

Review of Nirmala Menon's, *Remapping the Postcolonial Canon: Remap, Reimagine and Retranslate*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017, pp 201, ISBN: 978-1-137-53797-3. 72,79 €

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Postcolonial theory rejects universalizing categories of European Enlightenment treating it as a repository of abstractions which can be brought and applied to different contexts. This book argues that in the productive theorizing process, it is in the danger of replicating a monolithic dominant narrow paradigm. It demonstrates a process of canonization that has created a rather small group of writers and works to represent the postcolo-

nial literary space. Much of the scholarship has treated Anglophone literature as constitutive of postcolonial literature in the geographical region of the Indian subcontinent; certain texts have acquired the status of primary/standard texts. The book addresses such historical and theoretical exclusivism in the discourse of postcolonial literature and emphasizes the need for the field to evolve into a genuinely diverse and pluralistic one. Professor Menon argues that by exploring the vastly under-researched body of regional and vernacular literatures, this domain will enrich itself; breadth will add depth to the discipline. New theory can only emerge by resetting the essentials of postcolonial thought by thinking across traditions, texts and literatures.

The book argues for a canon which is self-reflexive with a pragmatic outlook, by resisting any attempt to see its universal validity. It interrogates the fixed definitions of a singular canon and re-negotiates the dominant designs of tradition through intimations of innate heterogeneous visions. It forcefully argues that the concepts of subalternity and hybridity remain frozen as truisms in a specific historical time and context and there is a compelling need to re-interpret and re-radicalize them in various contexts. Delineating Indian context, the book articulates the need for including native, vernacular, or indigenous literatures/conceptions to make sense of complex ground realities in more comprehensive ways. It is only logical that sensitivity to cultural differences

- the hallmark of comparative perspective - should be expanded to encompass awareness of differences. This can be read as an attempt to identify concrete human history and experience as integral to understand culture, beyond the theoretical abstractions. In that sense, the book indulges in a political act of reclaiming the rationality or experience-near conceptions to enlarge the horizon of engagement —comparative, local, global and cross-cultural.

This research work is primarily concerned with an unconscious canonization that leads to certain exclusivism with regard to the literary works in English, even the translated ones. At a fundamental level, it argues against the prejudices that prevail in the name of universals like the one by Samuel P. Huntington when he says that ‘Mexican-Americans can share the American dream only if they dream in English’ (p.256). Authentic representation and accurate translation of the voice of the subaltern is one of the recurring themes of the book. It re-examines two major postcolonial concepts, subalternity and hybridity by using a comparative analysis of texts written in English and texts from different Indian languages.

Chapter I engages with the major debates within the field and introduces the reader to the theoretical possibility that remains hidden in the regional literatures. It elaborates the need for revisiting the existing postcolonial

canon and establishes how the existing discourse is an incomplete and curtailed representation of complex and varied literatures of India, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. It highlights the previously unexplored literary texts to question the stereotypes of hegemonic representations and to retrieve the subaltern's autonomous consciousness. Though the author focuses on literary texts from three Indian languages, the logic is laid out for explorations in any postcolonial language including Tagalog, Maori or Swahili by interested scholars. In a sense, the work performs a moral function; it seeks to include the alternative conceptualizations of subjectivity and resistance available in a wide range of historical, theoretical and political contexts with a demand of democratic accommodation, adding to the completeness of postcolonial thought. This move can also be seen to go beyond the so-called high culture to encompass aesthetic and intellectual perspectives that are supposed to lie outside the dominant classes particularly when it talks of narrative strategies regarding oral literatures that are common among postcolonial literary works.

Chapter II seeks to expand the critical vocabulary of subaltern representation. It deals with the problem whether subaltern can speak or not by comparing texts from two different regional languages of India that offer different subaltern representations with that of Arundathi Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Arundathi Roy's Velutha (*The God of Small Things*) is powerless and cannot

speak (and the need to be spoken for) whereas Mahaswetha Devi's *Mary Oraon (The Hunt)* and O.V. Vijayan's *Appukilli (The Legends of Khasak)* are intelligent and can tell their own stories. They are active subjective (and subversive) agencies of change and are complex negotiators of their positions. The chapter takes up a detailed analysis of these characters and their distinct responses to power. Clearly, the subalterns from the non-English narratives have found their voices and assert their own visions, pointing out gaps in representation in the existing canon. The need for subaltern discourses to theorize the complexities that exist in these diverse multilingual narratives is emphasized.

Chapter III on hybridity offers a fascinating counterpoint to the notion that one comes across in the works of postcolonialism's widely recognized texts like Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. Unlike the old, tired concept of hybridity that is in circulation in the 'third space', this chapter focuses on expansive view of hybridity that exists in post-colonial states and its multifarious manifestations. It brings forth new theoretical dimensions of 'interrogative' versus 'accommodative' hybridity wherein accommodative hybridity has all the elements of hybridity but is not radical enough to subvert the linear narrative as instantiated in *The Inheritance of Loss*. On the other hand, Lalithaambika Antherjanam *Cast Me Out If You Will* and Girish Karnad's *Yayati* employ hybridities in interesting and different ways. Lalithaambika's rooted and localized hybridity and Karnad's embodied hybrid-

ity conducts the discourse through a lens of rights and equality that is disruptive and interrogative in their narrative outcomes. These constructs challenge monolithic and decontextualized apolitical aspect of hybridity. The point here is that the postcolonial literary theory should move beyond the narrow confines of diaspora, migrancy and transnational level to accommodate radical notions of hybridity that challenge the status quo. The chapter also looks at the discourse of essentialism through language debate (English versus regional languages) in India via Girish Karnad's play *A Heap of Broken Images*. The play adopts a nuanced approach with regard to notions like authenticity, linguistic pride, nativism and transnationalism highlighting the point that real issues lie beyond the polemics of language debate.

Chapter IV on translation traces the history of post-colonial translations and translation theories and examines them critically. It reconceptualises the issue of postcolonial translations which makes interventionist or counter-reading possible without getting integrated into the literary or theoretical or textual meta-narratives. It problematizes the practice of translation in three types of translations: Cultural translations, Academic translations and Faithful translations. Cultural translations translate a distant culture and history whereas Academic translations do not reflect theory. A work gets absorbed into the theory by being produced for it, more as a product of theory than the source for it. Though Faithful translations maintain equality between the languages, there

is a need to engage with the theoretical aspects from a postcolonial stance. After examining two translations, Mahaswetha Devi's *Imaginary Maps* and *Mother of 1084* translated by Gayatri Spivak and Samik Bandhopadhyay respectively, the chapter develops a new translation model, Dhvani-Bhava-Rasa theory of Sanskrit poetics which allows for multiple interpretations while being conscious about the equality of exchange between the languages even between the so-called metalanguage/s and the minor languages. It values pauses and telling silences, giving space to nuance, subversion, non-integration and even contradiction. Dhvani-Bhava-Rasa theory tries to maintain the openness of language that has the scope to address the unique challenges of postcolonial translations.

Chapter V summarizes the key conclusions of the work. Based on the new proposed model of translation, the author translates a Hindi short story *Wang-Shu* by Brisham Sahni which is an appendix to the book.

It can be seen, the nodes of silence acquires distinctive new meanings through its presence and absence or disappearance, across the chapters. With regard to the silence of subaltern and hybrid experience, it is counter-revolutionary whereas with regard to the process of translation, its multivalent presence can lead to nuanced understanding. Regarding the point that whether subaltern writing is an alternative or parallel writing to the mainstream, or counter-writing with its own force to re-

sist what is exerted on the dominated, this work seems to be taking the latter position though it does not admit so.

While it is laudable, as pointed out in this project, to include non-western languages and literatures to expand the theoretical vocabulary of postcolonial canon, it is also important to be wary of India specific dynamics where premodern co-exists along with the modern as argued by some social theorists . There is a need to come up with different narrative strategies to address this premodern domain which is otherwise elusive with regard to the existing modern/ postcolonial canon. To continue the conversation concerning different rules of engagement between the subaltern and non-subaltern as discussed in this text, one may look at the motivated dialogue between Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai and the theory developed thereafter to further explore the ontological relations between experience and reason. The point here is inspite of being the ‘owners’, subalterns are not the ‘authors’ of experience and the challenge is to bring together epistemology and experience without any distortion.

All in all, this book expands the ideological and geographical scope of understanding the world beyond the entrenched canon; it is a timely addition for the transformative possibilities it holds out to direct the progress of postcolonial literary theory.



**Works Cited**

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