

FOREWORD

This volume of essays is not a guide book for Agrégation, though it might provide guidance for candidates preparing the “Agrégation d’anglais” 2009 and its literature option. It is intended to be a *mehfil*, a meeting of minds which perform for the pleasure of an intimate gathering on this occasion. This concert of voices across traditions – English, American, Indian, French and Czech – might disconcert the reader looking for the three pillars of classical textual architecture. Any beauty that the reader may discern in the pages that follow should be credited to the authors and all imperfections to the editor.

Supreme irony marks this editorial project. Almost a week before the official announcement of the Agrégation programme, I interviewed in my own university for a job in the English department with a “Literature and Cinema” orientation. Throughout my academic career I have tried to introduce the study of literary voices and cinematic visions from the Indian subcontinent not out of any ethnocentrism but because I was convinced that the voices of the midnight’s children had helped shape the last half of the 20th century both within the subcontinent and in the diaspora. It is an incontrovertible fact that South Asian writers have emerged in the forefront of literary writing today¹.

When *In Custody* was prescribed for the Agrégation, it is quite understandable that I felt vindicated. For a marginal academic like me (a woman from the third world teaching English for specific purposes in a suburban university and nurturing literary yearnings), the temptation to identify myself with Deven, the

¹ Another Indian writer Amit Chadhuri issued a timely call against any triumphalism. “I wish Indian Writing in English were less triumphant.” www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2186200,00.html

protagonist of the novel, was strong, considering the fact that I had spent some seven years of my career persuading the Law department to modernize its language teaching methods by setting up a state-of-the-art language laboratory. Another constant preoccupation of mine had been maintaining linguistic diversity in the department. Each time budgetary restrictions threatened the teaching of Spanish as a second language, I had to struggle against those who failed to see that languages are like living organisms and that the survival of English depends upon the vitality of Spanish and vice versa. Besides, in a context of research centres starved for funds, my idea of putting together a volume of essays was bound to be a fiasco like Deven's recorded interview. All I could hope for was a glorious footnote in the annals of Agrégation! But fortunately for me, though I had not been given the position in the English department, I was granted a sabbatical by my university.

It is the privilege and curse, to borrow Rushdie's words, of the postcolonial and the otherworldist to resist silencing. Taking the cue from Anita Desai's *In Custody* itself to tide over the difficulties, I have relied on the values of friendship and empowerment to see the project through. Professor Michel Naumann, President of SARI² provided constant encouragement and un-failing support. Many colleagues offered their gift of friendship by responding to my appeal and volunteering to write, knowing very well that contributing to an ebook published by an association in the era of evaluation by AERES is not exactly what one might call a smart career move. I thank these friends from SARI, Paris I and Paris X warmly and earnestly for their trust. I wish to especially thank Professor Sangeeta Ray from the University of Maryland first of all for accepting to write the keynote article at short notice and secondly for transferring some of her fabulous energy and strength unto me. Her many and brilliant insights have added considerable critical weight to the book. Thanks also to Dr Vanessa Guignery and Mr Maxime

² Société d'activités et des recherches sur les mondes indiens, a non-profit body functioning under the French law of 1901, founded in 2006. www.u-cergy.fr/asso-sari/

Shelledy from Paris IV who jumped into the bandwagon on my request, fellow travellers on a pleasant journey. This collection would not have seen the light of day but for the generosity of its contributors and their willingness to cooperate.

The essays presented here explore the multiple aspects of Anita Desai's rich and complex narrative. The salient and overriding themes such as the end of the Mughal empire, the Urdu culture, the legacy of the British in terms of institutions and market economy, national identity based on religion, the linguistic, social and political divide exacerbated by the religious divide, the gap between cities and villages, the joys and sorrows of friendship, the clash between tradition and modernity with regard to transmission of knowledge and gender relations and Anita Desai's intuitive perception of the communal riots³ that were to shake India in both 1992 (destruction of the Babri Mosque) and 2002 (especially Vadodara) are first dealt with. The second part involves a structuralist approach and includes textual analysis proper with emphasis put on the weave of the text, the semiotic inscription of voices, the poetics and politics underlying these voices, and the movement infused in the text of the novel by the myriad and some times recurring images and scenes. The third part has a philosophical twist and discusses the duality present in the protagonists' lives and how a fragile truce among antagonists is negotiated. The existential angst felt by Deven and the rites of passage described in the novel certainly endow it with a transcendental and universal dimension. The concluding article describes the metamorphosis of the novel into the film, the artistic changes brought about by the director and their implications for the reader and spectator. In a collective work of this kind focussing on a single novel, there are bound to be some repetitions of ideas and quotes. It is hoped that they "take light from mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious stones" in a Mallarmean fashion.

Whoever thought of including the book for the Agrégation has to be felicitated for the timeliness of the choice. All the

³ These have now taken an international and terrorist dimension as the November 26, 2008 attack on Bombay shows.

current debates in France regarding higher education – the purpose of university education (transmitting knowledge or training for jobs?), the usefulness of science versus the luxury of languages and humanities, lack of funds and its impact on academic freedom and creativity, administrative rigidity, the power struggle between teachers and students, the status and salary of academics, the brain drain to America, find an echo in this book published in India in 1984. Building an awareness of and enhancing Muslim culture via an English text⁴ is perhaps one way of recognizing the Muslim minority in secular France and reconciling them to the English language perceived as embodying a predominantly Anglo-American world view. If Anita Desai's *In Custody* and Ismail Merchant's Hindi/Urdu film version of the novel titled *Muhafiz* and subtitled in English could play this added role of cultural mediation in 2009 albeit among a limited number of future English teachers, then the choice of this book for a public competitive exam in France would prove to be a judicious and genuinely transformative gesture. Surely teachers of language and literature stand to benefit from a book that fictively stages what Rushdie has termed "the linguistic struggle" which is but "a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within themselves and the influences at work upon our societies"⁵.

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⁴ Anita Desai's mother was German and Jewish. But this did not prevent her from writing in English or about Muslim culture.

⁵ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, London: Granta Books, 1992, p. 17.