

Ulka Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel: Colonial Difference and Literary Form* (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

How was literary realism introduced to the Colony? Was it derivative in form or were there disruptions made into it? Was realism passively determined by the political energies of the times or did it actively inform the radical qualities within politics and help constitute the individual's differential relations with the nation? These are some of the questions that Ulka Anjaria raises in her book, *Realism in the Twentieth Century Indian Novel*. With the exceptions of Priyamvada Gopal (2005) and Toral Gajjarawala (2012), Indian literary realism in the colonial context have received little critical attention since Meenakshi Mukherjee's classic *Realism and Reality* (1985). Anjaria however departs from Gopal in claiming that realism was not only a set of aesthetic techniques responding to the deeper and more significant issues of nationalist politics and gender, but precisely that form whose disjunctive and indeterminate nature qualified and conditioned the multiple and contradictory political practices of the nation.

Building on Lukács' use of the false mirror in reading Tolstoy and equating it with Premchand's idea of realism as a 'concave mirror', Anjaria argues that the writers using this form were acutely aware of the paradoxical condition of the anticipation of a better future and the disillusionment of the present times: in short, India's problematic 'historical entrance into modernity' (12). They used realism not as simple mimesis but as a metafictional mode where the limits of mimesis are called into notice in order to understand life under colonial rule – 'a mode of engagement, innovation, and imagination within writing under colonialism, rather than as a colonial left-over' (29).

Anjaria engages with her subject through two categories – character and temporality – and writes two chapters each on them. The first chapter, 'The Contours of the Human', takes up the question of character in the dialectic between humanity and saintliness in Premchand's *Rangbhumi* (1924) and *Godan* (1936). In *Rangbhumi*, despite referring to cases of dehumanization, Premchand foregrounds the ideology of human saintliness in the central character Surdas. In *Godan*, however, Anjaria argues, Premchand shifts to an ideology of common equality which acknowledges class and character-related differences and understands humanness to be a dialectic of human personality (formed through class-based limitations, manners, clothing, speech, etc.) and the possibility, and the lack of it, of transcendence (saintliness). Realism in this capacity appears to be a form of representation that highlights anticipation and the impossibility of materialisation (for instance, 'godan' or the ceremonial giving of cow never happens), and thus should be read symptomatically in the strategies of metonymy, alienation, or ambivalence.

The second chapter, 'Experiments with Gandhi', investigates character through the lens of individual freedom in a reading of allegory that affixes a higher reach of meaning to the mundane and appears not as antithetical to realism but the process through which realism creates meaning (62). Anjaria takes up four novels here, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), Premchand's *Rangabhumi*, and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) – all involved in the nationalist allegorisation of Gandhi but unable to materialise the possibilities in individual characters. Thus, Bakha in *Untouchable*, Lalu Singh in *Sword*, Vinay and Sophia in *Rangabhumi* and Moorthy in *Kanthapura* seem to form a relation of sympathy and disappointment with the Gandhian politics, which she terms the 'contingency-symbolism dialectic' (73), and become more isolated from and unyielding to the magnetism of Gandhi's

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character. She reads how *Kanthapura*'s 'new aesthetic of radical difference' (85) from the colonial model was in effect a systematic consolidation of nationalism's homogenising tendencies and eclipse of all forms of dissent, and argues how those systems are called into question by the novel's fraught rhetorical projection of overdetermined subjectivity, especially in Moorthy's self-searching questions in the end (93-6). Allegory was meant to bridge the correspondence between the novel and the nation, but the instability and ambivalence within the form compelled an introspection on writing the nation itself.

The third and fourth chapters direct our attention to the issue of temporality through a close reading of Ahmad Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Aparajito* or *The Unvanquished* (1932). Anjaria seeks to show how the discourse of historical time which is marked by linearity, maturity, and progress appears in Ali and Bandyopadhyay. In a chapter titled, 'Staging Realism and the Ambivalence of Nationalism', She finds in Ali the use of the standard Urdu form, 'shehrashob' which is a lament on the decline and loss of Muslim culture in South Asia and which parallels the historical progress (the novel following a pattern located from 1857 to 1940) with a poetic time that is built through moments of nostalgia, regret, and disjunction. This temporality is marked by the 'operative principles' of 'synchrony' and 'interruption' (107). By isolating his work from contemporary nationalist discourses and focusing on the story of a rich but dying culture, by paralleling the enactment of both the times, Ali addresses the 'profoundly indeterminate' nature of the future for Muslim culture in India and the heterogeneity in imagining the nation (122). In the final chapter titled, 'Aimless Bildung and the Longing for Form', Bandyopadhyay, Anjaria argues, hints at the impossibility of the 'bildung' in the colony by rejecting the standard narrative of the bildung in three respects: he challenges the coherence and verticality of time by infusing several digressive episodes; he refuses to allow his protagonist, Apu, to be assimilated into and subsumed by the city, which is often the most significant feature of the bildung (the successful overcoming of struggles between the individual and the urban world outside); and he denies Apu the paternalistic quality of the bildung – bourgeois family, domesticity, and inheritance of paternal values – by sending him to a solitary journey to the South China Seas (148-50). Anjaria points out that this is somehow compromised in Satyajit Ray's internationally acclaimed film from *The Apu Trilogy* (1956) which ends with the much-cited scene of Kajal sitting on the shoulders of his father, Apu. She reads these disjunctions in Bandyopadhyay and Ray as suggestive of different artistic commitments – Ray for a social realism of nationalist colour in the recently independent India and Bandyopadhyay for the aimless longing for form that could address the difficult transitions from the colonial to the nation formation.

Through close readings of the texts and the literary devices used by the so-called 'realist' writers, Anjaria both responds to the questions of the historical crisis registered in the texts and the sophisticated and complex use of the form in the colonial context. A few questions remain unanswered nonetheless. Half of the works that Anjaria uses here are originally written in vernacular languages, such as Hindi and Bangla, which have specific genealogies of realist style of their own. How do these genealogies influence or shape the use of realism here? For instance, Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's work is preceded or accompanied by the 'realist' works of Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, and Manik Bandyopadhyay – all of whom ingeniously infuse indigenous aspects in a colonially imported realist form for political reasons ranging from nationalism to race, gender, caste, or modernization questions. An understanding of this genealogy remains crucial for the writer's politics and style of using the 'bildung' form. Also, it is puzzling as to why Anjaria says nothing

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of the politics behind the choice of her texts, which are all written by male authors. Despite these omissions, Ulka Anjaria's work remains important as it insightfully points out the radical qualities within literary realism in the late colonial Indian context, and as it powerfully attempts to restore an area of study that has unfortunately been met with long negligence and disregard in Indian and postcolonial literary studies.

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