

Kathleen FIRTH, Felicity HAND (eds).

India: Fifty years after independence – Images in literature, film and media.

Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2001.

India: Fifty years after independence celebrates the 50th anniversary of Indian independence, paying homage to this relevant event in 20th century history. The volume is also a positive result of the international conference organized in Barcelona, which wanted to honour the occasion and correspond to the celebrations of many people in the sub-continent and the diaspora. The book has come to light thanks to the solid work of its editors, Kathleen Firth and Felicity Hand, whose deep involvement in this academic journey can now bring to the reader the pleasures offered by a multicultural and widespread India revealing its wonders.

What is most remarkable and undoubtedly enriches the value of this work is that there is a great representation of writers of different origins and cultural backgrounds. The volume is structured in four thematic sections – *Female Voices*, *The Storytellers*, *Indians Abroad* and *India on the Move* – which are equally balanced with three chapters for each one of them. In the first essay and through some of the most influential texts written in the last fifty years, Murari Prasad reviews literary manifestations of feminism that reveal diverse ideologies on the issue of women's emancipation. Both regional Indian writers and women writers in English such as Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal or Shashi Deshpande present myriad feminist significations and alternative perspectives on life and society which have contributed to women's active engagement in society. These visions and images of Indian women are imbued with new resolutions and aspirations in the struggle towards gender equality and justice. Mary Condé con-

centrates on the conflictive relationship between Indian women writers with a privileged Westernized education and the creation of an idiosyncratic Indian literature in English. Her examination of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is an epitome that «breaks out of a regional identity» (26) presenting English as a cohesive binder which «addresses the lives of Indian women who are not part of any elite» (27). Elizabeth Russell looks into identity politics and location. She discusses that defining identities «implies 'to outline', 'to limit', 'to frame' ... all differential traits are ignored or rejected.» (37). Asian women have often suffered some kind of alienation and displacement owing to their cultural suspension and in-between homelands.

The second section, *The Storytellers*, opens with C.D. Narasimhaih's contribution, which explores the concept of a national literature for India. He claims the necessity for Indian writers to trace the enriching ancestral texts of the *Vedas*, the later epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the masterpieces of the classical age, whose philosophical wisdom faded into oblivion at the end of the first millenium after Christ, to forge a concept of national literature. This, however, does not exclude empirical Western influences. Narasimhaih acknowledges the truth in the *Rigveda* – «let great thoughts come from all directions» (49) – though he also fears that the Western vision of life can replace Indian values for the benefit of commodity and therefore undermine and damage a national literature. Depicting the Indo-British relationship and its ultimate focus of attention – the battle for independence, partition and

subsequent consequences – have been the main themes of many writers who wanted to pay tribute to history with their particular retellings and chronicles. Syd Harrex and Savita Goel's essays deal with some of those writers who have fictionalized the colonial and postcolonial period, capturing in their novels the Indian-English attitudes. Syd Harrex highlights the works of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan as distinctive pre-independence writers who attack the main sources of oppression, and establish the politics of morality and the foundations of Gandhism. Savita Goel analyses Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* discussing his depiction of the political and social imbalances of a postcolonial India. The setting corresponds to the time of emergency (1973-75) under Indira Gandhi's administration. Mistry's reality, Goel notes, foregrounds the abusive and violent politics of corruption and exploitation. However, as it is all a question of balance, the novel also narrates the growing bond of love and affection shared by his main characters from contrasting social backgrounds.

The third section of the book renders homage to all those citizens of the sub-continent who, for compelling reasons, embarked on a complex journey abroad undergoing alternating pressures produced by the interrelationship of external and internal circumstances. Kathleen Firth examines the work by the Indian-Canadian writer M.G. Vassanji whose personal displacement and relocation is also an ultimate concern of many other migrants. *No New Land* revives ideas and visions that the writer and his fellows, addressed as «new Canadians», experience in their encounter and confrontation with 'otherness' as well as their subsequent double alienation. Firth overlaps the significance of Canadian multiculturalism, which originally linked terms such as 'quaint' and

'folkloric' (83), or 'ethnic' and 'foreign' with Vassanji's ironic narrative that suggests that Canadian experience equals ghettoization. However, Firth concludes agreeing with Vassanji's hope for a new land without cultural stigmatization.

The complexity of terms like 'homeland', 'heritage' and 'hindrance' takes R.S. Ash's study backwards and forwards, as she reads these terms within the works of Indian diasporic female voices in Britain. What are, then, the notions that writers in the diaspora hold of India as homeland? What role do cultural hybridity and biculturalism play in their novels and how are first and second generation immigrants affected by them? What factors intervene in the process that provokes the modification of gender roles? Following a chronological evolution in the history of the successive generations of Asian immigrants, R.S. Ash provides responses to these questions that constitute underlying themes in the works of Asian women writers. Her essay intertwines with Felicity Hand's «Forget India, We're British!» and both together suggest that the stereotyped fixed image one has of British people of South Asian origin has always been in constant shift, modified and redefined by diverse cultural patterns, «evolving into a new kind of cultural identity, a synthesis» (119). Nowadays, Hand remarks, «Indianness has indeed become an essential part of contemporary Britain» (109). Her introductory historical account of the British Asian community is upheld by a close approach to Gurinder Chadha's film *Bhaji on the Beach* and Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette*.

The closing section, *India on the Move*, opens with Somdatta Mandal's focussing on the relevance of Bengal's action against British imperialism in colonial times which is reflected in literature, especially in Bangla fiction. Mandal asserts that each individual writer such as Bankin or Tagore, among

many others, diffuses his own enlightening thoughts in which politics and philosophy converge. Thus, patriotism and spirituality are venerated by some writers; others like Tagore, Mandal argues, denote a more liberal milieu. Therefore, the political novel within Bangla literature manifests itself as a prior focus of attention from which different currents and moral urges originated in the long process towards Indian independence.

The last two essays by Daya Thussu and Sara Martín Alegre are dedicated to the media and the Western film industry that feeds on images of India in contemporary cinema. Thussu traces the rapid evolution of the media that as soon as it emerges develops a key role in the building of a national identity, forging a sense of Indianness which suffers alterations with the impact of privatisation and globalization. But whatever the damage any form of «cultural imperialism» might cause, the truth is that – as Thussu expresses – India has now her opportunity to convey a fair image of the country and culture to the rest of the world. This stands very far from the discredited vision of India portrayed by 1980s and 1990s films made by Western directors and analysed by

Martín Alegre. Her concern is that films such as *Passage to India*, *Gandhi*, *Heat and Dust* and *City of Joy*, promote «old and new stereotypes» and show a «monolithic reality», (157) «to perpetuate a sentimental, romanticised portrait of India that is blatantly colonialist» (152). Considering that India is the world's leading film factory, why are Indian films not distributed outside just like the Hollywood ones? What cultural mechanisms are at play to restrain their screening? Martín Alegre concludes with the optimistic expectation that Indian films will soon find a veritable place abroad that will brush off all the stereotyped, distorted image of the country.

The varied essays gathered in this volume are essential and challenging reading for both academics and students across the cultural sciences and humanities. The enriching insights and the wide-ranging perspective reveal the multicultural dimension of India, inspiring readers to explore themes further. Hopefully, this book will generate an even larger dialogue on the interrelation of cultures in the near future.

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Introducción al estudio de la literatura africana en lengua inglesa.

Universidad de Jaén: Servicio de Publicaciones, 2000.

There are not many monographs on African literature in Spain, either in Spanish or any other peninsular language. Recently we saw in *Babelia-El País* (March 10th 2001) José María Ridaó's review of the anthology by Donato Ndongo and Mbaré Ngom *Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial*, which may

be expressive of the situation of the whole issue of African literature in Spain and, indeed, although to a considerably lesser extent, in Europe. If the small amount of African literature in Spanish is characterized by what the reviewer aptly calls «materia reservada», i.e., by the lack of interest on the part of the