

Amit Sarwal and Reema Sarwal, eds. *Reading Down Under: Australian Literary Studies Reader*. New Delhi: SSS Publications, 2009, lxxvi + 634pp.

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Amit Sarwal and Reema Sarwal have assembled a big book. *Reading Down Under* is encyclopaedic in scope and marked by an archival intent. The volume consists of the work of 59 contributors, 52 essays and covers six topics: Entering Australian Literature; The Critical Scene; Reading Aboriginal; Multicultural Realms; Exploring Genres 1 & 2; and Austral-Asian Dialogues.

Bill Ashcroft, in the preface titled 'Literary Australis', invokes his co-authored, ground-breaking postcolonial volume, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), and notes that a critical and ideological product of nineteenth-century British expansion was the idea of 'Englishness' and how this was embodied in the literary formation 'English': 'No other imperial power developed a subject quite like "English" or its function as a vehicle of cultural hegemony, and no subject gained the prestige English achieved in the curriculum of Britain and the Commonwealth', he writes (xvi). Of course, having deployed such a powerful system to inculcate 'Englishness' in the colonies, it is no wonder, as Ashcroft points out, that the curriculum provided the tools both for critiquing and resisting cultural hegemony, and for asserting a national literature and cultural formation. This is what Indian and Australian literature share differentially and what forms the basis for exchange and dialogue between the two.

What Ashcroft's assessment of the collection underscores, however, is that early attempts to assert, stabilise and, perhaps, homogenise representations of the national give way to a myriad of intensities that contribute to the confluences of Australian-nesses and Indian-nesses. But in the instance of this collection the focus is on textual production in the Australian context. And one cannot but help but agree with Ashcroft's belief that the volume gives us 'Fifty two articles of impeccable scholarship, from many of the best scholars in Australia and India [resulting] in an analysis of Australia's multivalent culture that is unparalleled in Australian Literary Studies—inclusive, comprehensive, informative, but above all, interesting' (xx).

J.V. D'Cruz's foreword, 'Little Cultures, Local Histories and National Literature', adds an important dimension to the reading of the essays. By way of memoir, D'Cruz problematises the question of the national and its production through processes of 'othering'. D'Cruz's title draws on Ashis Nandy's idea of 'little cultures', which for D'Cruz operates counter-discursively: 'For "little" cultures read "diversity"/"alternative" forms of knowledge and living that do not look to the European Enlightenment or its modern progenies for validation' (xl).

'Nation' is one such progeny but nation is also a problematic in terms of identity formation given the diversities that operate within and across borders, and across internal divisions. For D'Cruz, this feature is emphasised by the recognition that 'Australia cannot establish successful relations with Asia unless we first come to terms with the Asia(s) inside Australia' (xxxiii) and, by extension, Anglo-Australia's relations with Indigenous Australia. In turn, the complexities of Indigenous

Australia's relations with Asia must also be admitted and grappled with. No wonder D'Cruz finds it easier to assert a local identity ('I'm a Melbournian') rather than a national one.

The section 'Entering Australian Literature' takes up this point to a certain degree. It examines the changing rhetoric involved in the literary production of national identity through various modes such as poetry and drama, as well as through literary movements including modernism. Pat Buckridge provides a history of the ideological shifts, noting that the literary representations move from a confident optimism in the 1890s, through destabilisation and re-stabilisation in the 1930s and 1940s, to a focus in the 1980s on the regional, often associated with issues of gender, indigeneity and ethnicity.

In the section 'The Critical Scene' contributors collectively provide a picture of a number of theoretical and historical approaches to Australian literature and its relationship to a nationalist project. Foci include a consideration of gender, class, indigeneity, ethnicity and ecology. But tellingly, it is David Carter's invocation of Nettie Palmer that might point to further developments of the 'critical scene'. Carter notes:

From the other side of modernism, the Palmers worked Australia's 1890s into a powerful myth of origins in which "conscious literature" and folk culture were fused in the ideal image of the organic national culture. Such a myth "solved" the problems of modernity and colonialism together. The writer should be at one with the reader, the culture, the people—the soil—in a living relationship, an idea linked to the bush where individuality and community could still be imagined democratically together. For Nettie Palmer the key notion was intimacy, the evolution of an intimate relation between writer and environment, writer and audience. (73)

Here one might consider Raymond Williams' assertion that culture is a whole way of life, not only in terms of its economic dimension, but also in terms of its creative and affective dimensions. And this seems to draw attention to the debates threading through the rest of this section and the following essays. To a certain degree, the myth of origins is one strategy among others to bring into a rationalist and political frame the affective which otherwise resists such a manoeuvre. Once attention is accorded to alternative and, for the most part, silent/silenced histories (or less valued genres as elements within the relationship between creative production and the articulation of a national identity), we begin to see an opening up of the debate to the affective and what that might mean in terms of imagining singular Australian-nesses and how they are made through relationship and dialogue. *Reading Down Under* brings this possibility to the fore and indicates that in its multiplicity the collection will provide the foundation for further research.

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