

Eloquent Hills: Essays on Nepali Literature

by Michael Hutt. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2012, 193 pp.,
ISBN 978-9937-594-00-4, Rs. 500

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Michael Hutt is undoubtedly the one and only English-speaking scholar outside Nepal who has dedicated a large amount of his research to the Nepali Language and its literature. Nearly twenty-five years after an invaluable collection of translations (Hutt 1991), and more than a decade after his classic manual of footnoted original texts (Hutt 1997), which remains the vade mecum for students of Nepali the world over, he now offers a collection of nine essays in literary history and criticism, of which eight have already been published. Written between 1989 and 2007, most of those chapters, dedicated to prominent writers or works, were scattered in many out-of-print journals and collective works that are today hardly available. Now, to the relief of many a zealous reader, they are finally gathered in the fine and affordable edition of Martin Chautari, who instigated this publication. The book is named after a verse of Devkota from the famous poem *Pagal* ('The Lunatic'): 'you say that the hills are deaf and dumb / I say that they are eloquent' (Devkota, 1956: 67, translated by Hutt, 2007: 155)

The chapters, which have not been re-written, are presented in chronological order according to their original dates of publication. Though this choice may arouse a feeling of disorder, recurrent concerns and themes clearly emerge. Thus, chapters 1 and 6 deal with two complementary aspects of Nepali dependence: Gurkha soldiers and long-term migration to India. Hutt shows that whereas Gurkhas are generally considered to be a consensual item of patriotic pride, they are depicted much more ambiguously by novelists and poets. Besides, summoning various stories fraught with social realism, he shows how fiction on departure to 'Mugalan' (India) reflect the injustices that urge the deprived to leave in the first place, as well as the uncertainties of all 'Nepalis outside Nepal' concerning their identity. Literary representations of the country are the focus of chapters 5 and 8. The idyllic perceptions of Nepal that Western foreigners frequently display are counterbalanced

by the bitterness of its insiders, which is summarized in S. Lamichane's striking story, in which the appearance of a crippled child abruptly puts an end to Westerners' dreams. Nevertheless, the nation of course also has its own elegies, be they romantic or revolutionary, and Hutt shows some of their patterns. Chapters 2 and 3 stress the strong link between Nepal's political history and its literature. In particular, the pages on Mohan Koirala offer a powerful analysis of the complex reasons why certain writers emerge not simply as authors, but as a *voice* within a generation. Aesthetic factors mingle with contextual ones: in particular, the pressure of state censorship and its gradual upliftment have always circumscribed expressive possibilities and shaped their evolution. Two of the chapters are devoted to single works: Devkota's *Muna-Madan* (chapter 4), *the* classic of Nepali literature if there should be one, and B.P. Koirala's famous *Sumnima* (chapter 7), the story of a Bahun male's union with a Janajati female, which has fathered controversies that are finely analysed by the author. In spite of many differences, both works are emblematic love stories that display the typical texture of Nepali romances. The last chapter, dedicated to the complex and multi-faceted writer Bhupi Serchan, is a preliminary to a book-length study that Hutt was later to publish (Hutt 2010). Gathering little known biographical fragments, it is the first attempt to draw a coherent intellectual portrait of this figure throughout the mishaps and paradoxes of his life journey.

Hutt's studies stand between two perfectly watertight worlds of analysis. On the one hand, as regularly pointed, the Nepalese critics' approach to literature is exclusively formal and textual, reluctant to contextualise, and most of the time very partisan. On the other hand, Western research on Nepal generally ignores local intellectual production; in particular, any mention or even a vague knowledge of literature is conspicuously absent, which is of course 'regrettable and extraordinary' (p. 154) (could anyone imagine a historian of England ignoring Shakespeare or Dickens, or a social scientist working on France disregarding Rousseau or Proust?). This scholarly setting renders the task of analysing Nepali literature from the outside all the more laudable.

The tools of a pioneer need to be sturdy and, understandably, *classical*, which is probably the most appropriate word to characterize Hutt's technique of analysis. He thus mostly selects well-known and established authors, such as B.P. Koirala, Devkota or Mohan Koirala, which is indeed

unavoidable at this stage. His method for addressing these authors is predominantly biographical, historical and contextual; the formal, aesthetic and linguistic aspects of texts are rarely discussed. Hutt's stance can also be branded 'classical' in the sense that it does not deny the centrality of a Social Sciences-oriented approach to Nepal's reality, which is a reflection of the state of Western scholarship on the region: it is implicit in many pages that the interest of literature produced in Nepal is primarily to provide *documents* to the understanding of its social and historical world, and not to lead to more philosophical discussions where their 'Nepaliness' would be of minor importance. Texts are seen as mirrors of a society that require a solid apparatus of cultural and historical comments in order to become *accessible*, rather than as pieces of art that are to be made *palatable* to foreign readers. This anti-formal approach gradually reaches maturity toward the end of the book, where it becomes more convincing in its formulation as a coherent *project*: an '[...] *attempt to suggest [...] that Nepal has and has always had its own sphere of literary discourse, populated by remarkable individuals, and that the link between that sphere of discourse and others within Nepali society could be strengthened and made more multi-dimensional than it currently is*' (p. 161). The task of critics (and translators) is to make the treasures of national literature participate in larger cultural and political debates, thus contributing to '*a Nepal in which Nepali literature is also considered and discussed outside a purely literary frame of reference, so that Nepali writer's representations, analyses, criticisms and articulations of Nepali realities inform not only foreigners' perceptions of Nepal, but also Nepal's perceptions of itself*' (ibid.). It seems Hutt considers Bhupi Serchan to best incarnate the kind of literature fit to serve this agenda, as his writing on Serchan exhales a distinctive tone of enthusiasm and support that is elsewhere absent.

Surely, Hutt's agenda is particularly relevant in the democratic ferment of post-war Nepal, and this collection of literary studies is a significant contribution in that direction. They represent nothing less than the touchstone of a new field in South Asian studies, and a decisive bridge on the gap between Nepal seen by insiders and all sympathetic outsiders.

References

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