

G.S. Amur 2012: *Transgressions: Studies in Indian Literature in English*. Bengaluru: Kanva. XVII +623 pp. ISBN: 978-93-81803-10-3.

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The emergence of Indian literature in English as an object of study is a landmark in the history of English Studies in India.<sup>1</sup> One need not reiterate the space it has occupied in English Studies curricula and research over a period of more than five decades, although the pioneering work undertaken by eminent Indian teachers of English from the early generation —K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, C.D. Narasimhaiah, G.S. Amur and M.K. Naik among them— in promoting the field and attaining international recognition should be acknowledged. They trained several generations of students in the field through their courses, their extensive research and abundant publications. Of these pioneers, G.S. Amur stands out as unique,<sup>2</sup> for his sheer profundity and range of engagement not only with Indian literature but also with American and postcolonial literatures and, more prominently, Kannada literature. He initiated interest in the field by conceiving the idea of a book on Indian literature in English, *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* (1968), which over the years became a standard reference on the subject. Apart from his substantial work on major Indian English writers, G.S. Amur was responsible for bringing Manohar Malgonkar into the mainstream of Indian writers in English, as his acceptance as a master narrator of fiction by the academia was the result of Amur's monograph *Manohar Malgonkar* (1972).

Amur's academic interests range from the theory of comedy to different forms of literature; in his much-acclaimed *The Concept of Comedy* (1963),<sup>3</sup> he makes a significant contribution to this field by arguing that the crux of comedies is an element of joy rather

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<sup>2</sup> There are several articles on the contribution of G.S. Amur to literary criticism in both Kannada and English. Among the Kannada articles, see M.G. Hegde's 'G.S. Amur' (2005), also available in *A. Na. Kru. Prashasti Puraskrita Pratibhavantaru* (2010).

<sup>3</sup> G.S. Amur is the only Asian to figure in *Wessen Und Formen Des Komischenim Drama* (1975). From the English speaking world, his contribution joins essays by Northorp Frye and Susan Langer.

than laughter. He is also one of the makers of modern literary criticism in Kannada. Amur's critical writings evince his brilliant scholarship in both the western critical tradition and in the indigenous intellectual traditions of Kannada and Sanskrit. One important pattern in his engagement with literary criticism is his 'double bind' (dual loyalties) in the best sense of the phrase; as a teacher of English, he has done a commendable job in both teaching and writing literary criticism in English. His unflinching commitment to Kannada literature, especially after his retirement, has resulted in the publication of a vast body of Kannada criticism, which has brought him several awards. Thus, having emerged through his long and erudite career as a bilingual critic of exceptional scholarship and with a wide area of influence, G.S. Amur has now compiled essays, originally written as reviews or articles for scholarly journals, in the volume *Transgressions: Studies in Indian Literature in English*.

*Transgressions*, the most comprehensive collection of Amur's critical writings in the field of Indian literature in English, is divided into five parts. The first, titled 'General', deals with reviews of anthologies, including Salman Rushdie's controversial *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* (1997) and Amit Chaudhuri's *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001). In addition, this section, while reviewing books like Sudipta Kaviraj's *The Unhappy Consciousness* (1995), Sumita Chakravarty's *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema* (1996) and *Interrogating Modernity*, edited by Tejaswini Niranjana et al. (1993), also discusses conceptual and theoretical issues such as cultural studies, modernity, orientalism, culture and colonialism, and women's discourse. The second part, 'Poetry and Drama', includes essays on the poetry of Adil Jussawalla, P. Lal, Jayanta Mahapatra, Keki Daruwalla, A.K. Ramanujan and Shiv K. Kumar. This section also contains an essay on the English-language plays of the Kannada dramatist T.P. Kailasam. Part III deals with the Indian English novel. Along with three general essays on Indian political novels, Muslim novelists, and the East-West encounter, it contains scholarly probing into the works of the three founding fathers of the Indian English Novel (Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao), of women novelists, including Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and Namita Gokhale, and postmodernists like Shashi Tharoor and Upamanyu Chatterjee. Part IV deals with the texts of expatriates and writers such as Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Bapsi Sidhwa, Hanif Kureshi, Peter Nazareth and Meadows Taylor. Part V contains essays devoted to the study of prose, including the writings of Jawaharlal Nehru, Raja Rao and Khushwant Singh; and travelogues, biographies and autobiographies, such as those by Narayan and P. Lal.

'Seemollanghana' (Crossing the Borders), to borrow a phrase from the title of one of his Kannada books, has been the hallmark of Amur's writing and this work is no exception. Its title is appropriate, as the volume is a transgression not merely in the sense that it goes beyond Amur's present engagement with Kannada literary criticism, but because the book convincingly transgresses genres, texts, authors, and more importantly, the very idea of literature as a semi-philosophical discourse. Further, the idea of transgression makes reference to Amur's "nagging feeling that his time would have been better spent on the great Sanskrit Classics and Kannada literature than on English and American literature".

In this sense, Amur clearly acknowledges “a sense of moral wrong”, echoing another connotation of the word ‘transgress’, by going beyond “his natural limit as a writer in Kannada language” (2012: x). This is not only illuminating in terms of Amur’s identity crisis as a writer, but it also accounts for the crisis of teachers of English in India, especially those of Amur’s generation; they began their career as teachers of English, borrowing insights and methods from the western tradition, and later, in the postcolonial context, found themselves obliged to recover Indian intellectual traditions in their work. Amur’s transgression can be seen as related to his intellectual milieu in India.

The section ‘Culture Studies’ (Part I) is one of the strongest in the book, as Amur is at his best when discussing theoretical and conceptual issues as he does here. Unlike K.R. Srinivas Iyengar (1962) and M.K. Naik (1997), he deals with problems and concepts beyond Indian literature in English, including issues such as modernity, diaspora, colonialism, orientalism, national identity, creativity, popular culture, together with the idea of Indian literature and the problems of Indian novelists.

Part II includes only one essay on the genre of drama, albeit one of the most important pieces in the collection. It shows the deep connections between Kailasam’s Kannada plays and his English plays. In fact, most of the articles in this section can be turned into topics for significant advanced research in the area of Indian literature in English. However, one wonders why there is only one contribution on theatre when Amur has written extensively on another Indian playwright in English, Girish Karnad. Karnad does write his plays in Kannada first, but then translates them into English himself, and is therefore considered to be an Indian writer in English.

Part III, which includes in-depth studies on the Indian English novel, is the most extensive and pedagogic section in the book. It evidences Amur’s close reading of the novels of prominent authors, and includes his altogether different, unorthodox but perfectly valid (and valuable), interpretation of Narayan’s novels. Special mention must be made of his reading of *The Guide*, the most widely read Indian novel in English, in the essay ‘A Saint for Malgudi: A New Look at R.K. Narayan’s *The Guide*’, from the point of view of “human possibilities for self-recovery and self-transcendence” (255). In another essay, ‘R.K. Narayan in His Own Culture: An Approach to *The Vendor of Sweets*’, Amur offers an entirely new reading of the text to underscore the point that Narayan is firmly rooted in his own culture:

Narayan’s characters are controlled by values and ideas originating in their own culture, though their actual understanding of these values and ideas and their relationship with them reveal a high degree of complexity and demand a variety of modes of expressions, ranging from the comic to the serious. The most important of these concepts are the *purusbarthas* (*dharmā, artha, kama* and *moksh*) and *Asbramadharmas* (*brahmacharya, gṛahasthya, vanaprastha* and *sanyasa*), concepts unique to Hindu culture and the Hindu way of life. An awareness of how these concepts appear in Narayan’s work is, I feel, essential for a proper understanding of it. (257-58)

In both readings of Narayan's work, Amur's concern is to probe into what constitutes a meaningful life —the most important question for the Indian character, whether reader, writer or scholar. This is what makes Amur a very Indian critic, his endeavor to resist a Western framework in the reading of literary texts and his engagement with the deeper concerns of philosophical problems. Peter Nazareth describes him as “an example of the best produced by the Hindu intellectual tradition —the capacity to be a true comparatist without losing the judgment of a literary critic” (qtd. in Amur 2012: 621).

Another key article in this section is ‘Individual Consciousness and Social Reality in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Shivaram Karanth's *Chomana Dudi*’. It is not only an illustration of Amur's approach to Indian literature in English as being part of Indian literature, but also a fine example of the development of an argument through the comparative study of literary texts from the same culture. The connections he makes between the canonical Indian writer in English, Mulk Raj Anand, and Shivaram Karantha, the most celebrated Kannada novelist, is typical of Amur's engagement with literary texts. Few literary critics in India have fashioned their approach in this mode; they have often, according to Amur's own observation, “tended to consider it [Indian Literature in English] in isolation, as though it was totally unrelated to writing in regional languages” (198). Amur's studies on Raja Rao are equally important. ‘Self-Recognition in *The Serpent and The Rope*’ offers a new reading of Raja Rao's metaphysical novel, and other essays on Rao's fiction included here have become valuable reference sources for scholars and students working in this area.

A further value of the book is the fact that it is not simply a collection of academic essays, but rather an attempt to build a theory of literature and provide an opportunity for the readers to engage themselves with the discipline, which has many promises to keep. For instance, Amur reveals his position about the creative possibility of English for Indian authors like Kailasam: “Kailasam, perhaps, thought that his lasting contribution in the field of literature were the English plays, . . . but his surest claims to immortality are, undoubtedly, the epoch making plays in Kannada, where he does achieve originality as well as greatness. *If this has a moral for all Indian writers seeking creative expression in English, well, it is a moral, which deserves to be shown a great deal of respect*” (173, emphasis added).

The mark of intellectual sophistication and profound scholarship is evident in the pages of the volume. In a way, the collection can be read as a short history of Indian literature in English, in the sense that it covers the major authors and trends, without simply offering a catalogue, a tendency one finds in many literary histories. In terms of academic standards, Amur's careful documentation and the range of references are models for Indian scholars. The para-textual evidence reveals the kind of research undertaken when reading texts. Furthermore, the meticulously prepared index at the end of the book is invaluable as a quick reference source.

Since most essays in the volume are reviews, the author, in keeping with the requirements of the genre, places each book in its context, not only describing its relevance but also offering guidance for reading. Amur has always been very conscious of his use of language, and this tendency seems to have grown with his career as a critic. His accessible style avoids

poststructuralist and postcolonial jargon, even though his work deals with many issues to be found in these areas.

On the whole, the book makes a rich contribution to the study of Indian literature in English through its broad scope and scrutiny of groundbreaking texts and issues, and offers a series of acute analytical observations and proposals for further study. In engaging with writers from the early period to the most recent, Amur shows not only his continual commitment to the field of Indian literature in English, but also his love for truly intellectual pursuits. My sole criticism is that a book of this nature, a collection of reviews and essays written over a period, would greatly benefit from a critical introduction, which would orient the reader towards the link between the variety of themes, issues and texts discussed. The Preface shows the author's own awareness of this: "I have tried to create the illusion of a solid book but there are obvious omissions, imbalances and inadequacies which readers and critics will easily notice" (x).

In recent times, literary criticism has lost ground to cultural theory, and some academics, especially in English Studies, might be faulted for 'dabbling' in the social sciences, without a thorough grounding in either these or in literary theory. The literary criticism that gave a central place to human experience in literature seems to have disappeared from the scene. Terry Eagleton, whose works are associated with literary theory, bemoans in his *After Theory* the neglect of human content in the study of literary texts (2003: 101-02). In many of its pieces, *Transgression* does give place to what Eagleton calls "a large slice of human experience" (2003: 102). It certainly acts as a companion to Indian literature in English; it will be of immense help to teachers who offer courses in Indian literature in English and to students of English Studies. The style is highly readable, as page-turning as that of the master storytellers Amur deals with in his book, making the reading of *Transgressions* a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

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