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Review

Indian Poetics and Western Literary Criticism

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M.S. Kushwaha, ed. **Indian Poetics and Western Thought.**
Lucknow: Argo Publishing House, 1988. pp. xii + 266. Rs. 150 /-

Edward C. Dimock, Jr. **The Sound of Silent Guns and
Other Essays.**
Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989. pp. xiii + 200. Rs. 200 /-

OF the fourteen papers that comprise this volume nearly a third are in the nature of a general inquiry into Sanskrit poetics, especially in its relation to schools of Western literary criticism. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes, for example, that there appears to be no Indian parallel to the Western concept of the sublime, but then adds that "an exhilaration and enjoyment that is more like spiritual realisation" is very much present in Indian literature (pp. 13-14). K. Ayappa Paniker lists the similarities, divergences, and "mutually complementary" differences between literary criticism in the West and in India, while Sisir-kumar Ghose is content to note that a revised history of English poetry, based on the tenet that 'vision is the characteristic power of the poet', has been attempted, predictably, by Sri Aurobindo alone. The greater number of the essays in this volume, how-

ever, dwell on certain well-known concepts of Indian poetics, such as *dhvani*, *aucitya*, and *vakrokti*, but it is most notably the concept of *rasa* which engages the attention of nearly every contributor.

No concept in Western literary criticism occupies as prominent a place as *rasa* does in Indian poetics; indeed, according to many students of Sanskrit poetics, "a work of art is artistic only when it evokes the experience of *rasa*" (p. 57). The theory of *rasa* seeks to explain everything through the emotions and we must ask how far *rasa* can be rendered compatible with categories of Western thought. *Rasa* is the reader's total emotional response to the text; it describes also the dominant emotion of a literary work, and the abstract enjoyment of such an emotion. A work may well engender several emotions: some emotions, having no independent existence, get swallowed up by other emotions, while others are rather more durable. A man who is agitated may be agitated in love or anger: thus agitation, which can only be explained in relation to another, more dominant, emotion cannot constitute the *rasa* of a work of art (p. 105). As V.K. Chari points out, the theory of *rasa* does not allow the possibility of a 'cocktail' of emotions leading to some new delectable mixture: one emotion must dominate. He finds in the work of the eighteenth-century Scottish critic Kames, with his distinction between 'discordant emotions' and 'concordant emotions', and in Coleridge's notion of the 'unity of effect', considerable affinities to the theory of *rasa*, but avers that *rasa* offers a more "comprehensive and convincing account of poetic semantics and a consistent general theory of poetry" (pp. 106-8, 121).

The allegedly comprehensive explanatory qualities of the theory of *rasa* are widely, not to say wildly, praised by many of the contributors for reasons that, at least to this reviewer, remain inconclusive if not obscure. Chari summarily dismisses the question as to whether a general theory of literature is desirable, but one wonders whether the exponents of the *rasa* theory who seek to explain everything through it are not committing

the same kind of blunder as those who would reduce Indian philosophy to *advaita*.

If the theory of *rasa* can be made meaningful to Western readers by showing its affinity to certain strains in Western aesthetics and literary criticism, one can also attempt to find parallels for other concepts which were the stock and trade of Sanskrit theorists. They appear to have had a firm conviction that the language of poetry is distinctive in that it deviates from the commonplace, is a heightened form of expression, or is otherwise striking. Speaking of Kuntaka, "the greatest exponent of the theory of *vakrokti*," Pathak finds that "his views offer the most striking similarities with modern Western analytic criticism" (p. 163). Pathak likens *vakrokti* to the 'oblique approach' of Pound and Eliot, F.W. Bateson's stress on the 'connotations' of poetry, Allen Tate's concept of 'tension', and R.P. Blackmur's views on poetic language as 'gesture'. P.S. Sastri, meanwhile, in his essay on "Indian Poetics and New Criticism", construes 'Cleanth Brooks' 'paradox' and Empson's 'ambiguity' as analogues to *vakrokti*. Irony, ambiguity, gesture, paradox, tension, and a host of other concepts all approximate *vakrokti*, but *vakrokti* is much bigger than any of them, or even all of them put together. Thus several of our contributors note with evident pride "that the modern critical creed of the search for irony, paradox and ambiguity was anticipated in India hundreds of years ago" (p. 177). The expansiveness of the concept of *vakrokti* is said to be matched only by its antiquity.

Although many of the contributors to this volume are described as among India's most eminent critics, scarcely an essay, with the singular exception of S.C. Sen Gupta's exploration of how revulsion rather than revenge constitutes the dominant emotion of Hamlet (p. 248), shows how *rasa*, *vakrokti*, *dhvani* or any other element of Sanskrit poetics is to be employed in the task of practical criticism. Had this been attempted, it would have helped one to demarcate one concept from the other and equally from categories of Western thought, besides demonstrating how Indian poetics can enrich our understanding

of works of literature, particularly those belonging to the modern period.

The ambitious task to which the contributors of **Indian Poetics and Western Thought** had set themselves is, in conclusion, left largely unfulfilled. The intention "to find out how far Indian poetics can compete with western literary thought" is fatally marred by superficial comparisons, a wholly inexplicable and undesirable divorce of theory from practice, and a petty and chauvinistic nationalism.

There is more to Indian poetics than Sanskrit poetics: Tamil poetics, with its distinctions between the 'interior' and the 'exterior', *akam* and *puram*, suggests other ways of reading texts. Nor can Western literary criticism be reduced to Aristotle on the one hand, and Eliot and the New Critics, who are not so new any more, on the other hand. Semiotics, deconstructionism, post-structuralism, feminism, and the new historicism are giving us fresh insights into the interpretation of texts, and eager though Kushwaha may be to have us return to Bharata, Anandavardhana etc., it is doubtful whether Sanskrit poetics can alone suffice to sustain interpretations to the demands that we make of criticism today. Finally, the shoddy writing and the appallingly large number of printing errors which characterize **Indian Poetics and Western Thought**, cannot advance the cause to which its contributors are committed.

The Sound of Silent Guns is a collection of fourteen short but rich essays by Edward C. Dimock, Jr., who until recently was Professor of Bengali and Indian literature at the University of Chicago. The terrain that these essays cover is rather large, although the literary and religious history of Bengal is a concern that runs through most of them. Two essays explore the relationship of Tagore and the Islamic tradition to the Bauls; and another two examine the attributes of Manasā, the Goddess of Snakes, as depicted in the *mangala* poems of medieval Bengali literature. "A Theology of the Repulsive" explores the myth of the Goddess Sitalā, the goddess of pustular diseases and malaria, while in other essays Dimock looks at onomatopoeic words in

Bengali and the city in pre-British Bengal. The title of Dimock's collection comes from a poem by Jibanananda Das, the subject for some further reflections.

If **The Sound of Silent Guns** were little else but a medley of engaging and informative essays, there would be little reason to review it alongside **Indian Poetics and Western Thought**. However, several essays in Dimock's volume, including four on Bengali Vaiṣṇava literature, show how the concepts introduced by Indian poetics may be appropriated to interpret Indian literature. Dimock's understanding of *rasa*, *bhava*, and the other categories of Sanskrit poetics is not a purely theoretical one; rather, we see these terms, as it were, in action. Dimock points out, in his essay "On the Translatability of Poetry", that Sanskrit critics appear to have had a "taxonomic approach to the psychology of emotions" (p. 4). How does one, for example, account for the fact that though any particular work is said to be characterized by a mood or emotion that predominates, it evokes in readers reactions that display significant variation? This "taxonomic approach" involves a move from the personal to the transpersonal, from *bhavas* to *rasa*. "There is a highly particular level", writes Dimock, "on which one can speak to an intimate with whom one has shared a picnic under an old oak tree as 'the tree', and there will be no ambiguity." The personal emotion of such a conversation would be described by Sanskrit theorists as *bhava*. At a higher level of abstraction, at a greater remove from the realm of the purely personal, "one can speak with carpenters about the fact that some trees are more useful than others for their craft." Or one can talk about love or anger, which are 'permanent emotions', the *sthayi-bhava*, that are within everyone's experience. "Or one can speak at a very high level of abstraction. . . of trees being made only by God." It is at this level of impersonal enjoyment and aesthetic delight" that one can speak of *rasa*. As Dimock remarks, "it is of course the common denominator 'tree', 'meaning all kinds of tall, barked, needles or leafy plants, that allow us to communicate with that vast proportion of the human race who have seen trees

but who are neither carpenters nor intimate picnickers” (pp.3-4).

Whatever may be the intricacies of the *rasa* and *bhava* theory, Dimock is more interested in how Sanskrit poetics may be used to explicate some difficult questions of translation and interpretation. Whether poetry is really translatable at all is a question that has engaged many minds, and Dimock offers the intriguing suggestion that, with reference to Sanskrit poetics, translation is only possible on the level of the *sthayi-bhava*. He drives his point home through a brief analysis of Buddhadeva Bose’s poem “A Parting”, of which the first two lines are:

After the first thousand nights we had to part.
Rain fell on the river, the water rose in flood.

The rain-drenched night, the separation of the lovers: we are already in the familiar territory of *bhakti* poetry. Everyone knows something of the emotion involved in separation from one’s beloved; the mood of sadness will be perceived by every reader. Love, too, is not the same everywhere, though it ranges from an uncertain attraction to passionate self-destruction, yet it is markedly different from fear or anger. To this extent at least the poem is translatable: the permanent emotions, the *sthayi-bhava*, can be explicated and transmuted across time and space. But not everything can be rendered in translation. Dimock observes that the second line of the poem, “rain fell on the river, the water rose in flood”, is a line from a Bengali nursery rhyme, *brsti pade tapur tupur nadi elo ban*. Thus the poem is more meaningful for the Bengali reader for whom the symbolism borders on the personal. At this level of *bhava*, the personal emotion, translation fails.

What of the translatability of *rasa*, which stands at the other end of *bhava*, within a culture? Is the *rasa* of the Sanskrit theoreticians the same as the *rasa* of the Bengali Vaiṣṇavas? The Vaiṣṇavas doctrine of *bhedabheda*, simultaneous immanence and transcendence, states that the *lila* of Krishna which took place in human or earthly time is the same as the eternal *lilā* that goes on in the equally eternal Vṛndāvana. Krishna is not only the

means of knowing *rasa*, he himself is *rasa* and the seeker of *rasa*. Thus, if one were to consider a work like the *Caitanyu-carita-mṛta*, the ‘life’ of Caitanya, one would, as a true Vaiṣṇava, have to conclude that the entire work is *rasa*, whereas the classical Sanskrit theorist would say that the *rasa* of the work describes only its dominant emotion. Dimock explains that “the classical contention had been that the esthetic experience of *rasa* lasts only while one is witnessing the drama or reading the poem”; it cannot be the same as *brahmasvada*, ‘the tasting of *brahma*’ (p. 12). But, in terms of Vaiṣṇava doctrine, the experience of *rasa* is not merely immediate but eternal, much as the *lilā* of Krishna takes place simultaneously in the Vṛndāvana that can be located geographically and in the infinite Vṛndāvana known only to the true *bhakta*. A later Vaiṣṇava writer, we are told, went so far as to aver that “*rasa* exists only in poetry or drama about Kṛṣṇa.” The Vaiṣṇava’s equation of the ‘here and now’ with the ‘timeless’ adds a significant dimension to the *rasa* theory.

Rasa may well be the dominant theory of classical Sanskrit poetics, but for too long we have assumed that it has a monolithic character. There is not one *Ramayana* in India, but nearly forty; and similarly the *rasa* theory, which may be likened to the trunk of a gigantic tree, has sprouted many branches. The study of Sanskrit poetics, and particularly the *rasa* theory, has been largely denuded of its significance by the tendency of scholars to resort to platitudes and vague generalities. The little and not-so-little traditions and schools that the *rasa* theory has given birth to demand much greater attention than has hitherto been given, and some of the essays in Dimock’s volume help us to move in directions that we should be taking. □