Film Review

Roja

Director : Mani Ratnam

Roja, I was told by numerous friends, was a really enjoyable film, very different from the run of the mill Bollywood stuff. I went to see it with great expectations but found it rather disappointing despite fairly talented performances by the hero and heroine.

The film has been given a tax exemption because it conforms to the government version of the problem of the secessionist movement in Kashmir. The film steers meticulously clear of human rights abuses being commit-ted by the Indian army. Instead it shows the army soldiers as upright defenders of national unity and territorial integrity. The brutality and mindless vio-lence is all presented as carried out only by the Kashmiri terrorists.

Even worse, the film gives no political context to the present crisis in Kashmir. Why is it that sections of such an eminently peace loving people have turned into desperadoes, waging arelentless war against the Indian state? We are not given even a glimpse of their political grievances, and of how government policies actively encouraged the rise of a mili-tant secessionist movement in Kashmir.

The Kashmiri Muslims are allowed to have their say only through slogan mongering such as *"azadi, azadi!"* They are shown as mere puppets in the hands of Pakistani Intelligence agencies. We hear hardly a dozen sentences by all of them put together during the entire film. Even the woman who sets the hero free because she sympathises with his plight is not allowed to speak a single sentence. She is only allowed to look fearful and tearful, take slaps and a beating - but not say a word. only one of the terrorist leaders gets into something resem-bling a dialogue with the hero while the latter is under their captivity - but merely by responding with terse slogan-like sentences about *azadi* (freedom). Only after he loses his son is the terrorist gang leader allowed to portray ordinary human feelings.

The government, the BJP and other parties have tried to cultivate precisely such a deliberately stereotyped and depoliticized interpretation of the present situation in Kashmir. They want us all to accept the necessity of putting down with brutal force such misguided "enemies of the nation." If this film's political message is taken seriously, it will add to the growing communication gap between Kashmiri Muslims and the rest of the country.

However, even though the film dares to take on one of the most burning political issues of our time, like all Indian films, it is more interested in romance than politics. The film is essentially a heroine centred love story. Roja, a village girl, ends up being married to a young computer profes-sional from the city because the girl (Roja's elder sister) he selected as his bride manages to surreptitiously convey the message to him that she is in love with another man and requests him to "reject" her. Though caught in an unpleasant dilemma, he goes a step further. Instead of merely rejecting the elder sister, on the spur of the moment he expresses his desire to marry her younger sister Roja.

The two are married much against Roja's wishes. Not being aware of why he rejected her sister, Roja is very angry at her new husband. She imagines her husband has hurt and humiliated her sister. However, when she gets to know the truth, their marriage takes off on a romantic high.

There are long sequences of their fast growing intimacy and growing love for each other.

Suddenly the hero is sent off to Kashmir to help intercept and decode Pakistani Intelligence messages to the terrorists. Just as he begins the job, he is kidnapped by terrorists who demand the release of one of their comrades in return for his release. Roja wages a long, single minded and heroic battle to persuade the army and the government to secure the safe release of her husband via the release of the Kashmiri prisoner. Her grief, determination and courage dominate the film till her husbandcomes back to her.

The story line is wafer thin.

A great deal of time is spent on showing Kashmir's scenic beauty, its snow clad mountains and slopes, swiftly flowing rivers and streams, dramatic sunsets and sunrises. At many points the film could be mistaken for a documentary sponsored by a Kashmir tourist agency.

I was told the filming of the famous Rukmini song was a good example of how a song with loud sexual overtones could be depicted "aesthetically" using a "folk" idiom. Personally I found it far more offensive andcrude than the much objectedto"meri*pantbhisexy...*" song. It had as little to do with folk dance as Ramanand Sagar's plastic doll Sita had to do with Balmiki's or Tulsi's Sita.

I tried hard to figure out why this film touched so many people so deeply. In my view, its appeal does not lie in its shallow nationalistic fervour. Underneath the slogan mongeringpatriotism, the film director is sending a very subversive but appealing message - national security cannot have much meaning to a person while her own family is in danger. When Roja sets off on a furious campaign to get her husband released, appealing to politicians and to senior officers, one of the army officers constantly questions her attempts on the ground that she is only worried about her husband, with no concern for national honour and security. Unlike most Bombay film heroines, Roja does not respond to this criticism with phoney idealism, saying let my husband be sacrificed "for the sake of the nation." In her view, there is no point having an army, if they can't save ordinary people like her husband.

On the other side of the fence her husband asks the terrorist who is holding him captive : "Would you be willing to sacrifice your son, your wife, your other dear ones at the orders of those who claim to lead the cause of *yowazadil"* The message is clear and personal. Family loyalties and bonds are sacred; no mythical ideal, including that of the nation, has the right to demand, that one's own family mem-bers be obediently sacrificed on the altar of the nation.

Thus, instead of the army determining the agenda, ultimately it is Roja who leads them to do their job. While watching negotiations for her husband's release break down, she declares to the colonel, "Now I will go and look for him personally. I will go to the houses of militants. There are bound to be some women in their homes as well. I will appeal to them to understand my grief as a woman." And the previously resistant colonel declares, "We will follow you wherever you go and help you achieve your mission." Following the citizens in their search for security and peace is indeed a very radical and humane conception of the role the Indian army ought to play.

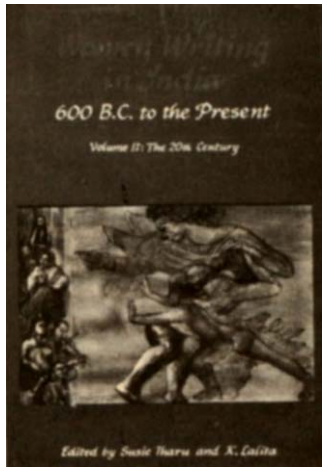
Madhu Kishwar

Book Review

Women's Writing in India: 600 BC to the present

Edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita

Review: Leela Gandhi



Women's Writing inlndia: 600BC to the present. Volume II: *The Twentieth Century* edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (OxfordUniversity Press, 1993) 642 pp., Rs. 500 (HB)

This second volume of Susie Tharu's and K. Lalita's *Women Writing inlndia* is a thoroughly researched, well-produced and comprehensive anthology, which continues the project of Volume I by supplying the English-speaking world with an impressive selection of Indian women's writings from 600 BC to the present day. Each text included here is prefixed by a readable and informative biographical headnote on the writer, and the translations are uniformly superb. The selections are fairly representative de-spite inevitable omissions, sometimes of leading writers such as Qurruratalain Hyder, Krishna Sobti and Ashapurna Devi, among others. The editors have excluded all Indian women's writing in English, which, they argue is more easily accessible to the English speaking reader to whom this volume is ultimately addressed.

While the work of figures such as Mahadevi Verma, Ismat Chughtai and Amrita Pritam, anthologised in this volume, hardly calls for reviewing, Tharu and Lalita's project invites some critical interrogation - both for its edi-torial claims and for the ideological grid it supplies for an assessment of women's writing. The volume has beenvariously praised by its publishers, reviewers, and by the editors themselves, for its "revolutionary", "groundbreaking", and curiously for a feminist

anthology, "seminal" work. This alleged radicalism is delineated in two ways - as a divergence from predominant or mainstream Indian attitudes to women's writing, and as a decisive departure from the entire tradition of Anglo-American feminism. The first premise seems to insist that Indian women's writing has been consistently marginalized and misunderstood before the present editors retrieved it and brought it "to light". The second premise dismisses British feminism for its alleged disengagement with women's writing, and American feminism for its "inalienably imperialist" and bourgeois universalizing of "woman and literary creativity". For all their insistence on the historicity of their assumptions, Tharu and Lalita's denial of literary and theoretical genealogy is alarmingly antihistorical and profoundly questionable.

The claim for the repression and censorship of female literary expression in India is falsified, in the first place, by the extraordinary proliferation of women's writing in the twentieth century, especially from the middle of the century onwards. This process of articulation has been encouraged by the availability of "woman friendly" forums in journals *likeHans* and *Sarika* in Hindi, and their numerous counterparts in other regions and languages. Moreover, writers like Kamala Das, Hansa Wadekar, Mahasweta Devi and Kundanika Kapadia, included in this volume, are already both well-established and recognizably "radical", acclaimed on the national literary scene as well as within their chosen regional and linguistic fields. Many of these writers have been translated previously into other regional languages and into English as well as foreign languages. The work of several of them has been translated into media like theatre, film and television serials. Some, like Shivani and Mannu Bhandari, are extremely successful as popular writers; others are regularly included on school and college syllabi. In addition to eliding over the previous local, national and international reputations of such writers, Tharu and Lalita do little to acknowledge precursive and truly pathbreaking archival work in their field.

The editorial claim that the two volumes of women's writing in India "represent a difficult and inventive moment in the theory and practice of feminist criticism" may similarly be challenged on many counts. The alleged disinterest of British feminists in women's writing is certainly not borne out by the metafictions almost obsessively generated by British mod-ernists like HD and Jean Rhys, or by the intellectual and financial support to women's writing extended by women writers like Woolf and Winifred Bryher. Pioneering work in bringing lost women' s writings to light and in popularizing contemporary women writers was later done by British journals like *Spare Rib* and presses like Virago and The Women's Press. It might also be mentioned that the challenge in Europe and America to the universalist assumptions of white middle class feminism has been articulated well in advance of Tharu and Lalita by, among others, working class, black and lesbian feminist movements. To ignore such debates is to homogenize and essentialise British and American feminisms. On the same note Tharu and Lalita's invitation to readfeminist fictions as social/historical rather than aesthetic/hermetic, is also in keeping with the by now well-established, some might say, domi-nant, shift in literary studies from new critical to cultural materialist methodology.

In these terms, it is necessary to delimit the novelty of this project to its convenient compilation of otherwise disparate material into a single, well-produced volume, especially useful to an international (likely, in the editors' terms, to be bourgeois feminist) reader at an archival and linguistic remove from India. Taking into account the political potentialof this intendedreader, the radicalism of this volume will at best be fulfilled in the ongoing curricular and pedagogic reform of English studies and women's studies programmes both in India and in the West.

The actual political and social possibilities of this anthology thus stand in sharp opposition to the editors' view, elaborated in an extensive introduc-tory essay, of what constitutes significant literary, critical or creative activity. We are told that their work is premised on the assumption that "historical circumstance, and ideologies generally have been hostile to women's literary production and have crippled our ability to read and ap-preciate their work." At the same time, the editors disavow any interest in the themes of "individual accomplishment", "female creativity", or even in the "well-formed" work. Their focus is, instead, on the extent to which women writers are able to translate their preliminary experience of gender inequalities into an affinity with other equally marginalised groups. In the context of the period covered by this volume, the relevant "dominant" discourse is identified as the grand narrative of an imperialist, Brahminical, middle class and patriarchal nationstate which papers over all historical discontinuities in the interest of citizen-subject formation. Within this ideo-logical grid, the evaluation of a woman writer is determined by the horizontal scope of her political affinities. A woman exclusively opposed to ideologies of gender is immediately critiqued for her complicity and alliance with repressive dominant ideologies.

This framework, although coher-ently stated and consistent with

the well-established bias of rigidly socialist feminism, is ultimately disempowering for two reasons. Firstly, for its effective delegitmisation of any feminist project which is not inflected by caste or class considerations. And, secondly, for its totalising view of the repressive nature of the nation state. Few marks are awarded for struggles within the space of the family, or for the painful process of surreptitious self-education experienced by large numbers of women writers. In the same gesture, Tharu and Lalita collapse into a monolithic category the radical and often radically divergent positions of socalled nationalists. Non-violence is accordingly dismissed as an ex-clusively imperialist inheritance, and Aurobindo and Savarkar carelessly placed within the same "communal" tradition. There is no account in these readings of *ahimsa* as a precolonial indigenous tradition or of the strategic pse, in independent India, of non-violent forms of protest such as *dharna, hartal* and hunger strike, by activists from the left. So also, the editors show little understanding of Aurobindo's profound supranationalism and antifundamentalist persuasion.

The rigid bias of Tharu and Lalita's volume effectively transforms what might have been a celebratory anthology for Indian feminism into a curiously joyless project. The inflexibility of their assumptions and the censoriousness of their tone invite a reconsideration of Virginia Woolf's prophetic warning in an essay entitled "American Fiction": "All kinds of consciousness - consciousness of self, of race, of sex, of civilisation - which have nothing to do with art, have got between them and the paper, with results that are, on the surface, at least, unfortunate."

Debauchery

Girls, thin as mannequins of delight,
soon grow into contented women,
thick of waist, thin of patience,
married to remembrances
and forever fattening like mangoes
that ripen away from the sun.

The girls gesture and flash their teeth.
A glance, quick as youth, and the head
thrown askance like an outrageous question

Why do women cry?

Moments away from the dust of files,
the women become glow-worms beneath the neon!
Rectangles of cash receipts abandoned to drawers,
they duck beneath the slender signs,
so deft and eager to get home,
now that dusk has advertised their intentions.

Strange eyes watch.
They see only a mole
dropped beside the nose
like a tear molten into blackness.

The women have strength in their arms
folded across breasts which hug
to themselves their fullness.

Slight as afternoon thoughts,
the girls beyond drowse into womanliness,
like anchovies caught upright
in a tide of passion.

Cheated, a woman purges her tears.
She does not cry or whimper.
Deceived by thievery, a woman does not wail.
She asks:
Why do women cry?

Women are confident.
They wait even as they ask:

Why do women cry?

K.G Kumar