Old Words, New Worlds: Revisiting the Modernity of Tradition

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In the Hindi film Raincoat (2004), Rituparno Ghosh presents a short story by O Henry in an Indian milieu. The place is contemporary middle class Kolkata; the main actors, drawn from Bollywood, are at home in the present. Most of the conversation between various characters revolves around cell phones, TV channels, soap operas, air-conditioning and automated teller machines, leaving us in no doubt as to the setting. But given that the story is somewhat slow, and the acting by the female lead, Aishwarya Rai indifferent at best, what gives the film its shadowed mood is its beautiful music, and the director’s obvious love for Kolkata. Both these elements, strangely, are at odds with the historical moment sought to be represented. Ghosh himself has written the film’s theme song, rendered in soaring notes by the Hindustani vocalist Shubha Mudgal. It clearly displays the influence on him of the Hindustani vocalist Shubha Mudgal. It is nothing other than the universal impossibility of returning to childhood. Ghosh is clever, then, not in successfully adapting a piece of American fiction for an Indian audience, but in attaching these rich registers of meaning to the modernist decay, as well as the eternal thwarted love for each other, and on to the protagonists’ thwarted love for each other, and on to their consciousness of time irretrievably lost, slipping away like their stolen afternoon together. As the plot, the music and the images mesh with one another, we lose track of the temporal context in which the events are supposedly embedded. We cannot really say what time we are in: mythic time (Mathura-Gokul), the deep past (Jayadeva), the medium past (British Raj), the near past (Mannu and Neeru’s youth in Bhagalpur, conveyed through flashbacks), or the present (the long day of the story, in 21st century Kolkata). Here, in this synaesthetic synchronic confusion of worlds, the sign of art.

Indian cinema’s current Wunderkind is not the only one to rest his oeuvre on a layered and complex aesthetic tradition. If we begin to look, Kalidasa and Krishna, Vyasa and Valmiki are everywhere in the art and literature of modern India, as are many other authors, characters, tropes and narratives that invariably appear to us as familiar, yet differently relevant in different contexts. They require no introduction for any given audience, yet at each new site where they turn up, as it were, there is the interpretive space to figure out what exactly makes them pertinent on this occasion. Thus the work of writing and reading is always ongoing, always inter-textual, always citational, and unfolds within a framework that blurs rather than entrenches the boundary between the traditional and the modern. Kalidasa counts as an ancient in one reckoning, as the greatest poet of the Gupta imperium; he is thoroughly modern if we read him via, say, Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali literature or Mohan Rakesh in Hindi literature; he is also, through other archives and genres, quite medieval, called and recalled throughout the vernacular millennium. Many literary texts and their key protagonists have this sort of a life, across times, spaces, languages, genres and political contexts. They require no introduction, as familiar, yet differently relevant in different contexts. They are only just beginning to grasp.

Let us say that in the evolution of literary-critical discourse, eventually it would be worked out that modern Marathi literature, say, is deeply engaged with its own past, with that of Sanskrit and Persian, and perhaps also with that of other geographically
adjacent and linguistically related languages, dead (like Maharashtri Prakrit) or living (like Kannada). Such a working out would also take place for Hindi, Bengali, the southern languages, etc. What interrupts this imagined course of literary criticism and literary history, especially in the minds of secular intellectuals like Simona Sawhney (and before her, G N Devy), is the rude barging-in of politics to the university, the library, and the consciousness of the studious individual. Pankaj Mishra images this interruption very memorably of the studious individual. Hindu nationalism shatters the slow rhythms of reasoned self-reflection, renders cultural self-knowledge at once urgent and endangered. 1990s Hindutva seizes Rama, or Kurukshetra, turns them into identity symbols through a massive, mediatised and thoroughly modern type of semiotic violation. Suddenly all of our plays, poems, novels and paintings, our histories and songs, our films and television shows, replete with the excess of imaginations preceding or paralleling our own, become other to us, taken out of our hands, transformed into weapons with which to hurt and exclude non-Hindus from our lives as Indians.

Torn out of a cultural conversation that may extend over millennia and a subcontinent, texts become inauspicious and unrecognisable. Critics have to stand up and reclaim their hermeneutic prerogative. The ethical moment of criticism is at hand.

**Literature as Moral Anchor**

*The Modernity of Sanskrit* by Simona Sawhney ably makes the argument for an ethically vigilant, politically active, and intellectually timely criticism. Sawhney describes the crisis as she sees it, proposes a counter-challenge, and then proceeds to demonstrate how this post-Babri Masjid critical practice (to use her own point of departure) could be realised. She reads Kalidasa’s *Śākuntalam* and *Meghadūtām*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Gītā* in and of themselves, and also through 20th century writers in Hindi and Bengali, like Dharamvir Bharti, Mohan Rakesh, Hazariprasad Dwivedi, Rabindranath Tagore, Buddhadeb Bose, Jaishankar Prasad and Mohandas Gandhi (Gandhi is the odd man out in this group of litterateurs, but more on that later). When we read this book we realise with a shock that lately in the humanities, the pressure of theory and the hegemony of history, not to mention the political economy of translation have basically crowded out literary criticism altogether. We cannot really remember the last time we encountered, in English, a close, careful reading of any Indian text, ancient or modern, where the textual object was not subjected to translation, philological reconstruction, historical analysis or theoretical treatment. Not that these operations are not valid in themselves, but none of them does what literary criticism does, which, as Sawhney reminds us, is to read the text. She brings the neglected critical idiom and the old-fashioned practice of criticism back to the table, judging our favourite texts in terms of categories like poetry, justice, violence, compassion, beauty and law, and revisiting a certain kind of value-based scholarship that we had set aside for the last two decades.

Sawahney’s opening movement, a meditation on love and memory (both expressed in the word *smara*) is absolutely the strongest part of her uniformly elegant and insightful book. Further, her careful readings of Rakesh’s play, *Āśādh kā ek din*, Bharati’s verse drama, *Andhā Yug*, Hazariprasad Dwivedi’s, Buddhadeb Bose’s and Rabindranath Tagore’s essays on the *Meghadūta*, and of Kalidasa’s Sanskrit drama, the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, are stunning. Her exegesis of the famous connection between verse, curse and lament, *slokā* and *soka*, made in Valmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* to account for the origins of poetry; her interpretation of the turning neck and backward glance (*bhāta ga*) in Kalidasa and Asvaghosa as the corporeal imaging simultaneously of eros and thanatosis; and her exposition of both monstrous violence and bestial helplessness in the tragic figure of Asvatathama in the *Mahābhārata*, via the word *paśu* (lit: animal/captive), are all simply delightful and would stay with her readers.

Of course, proving her thesis, part of the reason we like these readings is because we know them already. We know that the lovesick Yaksya sent his message to his beloved through a cloud that could not possibly have understood him; that Valmiki saw a hunter kill the male of a pair of coupling birds and thus, in a moment of both judgment (against the hunter) and empathy (for the surviving she-bird), gave birth to poetic meter; that Dusyantra and Sakuntala’s love has contradictory elements of desire and cruelty, a turning towards and a turning away; that the Buddha’s break with his attachments, like that of many of his followers, involves a shearing conflict between the injunctive force of asceticism and the persistent attraction of the world; that Asvatathama’s father Drona was killed by treachery because his son shared a name with a slain elephant – these are ancient, familiar and repeatedly surprising stories that never fail to enthrall us. Iteration is everything. In her new book on the Hindus, Wendy Doniger also assembles a vast compendium, a veritable sea of these stories, many of them from Sanskrit literature that we always already know.

If I may be permitted an autobiographical moment, Sawhney’s self-presentation as an ideologically driven latecomer to Sanskrit attracted me. Like her, I too trained in Anglophone and European literatures, literary theory and criticism, only to take a turn to Sanskrit somewhere in the mid-1990s. Like her, I consider myself permanently a student of the language, not a scholar of it, and I too qualify my own intellectual practice with labels like “history”, “theory” and “secularism”. Of the Indian languages, Hindi is my native tongue, my home. I love Kalidasa and Tagore, Krishna and Gandhi as much as she does, and they are the subjects of the book I am currently writing. I too would hope to be a sahrdaya reader, not a bhakta of any kind of classical or modern canon. Ideally I would emulate her balance between experiential and cognitive aspects of literature (*anubhūti/jñāna*). I share her implicit faith that literature is the moral anchor of a people; that in our “classics” we may seek, and find, the sources of our self.

So naturally, at first I thought that Sawhney’s book was written both for me and to me, even though I have never met the author. But I must confess that I have yet to experience either the seduction or the fear of Hindutva that Sawhney evinces. “Secular” though I may be, I would not like to put Hindutva anywhere near the centre of my own inquiry into texts and
Hindutva may distort and misuse Hanuman and Shiva, Ayodhya and Dwarka, and such appropriations may make us want to fight back and reclaim what we hold dear, for our own – presumably ethical – purposes. But Hindutva is not to blame for us abandoning our textual traditions, forgetting our vernaculars, neglecting our knowledge systems, and destroying our institutions of cultural literacy. Those are crimes for which we are all, left and right, secular and communal, equally responsible.

“Kaṃ kaṇ mein vyāpey hain Rām”, is the Bharatiya Janata Party’s slogan. If there were such vyāpti, if Rama really pervaded our imagination as he did in the past, he could not have been so easily taken from us – our thoughtful, slender-limbed, dark-skinned, lotus-eyed god, our ideal son, husband, brother and king, our prince in exile and lover in despair, perfection personified to half the civilised world for hundreds of years – and turned into a Muslim-hating mass murderer. To paraphrase Gandhi, the enemy is not the Englishman; we ourselves are our own enemy. Perhaps the time has come to acknowledge that Hindutva is the symptom, not the disease: that we have to take responsibility for our communalisation as we had to, in Gandhi’s view, for our colonisation.

Sawhney’s discussions of the character of Krishna, especially as he reveals himself in the course the Bhagavad Gītā, though competent, could have benefited from some reference to Sudipta Kaviraj’s masterful treatment of Krishna in Jayadeva’s Gītā Govinda and the Bengali Vaishnava traditions, and also in Bankimchandra’s 19th century opus, the Krṣṇacarītira. His book, The Unhappy Consciousness set a very high bar almost two decades ago. Not only is Kaviraj a superbly gifted critic, but his reading would have especially relevant to Sawhney because it foregrounds precisely the status of Krishna as a “classical” versus a “popular” figure, a warrior-statesman in one form and a playful lover in another. Interestingly, it is Krishna’s modern reader, Bankim, who wishes to classicise him, as Tagore notices before Kaviraj, and Sawhney would have done well to consider what this might mean for Bengali/Indian literary modernity.

Similarly, at many points in the book, Sawhney’s failure to refer to the work of Sheldon Pollock is puzzling, given she has reinvented herself as a Sanskritist since the early 1990s. (A minor point: The Modernity of Sanskrit needs a Bibliography, because its sample of references is somewhat idiosyncratic.) Just two glaring omissions by way of example: Pollock’s hugely provocative essay on the Rāmāyaṇa and political imagination, in the aftermath of Hindu-Muslim conflict Ayodhya and Bombay, that Sawhney takes to be the turning point of her own intellectual project, and his recent discussion of the origins of poetry in Sanskrit literary theory, through a myth of the meeting of Poetry Man (kāvyapuruśa) and Poetics Woman (śāhityavidyā). Sawhney’s treatment of the relationship between poetry (kāvyā) and art (kalā) as reframed by modern Hindi literary theorists cannot really afford to ignore Pollock’s comprehensive revamping of our understanding of Sanskrit literary and aesthetic categories (kāvyā, alaṁkāra, dhvani, rasa, etc) in both his books, of 2003 and 2006. This is quite apart from his consistent and monumental contribution to the contemporary debate about the narrative, structure, language and history of both the Sanskrit epics, texts that are central to Sawhney’s book (at the very least, she must have some awareness of Pollock’s important analysis of the intrinsic humanity-cum-divinity of Rama).

Problematic Analysis of Gandhi

Even if understandably she did not want to digress too much into either Sanskrit poetics or Sanskrit literary history, Sawhney could have taken on as a conversation partner someone like Prathama Banerjee. Banerjee’s intelligent work on imagination (kalpaṇā), literature (śāhitya) and literary-aesthetic experience (rāsa) via both Tagore and his Bengali contemporaries, as well as the Sanskrit systems – most especially her reflections on how classical Indic categories, as transformed by colonialism, are at once incommensurable with western categories and constitutively enmeshed with them – has pertinent implications for the problem we may broadly designate by the Rudolphs’ defining phrase from 1967 “the modernity of tradition”. In some ways Sawhney is on a much surer footing when dealing with literature than with political philosophy or social science – compare her
smooth handling of U R Ananthamurthy’s novel, *Samkâra*, with her problematic analysis of Gandhi on the *Gîtâ*. Gandhi’s views on caste (*varṇa*) and non-violence (*ahimsâ*) are notoriously complex, and must be deciphered through a wide range of both his writings and his political actions, as also through a by-now robust, highly variegated and fast expanding body of Gandhi scholarship spanning three quarters of a century.

The triangulation of compassion (*karuna*), empathic experience through the modality of literature (*karuna rasa*), and non-violence (*ahimsâ*) made possible by reading, simultaneously, ancient texts like the Buddhist canon and the *Mahâbhârata*, and modern literature like Tagore and Gandhi, could be enormously suggestive in terms of developing or demonstrating a perturbing connection between ethics and aesthetics in Indian thought. More attention to Gandhi over time could get Sawhney there. For now she is brave to take on the Mahatma, but seems out of her depth in the immense subtlety and unprecedented radicalism of his thinking. Gandhi’s genius lay producing, from his intimacy with the tradition, a genuinely novel set of political and ethical categories, whose nomenclature is as classical-seeming as their content is unexpectedly modern (or even, according to the Rudolphs, postmodern!). Gandhi is deeply religious but utterly unorthodox, apparently comfortable with a Sanskritic past but really belonging to a future that is yet to come about. He is as enigmatic as his Krishna, full of contradictions and play, as aware of the tragic dimensions of history as he is hopeful of its radical potential. To give Gandhi his due, Sawhney will have to write another book. But given how brilliant and beautiful this book is, that is a promise we are eager for her to keep.

Thanks as ever to Pratap Mehta, who (arguably) is not responsible for my views, but definitely acted as the agent provocateur! Thanks also to Ajay Skaria.

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1. Let us think of the work of the contemporary Marathi intellectual Sadanand More, for example.


4. Most of the best literary criticism I could think of in English comes from those who are primarily writers and not critics, like Salman Rushdie, Amit Chaudhuri and Pankaj Mishra. A scholar of pre-modern literature who writes great criticism, like David Shulman, is a rare exception in India studies nowadays, which was not the case when people like Ed Gerow and A K Ramanujan were alive.


7. As I write this piece, India’s general elections have just concluded and the BJP has suffered a massive setback. It appears the Indian electorate takes its democracy very seriously, which was not the case when people like Ed Gerow and A K Ramanujan were alive.


13. See Prachanda Banerjee, “The Work of Imagination: Temporality and Nationhood in Colonial Bengal” in *Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History: Subaltern Studies XII*, edited by Shail Mayaram, M S S Pandian and Ajay Skaria (Per- manent Black and Ravi Dayal), 2009, chapter 8, pp 280-322. I recently heard an anecdote I want to share with readers: The Sanskritist James Fitz- gerald, currently editor of the massive Universi- ty of Chicago Press *Mahâbhârata* translation project (originally overseen by the late J A B Van Buijtenen), recounted to me a few weeks ago Susanne Rudolph’s opening lecture in a South Asian Civilisations class at the University of Chicago in the early 1970s. Fitzgerald recalls more than 30 years after the fact that his then-teacher, a young professor of political science, began her course on modern south Asia with a (characteristically brilliant) lecture about Yu- dhishthira, the Pandava prince and the son of Dharma who is in one sense the main character of the *Mahâbhârata*. I cite this recollection as a perfect example of the very thesis about the relationship between tradition and modernity that the Rudolphs, Susanne and her husband Lloyd, introduced into the discourse of south Asian studies back in the 1960s.

14. I would have loved to see Sawhney read Rani Siva Sankara Sarma’s *The Last Brahmana: Life and Reflections of a Modern-day Sanskrit Pandit*, D Venkat Rao trans from the Telugu (Permanent Black), 2007. This fascinating fictional memoir skilfully deals with the line between criticism and history, addressing many of the same themes as Sawhney’s book.


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