

THE LITERATURE OF DISPOSSESSION: SUBVERSION OF ELITIST NATIONALISM IN DALIT AND ABORIGINAL TEXTS

Debjani Ganguly

'the margins of the nation displace the centre; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis'.

(Homi Bhabha, 1990:6)

Clearing the Ground: A Little Theory

Postcolonial interventions in the domains of history and historiography have so badly shaken up and subverted the teleological and positivist models on which these disciplines have been based, that one Oxford professor, in a last ditch attempt at holding on to the bastion of the old school, declared to a Sri Lankan academic: 'Anything after 1945 is not history, it is journalism' (Coomaraswamy 43). Yet, the ironic appropriateness of the Oxford don's choice of the year 1945 can hardly be missed. It marks the end of a gruesome political event which blew up the Eurocentric teleological model of history into smithereens, by directing a demented German's reified notions of 'race' against Europe itself instead of against the coloured Third World colonies. As Aime Cesaire puts it: 'he (Hitler) applied to Europe colonialist procedures which, until then, had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India and the blacks of Africa' (14).

Few events have prompted such widespread academic exploration and delineation of new paradigms for humanistic research as European colonisation and its aftermath. In the context of the Third World, decolonisation has necessarily meant critiquing colonialist and even nationalist historiographies. Edward Said, in his inaugural address at the 1989 ACLALS Conference at the University of Kent, reiterated this necessity by underscoring the compulsion (in humanistic research) to challenge what he called 'the official orthodox, authoritatively national and institutional versions of history'. In this context, he upheld Ranajit Guha's *Subaltern Studies* project and Martin Bernalis' *Black Athena* as desirable models because such works opted for a historical method whose material was made up of 'disparate but intertwined and interdependent and above all overlapping streams of historical experience'. Official, authoritative, institutional versions of history have often been used by elitist historiographers to freeze certain identities into immutable essences which are then hierarchically ranged against one another. Thus, for instance, we have what Jenny Sharpe calls 'the trapping of the subaltern within an orientalist narrative of an ancient and unchanging India'. Further, in India, the task of nation-building is often perceived in mainstream historical discourse as the outcome of a predominantly male, upper-caste, bourgeoisie effort. And the potentially subversive, yet all-encompassing postcolonial theory, with its frequent tendency to camouflage hierarchies 'within' the former colonised and oppressed nations, has, in the Indian

context, been constantly in danger of obscuring the various caste, class, gender and religious affiliations and fragmentations that helped forge a certain construct of the 'Indian Nation'.

Today, there is a broad consensus among social scientists and historians that debates around the constructs of 'Nation', 'Nationality' and 'Nationalism' have been foregrounded in the twentieth century as never before and that European colonisation is responsible in no small measure for such politico-historical polemics. This is because within the context of colonisation, discourses on the 'Nation' and 'Nationalism' acquire a special resonance as they are often seen as sites that contest imperialist histories and initiate a process of decolonisation. However, in the last two decades or so, burgeoning subaltern discourses from around the world have functioned not only as subversive, impassioned, yet relevant and expressive forms of cultural communication, but have also served as reminders of the necessity to analyse the problem of the 'legitimacy' of the claims of a nation. Seen within the context of colonial and postcolonial debates on the 'nation', such discourses problematise the coloniser-colonised equation by throwing up evidences of repression on the part of the indigenous elite or the white settlers who assume the powers left behind by the European colonisers. As Frantz Fanon says in *The Wretched of the Earth*, to the national elite, 'nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are the legacy of the colonial period!' (122).

Within the Australian context, the 1960s first witnessed the articulation of Aboriginal protests, and in the past 35 years, the debate over Aboriginal rights to land, to education and citizenship has received significant recognition. Further, such politico-social battles have been paralleled by an outburst of creative writing in English by Aboriginals. Those writings are more often than not politically charged and are remarkable for their attempts to subvert notions of the Australian 'nation' built around ideological parameters that either relegate them to the fringes or outright-exclude them. For instance, Kevin Gilbert's and Mudrooroo Narogin's notions of the Aboriginal patriot and the poetry of Maureen Watson, Gerry Bostok and Lionel Fogarty, articulate the Aboriginal society's claim to be the 'first Australian nation' on the grounds that they are the 'first citizens' of the country. Coupled with this claim is the awareness that the only way to challenge the white, elitist conception of nationhood is to express in tangible creative forms the various facets of Aboriginal culture through literature. As Mudrooroo Narogin said in the first ever National Conference of Aboriginal writers held in Perth in 1983:

I believe we should recapture our history and culture and a means of doing this is through literature and art; and if we do not do this what shall we have? Culture is built on the faith of a people and the history of a people. This presses into the present in a constant surge and we define and keep on defining ourselves by it...I believe literature has a great part to play in helping to forge and strengthen the Aboriginal nation. (*Aboriginal Writing Today* 29-30)

In India, the subaltern voice within mainstream nationalism began to be heard much before political decolonisation. Of course, feminist historiography has only recently foregrounded the interface of gender and imperialism within the context of Indian colonisation. But from the 1930s onwards, voices from another repressed community in India, the untouchable castes (now called the Dalits) began to get increasingly audible and brought to the surface the failure of the Indian upper-caste bourgeoisie to 'speak' for the nation. Since the famed Gandhi-Ambedkar dispute in the 1930s, epitomised in Ambedkar's dramatic yet poignant declaration, 'Gandhiji, I have no homeland', there has been an impressive proliferation of Dalit creative and polemical writing. The attempts in such writings to deconstruct the nation as conceived within the parameters of the Hindu nationalism of the nineteenth century on the one hand and within the ideology of the Indian National Congress (the dominant, political party controlled by upper castes and capitalists) on the other, provide rich angles of comparison with similar ideological forays made by the Aborigines in Australia through their creative writings. Such literature then (along with other more overt forms of political activism) functions as a potent subalternist mode and becomes a significant

discursive site of resistance to elitist historiography, both colonial and national.

Literature and Nation: An Uneasy Alliance

The post Second World War period has witnessed a proliferation of theoretical debates on the 'Nation' based on the premise that nations are not immutable essences but historically constituted terrains requiring the intervention of human agency. Further, such debates also make a plea to interpret this human agency in broader cultural terms rather than restricting it within dry and narrow political parameters. One of the earliest and eloquent spokesmen of this position has been Benedict Anderson: 'Nationalism has to be understood by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being' (19). Such a premise enables us to see literature, in its functional role as a cultural sub-system, as not only an important signifier but also a determinant of national consciousness. One of the earliest evidences of this relationship is the tenacious link between forms and subjects of imaginative literature and the rise of the modern nation-state in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The two-way relationship is manifested not only in the way national boundaries and linguistic and philological traditions constructed 'national literatures' (such as the French, English, German, Spanish) but also the way in which such literatures fortified an already emergent national consciousness through the creation of the national print media—the newspaper and novel, the latter especially objectifying the 'one yet many' of national life (Brennan 49).

And yet, the correspondence between 'literatures' and 'nations' is not as direct or simple as the above example suggests. The transitional, transgressive domain that literature inhabits, a domain that is constituted more of 'cultural shreds and patches' (Gellner) than of fixities and totalities can but have a very problematic relationship with the construct of the 'nation' which is interpreted, at least in orthodox discourses, in terms of political, historical and even cultural containment and homogeneity. Postcolonial discourse, however, has had the salutary effect of highlighting the importance of looking into the fissures, gaps or alterities that necessarily form part of any attempt to construct a 'national consciousness'. Fanon for instance, has repeatedly emphasised 'those border and frontier conditions' (Bhabha), those dispossessed, marginalised perspectives that are indispensable components in the construction of a national identity. He also emphasises, at the same time, the transitional and fluid nature of these transgressive and marginalised conditions and perspectives themselves, so as to liberate the discourse of emancipation from binary fixities. One thus needs to be on guard against the dangers of stereotyping, fetishism and calcification of 'subaltern' identities themselves. Such a perspective has an extremely significant bearing on a study such as the one undertaken here, since, in the process of subverting elitist nationalism within their respective geographical and cultural boundaries, both the Dalits and the Aborigines are in danger of essentialising their own identities and thus articulating what Homi Bhabha calls 'atavistic apologues' (*Location of Culture* 141), full of tribal memories and claims of a thousand camp fires in the forest singing in the blood. Such essentialising, however, does constitute the moral first step of protest and the Dalit and Aboriginal literature examined in this article largely falls into this category.

My choice of literary discourse in examining national consciousness in Dalits and Aborigines has been deliberate for a few other reasons. It is an emancipatory mode in more ways than one. More obviously, to these subaltern groups themselves, literature has been by far the most effective means of articulating their need for freedoms, identity and recognition. But more significantly, literature, in its inherent capacity to operate in the 'twilight zone of occult instability' (Fanon) and to 'nibble away at the monoliths of Truth, Nation, Religion and Ideology...with its little words' (*Nandan* 62, emphasis mine), can in its own quiet way, subvert even the shrillest of propagandist writing to emanate from the pens of Dalits and Aborigines and show up their constructions of national identity as no more than culturally shifting, temporal and even evanescent phenomena.

A Blur on the Land, a Smudge on Paper: Territorial and Discursive Displacement of Dalits and Aboriginals in National Narratives

One of the critical commonplaces in current theoretical articulations on 'Nation' and 'Nationalism' is the assertion of an indissoluble link between the idea of a nation and its narration. Nation as a 'text', the 'writing' or 'inscribing' of a nation—such critical phrases are heard often enough. As Geoffrey Bennington says, 'we find narrations at the centre of nation: stories of national origins, myths of founding fathers, genealogies of heroes. At the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation's origin' (*Nation and Narration* 121).

In this section an attempt will be made to show up the ethnocentric bias embedded in both Indian and Australian narrations of nation—formation and origins, narrations that have quite consciously either written out of existence or rendered inconsequential both Dalit and Aboriginal identities and versions of history.

Such an attempt becomes even more significant in the Australian context when we have an Australian academic like Simon During claiming (at an Annual Specials Conference on 'National Cultures and Literature' at Deakin University, Victoria, 1986) that in Australia 'unlike many Third World countries, *Nationalism is not used against large minority racial or tribal groups*' (emphasis mine) and that in a settler nation like Australia 'nationalism can retain a link with freedom in allowing us to resist cultural and economic imperialism and to remain outside the technology of nuclear war, which with modern communication systems, largely defines internationalism today. It reminds us that we are not historically or politically simply on the side of the major power' (emphasis mine). During's wilful distortion of history and his exclusivist notion of Australian identity (reinforced by the self-righteous collective pronouns) effectively parallel the racist discourse that formed the basis of the definition of Australian cultural nationalism around the turn of the twentieth century. Australia's identity as a 'nation' has been underwritten by the discourse of Social Darwinism of nineteenth-century Europe with its accompanying valorisation of Christianity and Capitalism as the twin props on which white European culture balanced itself with such élan.

Such conspiracies of silence or blatant discursive displacement have their parallel in the legitimacy claimed by the Australian nation-state through its doctrine of *terra nullius* (uninhabited land) under which the continent was claimed by the British in 1770 and which reduced the stature of the Aborigines to that of 'non-human fauna'. This motif of disinheritance and deprivation runs through the whole gamut of Aboriginal writing as it attempts to give its own version of post-contact history. In Gerry Bostok's words:

The white man settled this vast country; cleared the land;
Built a great nation democratic and free,
And they looked after you, their friends,
Our brothers, the Aborigine.

They had to protect you, cater for you,
They gave you a home
Or you would have died of disease
Or starved if they left you to roam.

These are the lies
Of our white Judas brother,
He has taught us deceit.

And contempt for one another
And watched amused
As we grovelled for fresh air
Under his racist care;
Derelict and abused'. ('Black Children' 1987)

Gerry Bostok's poem epitomises the Aboriginal consciousness that very effectively sees through and critically distances itself from the various narratives that have constructed the white Australian nation: Social Darwinism, Capitalism, Christianity. Such scathing exposure and ideological distancing characterises some of the early poems of Oodgeroo Noonuccal in her first collection *We are Going* (1964). In the following lines, she targets Christianity's missionary zeal to civilise the Aborigines and shows up the alterities, the divides that this religion perpetrated and perpetuated in its attempts to uproot indigenous religious practices:

Give us Christ, not crucifixion.
 Though baptised and blessed and Bibles
 We are still tabooed and libelled.
 You devout Salvation Sellers,
 Make us neighbours, not fringe dwellers;
 Make us mates, not poor relations,
 Citizens, not serfs on stations.
 Must we native old Australians
 in our land rank as aliens.
 ('Then And Now')

The cultural foundations of a nation are nowhere better illustrated than in the cases of India and Australia where religion, as a cultural practice, becomes a potent mode of defining national identity for some, while effectively marginalising others. The secular tones of the post-independence Indian constitution notwithstanding, the role of a monolithically interpreted 'Hinduism' (a religion that has never been institutionalised otherwise) in the process of the construction of an Indian 'nation' in the early nineteenth century has been documented by new historians such as Romila Thapar and Partho Chatterjee. Romila Thapar speaks of the attempts in the nineteenth century 'to put all segments that constituted the vast mass of Hindu religion into one structure which was then called Hinduism, a desperate attempt to fit in the texts, fit in the rituals and the cults, to give it some semblance of order, on the basis recognised as existing in semitic religions' (Sen 122). This reassertion of Hindu identity, seen in mainstream historical writings as an important facet of anti-colonial struggle (and called as the Indian Reform Movement) in nineteenth and early twentieth century India, could, for the Dalits, only mean a dual colonisation—that of the British and of the Hindu elite. In India, the colonial and nationalist phases produced substantial Dalit discourse in the form of poems, periodicals, speeches, folk drama or 'tamashas' in which began to be articulated the Dalit disgruntlement at the closures inherent in the elitist conception of Indian nationhood. Thus, in the late nineteenth century itself, we have Jyotiba Phule's strident rhetoric against Hindu and especially Brahmanic hegemony in Indian Reform and Nationalist movements: 'There cannot be a "nation" worth the name until and unless all the people of the land of King Bali such as the Shudras, Bhils and fishermen, etc. become truly educated and are able to think independently for themselves and are uniformly united and emotionally integrated' (Omvedt 97). Phule's historical-materialist analysis of the origins of the caste system along with his reinterpretation of Indian mythology (all communicated to the masses through songs, plays and polemical tracts) challenged the existing Brahmanical and Orientalist ideologies used to legitimate the caste system. The Brahmanical ideologies invoked the laws of Manu and the 'creation hymn' of the Rig Veda which are variously manifested in the Puranic myths and in the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat*. With the advent of British rule came European Orientalist discourse with its 'Aryan Theory of Race' which further helped consolidate the caste system. An ethnic kinship was asserted between the Europeans and the ancient Vedic people or the Aryans, and members of the Brahmin elite in Maharashtra such as Lokmanya Tilak were not exactly averse to using the Orientalists' arguments to justify untouchability. Phule staked a claim to 'nationhood' and 'first citizenship' by asserting that the Shudras and Ati Shudras were the original inhabitants of this land and now dispossessed and delegitimated

by the Aryan conquerors.

Similar claims to first citizenship and affirmation of delegitimation abound in Aboriginal polemical and creative writing. Kevin Gilbert, in his introduction to *Inside Black Australia* (1988), cites archeological findings as evidence that 'Australia has the oldest geological formations in the world and the oldest life forms' (xix) and that the 'Aborigines inhabited this land before the great ice-age, disproving the theory of the land-bridge immigration path, in agreement with the Aboriginal story that we have *always* been here' (xix) Again, Jack Davis' poem *The First Born*, in a reworking of the Earth Mother archetype, has the Australian land terrain claiming the Aborigine as her first born and lamenting their dispossession:

Where are my first-born, said the brown land, sighing;
They came out of my womb long long ago
They were formed of my dust...
Where are the laws and the legends I gave?
Tell me what happened, you whom I bore after
Now only their spirits dwell in the caves.
(*Inside Black Australia* 54)

The 'land rights' motif symbolises the ideological core of Aboriginal literature and is a reminder that the white Australian nation will need much more than a Mabo case or an ecological clause in the Rio Earth Summit (1993) to neutralise the Aboriginal outrage at the *terra nullius* doctrine of the British Crown.

As for the Dalits in India their denial of cultural and political space by the very powers that were mobilising the anti-colonial struggle showed up the precarious foundation on which the Indian Nationalist leaders were attempting to forge a national identity. Even before the rise of Savarkar and his Hindutva ideology in Maharashtra in the 1920s, the Indian Reform and Nationalist Movement were dominated by an elitism that equated Hinduism with nationalism. Historians have shown how religious symbols were used to popularise nationalism, whether it was the introduction of Ganesh Chaturthi in Maharashtra by Tilak or the Kali cult in Bengal.

The Dalit resistance to such an equation of national identity with Brahmanical Hinduism was two-fold; discursive (through poems, plays, speeches, polemical writing), and activist (through demonstrations, rallies, etc.). For instance, in an article written in 1909, the prominent Dalit leader of the time, Kisan Gaguji Bansode, expressed a militant anti-Hindu stance as he wrote: 'The Aryans, your ancestors, conquered us and gave us unbearable harassment. At that time we were your conquest. You treated us even worse than slaves and subjected us to any torture you wanted. But now we are no longer your subjects' (Bhagwat). Bansode also published a small volume of verse from which I quote a poem, not very creatively scathing, yet nevertheless scoring a polemical point:

Look, look all people. This is my Hindu nation.
Divided at its root,
A jungle of division
Honour for enmity--this is my Hindu nation.
Nowhere in the world
Such segregation as here
Caste a birth. This is my Hindu nation.
High place to the Brahman
Low to all others.
The seed of this is in religion.
(*An Anthology of Dalit Literature* 6)

As India entered the postcolonial phase in the early 1960s the aura of sanctity built around the construct of the Indian nation began to fade somewhat, and in India (as in some other ex-

colonies of Asia and Africa) the 'nation' began to be perceived not as a conglomeration of people with common interests, but as a monolithic repressive entity that failed to represent and adequately articulate the aspirations of the silenced, the oppressed. Further, the 1980s have witnessed the global crumbling of both Nationalism and Marxism that helped propel India during the colonial and nationalist phases. The Dalit movement in postcolonial India has had to grapple with then radical socio-political changes and even reorient its strategies. The demystification of the Indian 'nation' has also, at the discursive level, thrown open possibilities of many 'narratives' of the nation and national formation and Dalit discourse in postcolonial India can be interpreted as one among many such narratives, a narrative which has, at its centre, a literary search for a viable Dalit history and mythology, as a concomitant to its recognition of a crisis in historical consciousness. Such recognition of 'historical catalepsy', as Memmi puts it, has also been the most significant component of Aboriginal consciousness and has surfaced in Aboriginal creative writing (in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s) with a vengeance. The attempts to retrieve Aboriginals from their fringe position of 'melancholy footnotes' (Stanner) to white Australian history, characterises, for instance, Maureen Watson's poem 'Walk Tall':

'Aboriginal land', yes, your birth right.
 No matter what some name it
 so dig your fingers deep in the soil.
 And feel it, and hold it, and claim it.
 Your people fought and died for this
 The history books distort at all
 But in your veins runs that same Aboriginal blood,
 So walk tall, my child, walk tall... (15)

Revisionist historians such as Henry Reynolds and Wayne Atkinson have reiterated the effectiveness of such family and oral histories as Robert Bropho's *Fringe Dwellers*, Kevin Gilbert's *Living Black* and Sally Morgan's *My Place* in undoing the violation of near invisibility of Aboriginals in Australian historiography. Such narratives authenticate Aboriginal history and show up the gaps, the absences, the distortions and fabrications that characterise official and institutional documentation of Aboriginal affairs.

Where creative waiting is concerned, Colin Johnson's (Mudrooroo's) novels *Long Live Sandawara* and *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, radically reinterpret the roles of a Western Australian Aboriginal patriot and that of a Tasmanian Aboriginal historical figure respectively and rehabilitate them in the Aboriginal collective consciousness, a consciousness that had for over two centuries been amnesiac where its indigenous folk heroes and leaders were concerned. Through these novels Johnson has also attempted to counter the white Australian historical myth of Aboriginal passivity to white invasion of the continent. Other attempts in Aboriginal literature to counter this cultural mutilation or amnesia have taken formal or structural dimensions. Thus we have Johnson incorporating traditional song rhythms and other features of Arnhem Land Oral Literature in *Wooreddy*. Johnson's use of the Aboriginal song-cycle format with its 'frequent repetition of words and sounds, and...incremental progress of storyline' (Shoemaker 202), in his poetry collection *The Song Circle of Jacky and Selected Poems* (1986), has been commented upon often enough by critics. Whether it is his deliberate mutilation of standard English syntax: 'Jacky him been sit listening to the wind/Jacky him been walk listening the wind' (*Inside Black Australia* 41), or his syntactical circumbulation, reiterating and reinforcing white atrocities:

They gave Jacky the right to die,
 The right to consent to mining on his land
 They gave Jacky the right to watch

His sacred dreaming place become a hole
 His soul dies, his ancestors cry;
 They give Jacky his rights—
 A hole in the ground!
 (*Inside Black Australia* 41)

Johnson, along with poets like Gilbert, Fogarty and Sykes, has forged a new tongue in which to articulate the chronicle of 'Aboriginaland'. Some are newer voices such as those of the Lajamanu poets (included in Gilbert's anthology *Inside Black Australia*) and tribal poets from the Northern Territory such as Tutama Tjapangati and Nospeg Tjupurrula, have gone even further in using novel phonetic combinations of English and native languages to give Aboriginal poetry an oral, multi-lingual thrust and thus help it break away from the aesthetic stranglehold of white European and Australian literary traditions.

A similar preoccupation with language and its ability to repress or liberate, characterises much of Dalit poetry. Arun Kamble's poem 'which language should I speak?' articulates the anguish of a Dalit speaker jostled by two disparate linguistic situations:

Chewing trotters in the badlands my grandpa
 the permanent resident of my body,
 the household of tradition heaped on his back;
 hollers at me,
 'You whore-son, talk like we do.
 Talk, I tell you!
 Picking through the Vedas his top-knot well-oiled with ghee, my Brahmin
 teacher tells me, 'you idiot, use the language correctly!'
 Now I ask you
 which language should I speak?
 (*Poisoned Bread* 54)

Writing has functioned as a potent medium through which identities have been constructed in the postcolonial world. This fact has been most palpably borne out in the decolonisation attempt in the African continent where, prior to colonial rule, there existed a rich oral tradition which was subsequently mutilated by the colonial impact. The African cultural attempts at retrieving these oral traditions and 'writing back' to the imperial centre, have contributed in no small measure to the construction of identities within ethnic parameters which function as perhaps the earliest cultural challenges to Eurocentrism. The spurt of Dalit creativity after the Buddhist conversion can be interpreted likewise as an attempt at consolidating a newly discovered sense of cultural identity, distinct from the elitist Brahminical conception. Here was a 'narrative' of a 'nation' that had for millennia been silenced by the 'heirs of Manu', as one Dalit poet puts it. The 1960s and 1970s were years of veritable literary storms with Dalit writers like Shankarrao Kharat, Baburao Bagul, Annabhan Sathe, Bandhu Madhav, articulating Dalit fury with an aggressiveness never before witnessed in Marathi literature. Baburao Bagul's collections of short stories, *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti* (*When I Hid My Caste*) and *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe* (*Death is Getting Cheaper*), are scathing indictments on the pretensions and failures of the Nehruvian welfare state and the hegemony of the urbanised upper-caste bourgeoisie in Maharashtra. The Dalit poets of this period, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar and Keshav Meshram, comprehensively reject the reprehensive and repressive Hindu mytho-historical constructions that banish the Dalits to the fringes and inject a trenchancy into literary discourse that has rattled the mainstream Marathi literary establishment no end. Keshav Meshram, for instance, begins a poem with 'One day I cursed that mother-fucker God' and Daya Pawar writes :

Good, the Museums will be filled this year
 Why don't we stuff these holy puppets for future generations
 Here's an interesting inscription:
 'This water-tap is open to all castes and religions'.

The Buddhist conversion has also mobilised a not inconsiderable number of 'street' and 'folk' performers. Waman Kardak's peripatetic excursion into neo-Buddhist slum communities and villages with his impressive repertoire of folk songs, are now legendary.

Beyond 'Hollywood Versions'

Tracy Moffat, the celebrated filmmaker of *Nice Coloured Girls*, in an interview with Anna Rutherford in 1988, expressed her exasperation at what she called 'the Hollywood version of Aboriginal life' found in most creative attempts at portraying the cultural pillage and ruination of the Aborigines. What she was objecting to was the disinclination on the part of Aboriginal creative writers and filmmakers to move beyond their initial moral attempts at rehabilitating Aboriginal cultural identity and to work towards portrayals that are not fixated upon a compulsion to produce only positive versions or versions based on a white victimiser/black victimised paradigm. What she meant was that such liberal creative enterprises have had their share of the run and the onus is now on the second generation writers and creative artists to problematise Aboriginal cultural identity and extricate it from the essentialist 'abstract text' of 'Aboriginality' (to use Hodge's and Mishra's terms) which has constituted the subtext of Aboriginal literature for some time now. Archie Weller's novels and short stories appear to be a step in this direction, as do Tracy Moffat's films and documentaries which are not exactly concerned with 'verisimilitude' (Moffat 155).

Marathi Dalit literature of the late 1980s and 1990s shows a parallel orientation and short stories like Arjun Dangle's 'Promotion', for instance, display a distinct shift from the predominantly caste-based concerns of the first generation writers towards crises caused by increasing urbanisation and embourgeoisment of the Dalits and their travails in attempting to negotiate the zone between the ghetto and the skyscraper in the metropolis of Bombay. Whether such attempts at problematisation of identities and a refusal to present a unified pan-Aboriginal or pan-Dalit perspective in recent writing can be interpreted as manifestations of a post activist phase in both these literatures, is a point open to debate. What they do foreground, however, is a redefinition of 'identity' as a construct. 'Identity' in such writing still operates as a site of resistance; at the same time, however, it recognises the futility (if not the absurdity) of founding itself on a set of immutable cultural values irrevocably associated with a specific ethnic minority set in Manichean opposition to the dominant and oppressive majority. In other words, though modes of political consciousness still continue to be encapsulated in specific constructions of identity in these literatures, such constructions need to be interpreted as being, but increasingly provisional, variable and fissured—and consequently, perhaps, not exactly politically conducive sites from which to confront the majority.

SNDT University, India

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