



Literary Theory and Criticism: Recent Writings from South Asia

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Literary Theory and Criticism: Recent Writings from South Asia is an anthology of essays edited by Professor Arun Gupto and published by Routledge India in the year 2022. The author has made a commendable contribution through this curated collection of essays from seminal texts produced by remarkable critics rooted in South Asian background. Moored in contemporary debates relating to issues like, nation, nationalism, identities and feminism, this anthology engages its readers and scholars in interdisciplinary textual exercises in all the essays included in the book. Moreover, categorizing the book into two parts: theory and criticism, with each section including six essays, the editor has carefully envisioned to clarify the readers or scholars the indispensable relationship between theory and praxis, and the contribution of the writers and critics from South Asia to the fields of literary theory and criticism that has so far been Eurocentric.

This deliberate attempt of critically structuring the sections of Theory and Criticism facilitates to bridge the gap between text-centric exegesis and broader theoretical horizons. Thematically, the volume is anchored by three primary discursive areas: nation/nationalism, identities, and feminism. While the essays in the theory section includes chapters that examine and question issues such as cultural formation, subaltern narratives, feminist imaginaries, and the interplay between art and religion in the South Asian context, the essays in the criticism section actually demonstrate scholars the skill of doing critical textual analysis of a text.

Moving into further detail, the six essays in the Theory section (Part 1) are categorised by the editor around three primary discursive areas: nation/nationalism, identities, and feminism. These essays are distinguished by their focus on theoretical horizons and socio-political issues rather than specific literary exegesis. The essays *DissemiNation: Time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation* by Homi Bhabha and *Hyphenated post-*



colonial: A divergent perspective by Tariq Amin Khan, share common theme of nation and nationalism. These essays problematize the construction of the post-colonial state and the narrative complexities of national belonging. Likewise, the essays *Belatedness as possibility: Subaltern histories, once again* by Dipesh Chakrabarty and *The Blurring of Distinctions: The Artwork and the Religious Icon in Contemporary India* by Tapati Guha-Thakurta can be thematically studied as identities and representation as they explore how historical and cultural identities are formed, often in resistance to Eurocentric or fundamentalist frameworks. Similarly, the essays *Women and Freedom* by Firdous Azim and Grassroots texts: *Ethnographic ruptures and transnational feminist imaginaries* by Piya Chatterjee have imbedded themes of Feminism and Subaltern Agency as the essays focus on the transformative potential of women's voices and the ethics of representing marginalized subjects.

Moving on to the Criticism section (Part 2) of the book, it also consists of six chapters that apply the theoretical horizons established in the first half of the book to specific literary works and cultural contexts. While these essays are text-centric and dedicated to exegesis and close reading, they are categorised under the same three primary discursive areas: nation/nationalism, identities, and feminism. Specifically, Harish Trivedi's *Post-Colonial hybridity: Midnight's children* and Vrinda Nabar's *Fragmenting nations and lives: Sunlight on a broken column* analyses how literary narratives narrate the nation and reflect the historical trauma of decolonization and Partition. Similarly, the category of essays that focus on the psychological and cultural effects of colonial legacies, displacement, and the resulting hybrid identities are the essays, *Of Mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse* by Homi Bhabha, *Post-Colonial hybridity: Midnight's children* by Harish Trivedi, and Minoli Salgado's *Punyakante Wijenaika: Spectral spaces*. Finally, the essays that investigate the emergence of the modern subject through a gendered lens, focusing on interiority and resistance to patriarchal norms are Lata Mani's *Epilogue: The tantra of contemplative cultural critique*, *Choker Bali: The novel of the new age* by Radha Chakraborty and *Fragmenting nations and lives: Sunlight on a broken column* by Vrinda Nabar.

The author's muse behind compiling this book as expressed precisely in the preface, is to emphasize how quintessential it is to understand literary theory without which there can be no sensible classroom discussion happening. With the advent of literary theory appearing as a genre, the editor moves further on explaining that the change took longer time to take place in context of South Asia. Nevertheless, with the growing prominence of the South Asian writers and frequent critical reflections offered to their discourses or writings in academia globally, the editor's interest in South Asia grew. The editor reflects on the evolution of English literary studies in Nepal, highlighting the shift from Eurocentric focus to a more inclusive approach that acknowledges South Asian and Nepali voices. This shows that the editor is interested in expanding the canon to include Nepali and South Asian English writers, reflecting an interest in cultural identity, academic transformation, and literary inclusivity.

The twelve essays selected and divided strategically into two equal parts, form a logical system of investigating theory and criticism, respectively. Each essay has been followed by purposefully planned exercises that include questions under the categories listed as: textual,



rhetorical, discussion, inter-textual, creative, and critical thinking. The book is a collection of distinct voices from South Asia on the sensitive issues such as south Asian studies, cultural theory, literary criticism, postcolonial studies, feminism, rhetoric and composition, nation/nationalism, and identities. This judiciously collected anthology, not just because of the essays included in it, but also because of the engaging interdisciplinary textual exercises, serves as an indispensable resource for students of literary theory and criticism.

However, although the author claims to have collected recent writings from South Asia, only three contributors are from South Asia and others are diaspora. The anthology's representation of South Asia is debatable, as no theorists from other South Asian countries are included. Though the editor in his preface mentions that inclusion of South Asian writings in Nepali curricula has helped some Nepali writers gain popularity, no Nepali critical writings are included. It would have been better if the editor clarified the rationale behind excluding writings from them. Nevertheless, this well curated anthology can serve as an indispensable text or resource for students or scholars interested in literary theory and criticism.

One of the most significant strengths is the inclusion of systematically developed exercise questions after each essay. These include textual, rhetorical, intertextual, creative, and critical prompts that honor the student's intellectual autonomy and force an engagement with the mechanics of reading and writing. The second most significant strength is that the collection successfully moves beyond purist literary boundaries to incorporate research methods from Sociology, Political Science, Economics, and Geography which demonstrate how theories travel across disciplines to enrich literary and cultural analysis. Also, the thematic cohesion in the discursive areas of nation/nationalism, identities, and feminism allows for a dialogic call and response relationship among the twelve essays, covering a staggering conceptual ground. Also, the bridging between the two sections of the anthology is done quite well. The theoretical horizon provided in the first half is affectively applied through text-centric exegesis and close reading in the second part. Finally, the book fills the regional gap as editor notes that while many anthologies exist, there are almost no anthologies focusing on South Asian writings that include interactive exercises and multiple reading possibilities.

Nonetheless, there are certain weaknesses. A major critical weakness is the lack of geographical diversity within the selected essays. Despite the book being a project rooted in the Nepalese academic experience, and edited by the Professor from Nepal, there are no essays written by Nepali scholars or focusing on Nepali literary texts. This is a representational gap. Secondly, the collection is predominantly focused on the regional triad of India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. This reinforces a common trend in global academic publishing where South Asia often serves as a proxy for metropolitan India and its immediate neighbors. Finally, the reliance on the diaspora as many of south Asian voices included are based in prestigious Western Universities. This implies that theories must often travel through Western-validated channels to be considered canonical enough for such an anthology.

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