Fiction and the Reading Public in India. Edited by C. D. Narasimhaiah; University of Mysore, 1967; Pages 239. Rs. 10, 25 sh., $ 3.

In November 1965, a Seminar on Fiction and the Reading Public in India was held by the Department of English, as a part of the Lala Lajpat Rai Centenary Committee’s programme. This work is a collection of papers read at this Seminar, which fall under four categories: (1) Professors of English writing critical essays about (a) English fiction by Lawrence, Kipling and others, and (b) English fiction written by Indians like K. S. Venkataramani, Raja Rao and women writers like Ruth Prawer Jhabwala, Kamala Markandaya and Santha Rama Rau; (2) Creative writers in four South Indian languages giving their critical estimates of fiction in their languages (Kannada by K. Sivaram Karanth; Telugu by Buchi Babu; Malayalam by M. Govindan; and Tamil by Ka. Na. Subramaniam; critical estimate of the novel in Telugu and Tamil happened to be by two creative writers in these languages present in the seminar, while the Kannada novel discussed was Gramayana by Rao Bahadur and Malayalam novel Ummachu by Urooli); (3) Two articles on translations from Indian languages into English: one on Kannada by H. Y. Sharada Prasad and one on Hindi by the present reviewer; and (4) Two statements by two creative writers in English, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan.

Ten professors and lecturers in the department of English participated in this four-day seminar and I still remember the heated controversy raised on P. Rama Moorthy’s fervent advocacy of D. H. Lawrence; the linguistic analysis of The Serpent and the Rope presented by Rajeev Taranath and the perceptive observations by the two lady participants; C. Vimala Rao’s paper was on Women and Fiction, while N. Meena Balliappa gave her views on ‘East-West Encounter,
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Indian Women Writers of Fiction in English’, which she concluded with these wise words, ‘The search for an optimum point of contact between diverse cultures and races seems to have yielded only negative results. A fruitful union at a significant depth is not treated by any of the three writers. It is the point of separation that stands underlined in their works’ (p. 27).

It is this typical Indianness which is repeatedly emphasized in several papers, the editor’s 23-page appreciation of Kanthapura being no exception. It seems that early Indian historical fiction was influenced by Scott and Dumas and social fiction by Dickens, Hardy and Jane Austin to a great extent. But the didacticism of Dickens did not last beyond thirties and Hardy’s fatalism did not correspond with the Indian view of Karma and tragedy.

Some of the authors from South India were very candid in admitting their limitations. Karanth said, while analysing the reasons of paucity of great works of lasting qualities in the field of fiction: ‘I feel that it is so for the simple reasons that our writers are not much of thinkers. They are more wedded to sentiment. They may switch from one sentiment to another, but rarely sit down to examine the already accepted values of life’ (p. 133). In Tamil the blame is laid entirely and squarely on the popular weekly periodicals and serialization. In Telugu, Buchi Babu makes a very significant observation about our changing attitudes towards sex and marriage: ‘I read in Lala Lajpatrai’s autobiographical writings that what interested him most during his stay in California was M. N. Roy’s falling in love with an American girl who despite parental opposition decided to marry him. Recalling this incident Lajpatrai writes, “The Hindu boys in New York were disposed to consider Roy as a traitor to the cause in so far he had fallen in love with this girl. Most of them insulted the girl. I opened my rooms to them and began to exchange visits.” That was fifty years ago and even today the life of a man who marries for love outside his community is no easy one and no picture of his life in fiction ever satisfies the modern novelist who indulges in motiveless jeering’ (p. 145).

There is a lot of soul searching and even comment on the slow pace of social change in our life and literature in the critical surveys of the four novels. How one wished that the Kannada and Telugu novels were available in English and/or in other Indian languages.

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While the papers emphasize on properly presenting Indian viewpoint and literary nuances to the western world, one meets with a neo-mystic note in Raja Rao’s two-page meditation on ‘the writer and the word’: ‘You cannot communicate unless you have no desire to communicate.’

Much of the communication between Indian languages and English-reading public is hampered by bad translations. Y. Sharada Prasad has rightly said that Narayan Menon’s translation of Chemmeen is an exception: ‘He takes us to Thakazi’s Kerala, without intruding any Englishness on the scene.’

Yet this book is more of an educational nature written by the professors for the professors. Excepting an article on P. G. Wodehouse by ‘a lay reader’, there is little attempt in this volume to assess the reactions of the common Indian reader of fiction in English and Indian languages.

How one wished the compilation had as appendix a good select bibliography of Indian fiction translated into English, with dates of publications mentioned in the work, and notes on contributors.

Well got-up and neatly printed, this volume will serve as a good introduction to the Indian fiction writer’s world of ideas.

—Prabhakar Machwe

Vimukti (A Two-Act Philosophical Farce, with a Sanskrit Commentary). By Kavikokila Dr. V. Raghavan. Madras, 1968; Rs. 2/-.

Prataparudra Vijaya or Vidyanatha-Vidambana (A Parody in four Acts). By Kavikokila Dr. V. Raghavan, with a foreword in English by Prof. K. A. Subramania Aiyar and appreciation in Sanskrit by Pt. Charudeva Sastri. Madras, 1969; Rs. 3/-.

Vimukti is a kind of farce which in Sanskrit literature is very rare. It is one of the allegorical plays. The special characteristic of this farce is apparently frolicsome, but really very serious. It draws readers to the universal truth of Yoga philosophy.

In the foreword, Prof. Umasankar Joshi, Vice-Chancellor, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, rightly observes: ‘The happy blend of Allegory with Farce in Dr. Raghavan’s Vimukti spotlights the tragi...