

Reinstating the Self

If one were to define the modern Indian sensibility, the task will not be easy, loaded as it would be with the problematic definitions and concerns of "modernity", which itself is devoid of any fixed, objective referent. But if we were to look for its articulation among the Indian writers, perhaps no one would be closer to it than Nirmal Verma. The concept of modernity remains the privileged site for the articulation of competing views about the relationship of past, present, and future. An Indian writer's engagement with it becomes particularly difficult when he finds that the concept of modernity is bound up, almost inextricably, with the cultural legacy of European colonialism. Verma faces this challenge squarely in *India and Europe*, a collection of his essays; most of them are translations from Hindi, while a few are originally in English. The essays bear out what Alok Bhalla notes in his Introduction that Verma sees himself, as a modern rationalist, "a lost and liminal figure". The pivotal essay in the collection is, "India and Europe: Some Reflections on the Self and the Other", which explores the relation between India and Western modernity. Ever since Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) initiated colonial discourse study, the British colonial encounter with India has received careful scrutiny, as it gradually became known that Orientalism had made an invidious representation of the East. However, Verma refuses to take the two sides as stark dichotomies. India is not simply the Other for Europe – since even Europe was not able to define itself except in relationship to India.

Even though the West has created a great deal of knowledge about non-Western societies, it is a knowledge deeply objectified and essentialized. As European rationality set itself apart as the norm, it forged an epistemological apparatus which could sustain its exclusivity on the construction of the Other as deviant. The universalist claims of western epistemology have generally

operated to appropriate and control the Other. Even Hegel and Max Mueller thought that the real India existed only in the past, and in the process they claimed to have discovered India's past, but abolished its present. They had adopted a regressive view of Indian history, with the implicit belief that India's present had lost its contemporaneity for the West, so that whereas Europe carried on with its onward march of progress, modernity and rationality, India was doomed to a past, however glorious, a view sought to be buttressed by the cyclic conception of time in the Indian tradition. Thus the network of myths and symbols through which India made sense of her world was steadily undermined.

For Verma, India's contact with the West was not a meeting among equals, but a "violent cultural rupture" in Indian ways of life, as European colonization was not merely an act of spatial-temporal expansion, but an attempt to colonize India's sense of time by privileging historical consciousness, viewed as a specifically Western prejudice. In this respect "Modernity" itself reflected the wider historical process of colonialism during which a specific (European) present was imposed as a measure of social progress on a global scale. The image of Europe as the Other had not come directly to India, but rather through the distorted image of British colonialism. Verma steps out of this debilitating paradigm, pleading with a strong sense of urgency that since the most invidious effect of British colonialism was on the Indian psyche, this Self needed to be decolonized not by harking back to a mythical past, but by embracing qualified modernity. He believes that a redeeming face of modernity was presented by Gandhi, who was quick to underline the basic truth and essence of our culture to distinguish it from its historical distortions. Unlike Naipaul, he was able to see the "inner core" of our civilization. Colonialism did more than induce "amnesia"

● *India and Europe: Selected Essays*
 ● by Nirmal Verma, edited by Alok Bhalla
 ● Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla
 ● 2000, xii + 175, pp. Rs. 300

in the Indian people, as one nativist critic puts it; it alienated them from their moorings. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* is not only an indictment of the colonial exploitation and the assumed moral legitimacy of the Western civilization, it is also a blueprint for social regeneration and restoration of selfhood.

Indeed meditation on the self is the chief burden of Verma's book. In his essay "The Self as a stranger", he bemoans the loss of self and the consequent alienation of man. This alienation is also engendered when one feels 'stranger' even in one's country. The indigenous criticism often dismisses the concepts of alienation and *angst* as imports from the modern European thought. But to consider them merely as the concomitants of cognitive, industrialized societies, is to hedge the universal human condition. These are as old as the *Mahabharata*, a repository of all conceivable human conditions and orientations. Verma often considers himself as a "native stranger" in the surrounding climate as he himself engages in a critical and interrogative relationship with the past. Another essay, "Home of Man's Being: Some observations on Language, Culture and Identity", considers the role the language plays in the self-idealization of a culture and how the imposition of an alien language can lead to artificial divisions in a society where no such divisions existed. When we express our thoughts in a language other than our own, then the thoughts themselves start getting governed by the conceptual apparatus of that language derived from its own archive. This view, however, needs to be probed further as it creates its own problematic in the Indian context, when English is almost accepted as an Indian language, so that Verma may be carrying his arguments too far.

Yet another conceptual framework Verma questions is in relation to the idea of "nation". He does not consider India, simplistically, as an "imagined community", a formulation made fashion-

able since Benedict Anderson, and alters the terms of discourse by emphasizing that though India had neither been a unitarily administered polity or a nation-state, it nonetheless, has existed as a civilizational entity for a long time, and is underwritten by a common historical archive. The idea is further elaborated in the essay "The Indian Culture and Nation" by presenting the Indian past not as a bygone era, but a present that is constituted out of the past, thus stepping out of the paradigm of exclusive valorization for the historical present over the past as its negation and transcendence. Tradition itself is not a fixed referent, and it is continually reshaped and restructured, being not in the least inimical to cultural absorption. It is "self-analysis" that is the pre-condition of a vibrant tradition. And

we have to acknowledge that tradition intervenes in the contemporary consciousness to give it an organic unity, which is an antidote to the fragmentation and alienation of modern life.

Referring to the polemics about the ontological status of a work of art and its instrumentality, Verma expresses his strong conviction about the autonomy of a work of art, which contributes to and sustains its own truth, so much so that it gives art the status of an alternative reality. Since a work of art creates its own fictive world, and has an appeal to an ineffable sort of truth, it has to be appreciated and assessed in its own right. He resists the fashionable tide of literature being appropriated by several other disciplines, as for instance, history and anthropology, in which literature loses its essence. Language itself has to

be considered as a means and not an end, which should not create a division between the creative and the critical activities. Indeed, when we look back, we find that in the Indian experience history and myth, memory and self-criticism are all embedded. The fusion of thought and feeling had been the hallmark of the medieval Indian poets, a quality which Eliot had found in the work of metaphysical poets. Its absence engenders the dissociation of sensibility conspicuous in the modern man. The crux of Verma's arguments is that there has to be a complementarity of visions, and that the paradigm of modernity must be defined by taking recourse to both Gandhi and Simone Weil.

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Return Flight of a Wounded Bird

Dislocation has its poetic potential. One who is in exile, imposed or self-inflicted, is a poet. There is no escape other than poetry. Poetry is his predicament, his subterfuge to come to terms with his residual past and emergent future. Those who hail fiction as the genre of the displaced, associate dislocation with exposure, horizontal experiencing. Dislocation as an emotive trope moves up and down, rather than to and fro. More than just a spatial rupture, it is a temporal disjunction. More than just an easy addition into one's cultural portfolio, it is a complex dismemberment of the intact self that one has had before. If fiction is capable of showcasing the plurality of experience, poetry is capable of articulating its polarity.

The poetic enterprise of Subhash Kak, an expatriate Indian scientist settled in US, attains special significance in the light of manifold dislocations that he as a Kashmiri Hindu undergoes both in India and abroad. Not only is he an alien outsider in the West, even when he comes back to India, is he not able to go back to his native place. Perhaps poetry is his only space of belonging, a medium through which he re-creates images of

his possessive native space to make up, howsoever partially, for the inability to experience it physically any longer. The collection of poems under review, *The Secrets of Ishbar: Poems on Kashmir and Other Landscapes* raises expectations of its being a multi-layered poetic discourse on various strains, affiliations, affinities that possibly emerge between the poet's native space and his adopted abode.

The collection of thirty-two poems is divided in two parts—"Snow in Srinagar" and "Ten Thousand Years of Solitude". Apparently enough, the first part promises to offer the reader a rich tapestry of Kashmir's landscape as re-visited by the displaced poet through memory and nostalgia. The opening poem "Exile" is in a way a prelude to the poet's creative credo: "Memory gets hazy/ even recounting doesn't help/ . . ." So the poet chooses to walk "through narrow lanes" of his town to experience life. As he glides past a water passage, he is reminded of "sleek houseboats/ moored to banks with soft green grass/ with willow trees/ guarding the edge of water . . ." The last two lines do sum up the sense of loss: "The best

paradise/ is the paradise we are exiled from"; but the repetition of "paradise" only fetishizes the medieval image of Kashmir as an idyllic pastoral landscape bereft of any human problems.

The opening three lines of "Reaching Srinagar" herald the poet's (imaginary) entry into his homeland: "As the dusty bus crosses the Banihal tunnel/ the air becomes scented and zippy/ and the passengers break out into a loud cheer". But the ecstasy of exploding into vast expanse of blue sky remains understated. "The City of Fame" presents a topographical account of important cultural centres of Srinagar in poetical terms. "Snow in Srinagar" records the anguish of the poet in not being able to snowfight with his pals on a snowy Srinagar morning: "Who knew then decades later a terror will come to Srinagar/ and I will be unable to see my home where I was born". The poem could have had a better climax, had the poet not stated "the terror" in explicit terms.

In "Journey into Himalayas" and "Ishbar Evenings", Kak draws vignettes of Kashmir with a rare metaphysical intensity. For instance, there are

• *The Secrets of Ishbar: Poems on Kashmir and*
• *Other Landscapes*
• by Subhash Kak
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• Vitasta, New Delhi, pp.62.