
REVIEW OF MARIA-SABINA DRAGA ALEXANDRU, *PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION IN ENGLISH*, LEIDEN AND BOSTON: BRILL/RODOPI, 2015. X+291PP.

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Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru's *Performance and Performativity in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English* offers an innovative reading of several texts by Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Vikram Chandra. The volume joins the comparative scholarship on the above named authors—which has focused on the effects of globalization (Jay), or the global market place (Huggan; Dwivedi and Lau), questions of modernity (Wiemann), issues of genre (Ganapathy-Dore)—by foregrounding the role of myth and storytelling and the ways they negotiate between the Indian tradition of the epic and the “requirements” of the contemporary novel (3). The author focuses on performance and performativity, two key categories for understanding this body of work, and discusses them from both the perspective of the long durée time of Indian theatre and also from the standpoint of various Western conceptualizations. According to Draga Alexandru, “performativity of language” together with “performative identity” are fundamental aspects for understanding how “the boundaries of the self placed ... in changing cultural in-betweenness are negotiated in Indian fiction in English” (5-6). She defines performance as “embodied meaning production,” which is highly dynamic and functions as “the basis of establishing connections between the text and its contexts and audiences” (8). “Performativity,” on the other hand, provides Draga Alexandru with her starting hypothesis, namely that “there is a degree of performativity in all fiction, since, besides telling stories, fiction triggers the realities of those stories into being” (9). From here, the book proceeds to interweave

the two concepts with a very wide range of literary, interpretative and political concerns that inform the case studies proper.

The ambitious and rich nature of Draga Alexandru's book is demonstrated by its very structure: it is organized in eleven chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction offers a detailed and insightful reading of Salman's Rushdie's 1997 short story, "The Firebird's Nest"; this is the starting point of the project and provides the reading lens for the examination of the novels and short stories to follow. The multiple forms of metamorphosis "The Firebird's Nest" presents are regarded by Draga Alexandru as emblematic for the transformations of texts, genres, identities, and migratory and nomadic practices that her selected case studies present.

The first two chapters—"Writing in English: A Performative Act" and "Changes and Challenges in the Novel Form"—meticulously set up the theoretical framework. They weave smoothly numerous theories of performativity and performance and their connections to nomadic texts and identities with considerations about the contemporary functions of myth, storytelling, and theories of the novel east and west. A fascinating discussion of two adaptations of the epic *Mahabharata*, by Peter Brook and Girish Karnad respectively, is offered in chapters three and four. "Intercultural Epic in Performance" and "Reperformed Tradition" foreground and carefully examine the relevance of storytelling and theatricality in the Indian tradition proper, and the pitfalls of Western (Brook) and intercultural (Karnad) adaptations. Chapters three and four delight the reader through their perceptive interpretations and clear contextualization; they also elegantly tease out the implications the differing responses Brook's and Karnad's adaptations triggered with Indian and international audiences. At the same time, these two chapters function as graceful bridges to the second part of the book, which undertakes close readings of texts by Rushdie, Roy, and Chandra.

"Repositioning Scheherazade," "Storying the *Fatwa*," "Migratory Identity Politics"—chapters five, six and seven—are dedicated, as one chapter title suggests, to the "towering" (34) figure of Indian writing in English, Salman Rushdie. Rushdie's *Midnight Children* is examined through the lens of storytelling as performance and intercultural encounters, and Draga

Alexandru argues that it offers a narrative study of “performativity of both historical and mythical discourses” (132). In view of the *fatwa*, *The Satanic Verses* is to be regarded as “performative language” (163); however, the author moves beyond the highly charged political context with an eye to the “hybridity and the transformative performances of identity” (153) the novel enacts. Other exciting aspects of this landmark novel are revealed by foregrounding the impact of Bollywood on the book. The discussion of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* takes us back to the power of storytelling and its life giving potential. The three chapters dedicated to Rushdie provide a much needed map to the writer’s early career, consistently following the symbiosis of performance and performativity, but also paying attention to the larger context of these early fictions and their connections to the writer’s trajectory.

Chapters eight and nine, “Writing the Unspoken” and “Performances of Marginality,” present Arundhati Roy and her novel *The God of Small Things* as a counterpoint to Rushdie’s reconfiguration of traditional storytelling. Seen as the equivalent of the French *écriture féminine* project (191), *The God of Small Things* is regarded by Draga Alexandru as the “fictional enactment of her [Roy’s] political beliefs” (193), illustrating how “through her various tellings of the same story,” Roy problematizes the condition of women and different ideologies (189). If the effect of Bollywood was fruitfully discussed in connection to Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, the screen writing experience of Roy is viewed as foregrounding her “performative discourse” (207) in *The God of Small Things*. Questions of theatricality, the relevance of the child and baby talk, performative imagery, *Kathakali* symbols and structures, Christian/Hindu encounters, and the all-powerful effect of love are duly emphasized in Draga Alexandru’s thorough interpretation of the novel.

The final chapters—“Postmodern Scheherazades between Storytelling and Novel Form” and “Performance, Performativity, and Nomadism”—offer an incisive reading of Chandra’s *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* by demonstrating the continuous process of hybridization and metamorphosis of the novel. Draga Alexandru convincingly demonstrates how this text’s structure and its affinities with the World Wide Web provide another facet of reconfigured storytelling, just as it examines continuities with and discontinuities from the Indian tradition. Through a comprehensive analysis, Draga Alexandru also shows how *Red Earth and Pouring*

Rain problematizes thematically and structurally the performance of estrangement from one's homeland and return to it. The last chapter, with its emphasis on the narrative structure and the layered content of the novel, forcefully argues in favor of the nomadic nature of this novel, both on the thematic and textual level (243).

Written with passion and commitment to both complex theoretical concepts and astute close reading, Draga Alexandru's important monograph foregrounds the numerous reconfigurations of the Indian tradition in contemporary fiction and shows how multiple forms of performance and performativity enable liberating metamorphoses and nomadic transformations. These two key categories allow Draga Alexandru to offer fascinating close readings of the texts under discussion, and to connect contemporary writing with the long durée tradition of Indian storytelling. The volume complements current studies on Indian fiction in English by opening much needed dialogues with performance studies and intercultural theatre. It is a welcome contribution to postcolonial studies and performance studies, and an erudite volume enriching the existing scholarship dedicated to Rushdie, Roy, and Chandra.

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