

Book Review

Writings From The Sundarbans

Edited by Indranil Acharya and Sayantan Dasgupta
Studies in Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University
(Sub-series II: Indian and Asian Contexts)
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The great riverine ecosystem of the Sundarbans has always displayed rich cultural heritage and ethnic aesthetics that have, often, found representation in the works of writers belonging to the region, writing in regional languages. Through their unique cultural appropriations a distinctive lifestyle has been established by the dwellers of the region, corresponding to the demands of the local ecosystem that balances an equation between human and nature, where nature appears to be a source of both nourishment and conspicuous threats. However, like the marginalized communities of the Sundarbans, these literary narratives have also been marginalized surprisingly, primarily because of their negligible representation in mainstream literary discourses due to a recognizable dearth in translations. This hiatus has been carefully bridged with the publication of *Writings From The Sundarbans*, an anthology that houses translations of literary creation composed in Bangla by the authors of the region.

Being a part of the series, *Studies in Comparative Literature*, a major initiative undertaken by the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University in collaboration with Orient BlackSwan, this anthology of short stories translated into English, *Writings From The Sundarbans*, features among the titles included in the 'Sub-series II: Indian and Asian Contexts'. Essentially an intercultural and interdisciplinary project, the series, through comparative approach, aimed at disseminating attention not only on the literary and cultural representations produced by the marginalized sections around the nation but also on the bhasha literatures, the oral traditions and translations. At the same time, a major purpose of the series was also to magnify the prospects of accessibility of these marginalized representations and make them visible among the authors and

researchers around the world, creating a scope for the foundation of new discourses.

A close reading and analysis of the narratives in *Writings From The Sundarbans* will make it unmistakably clear that the editors, Indranil Acharya and Sayantan Dasgupta, have left no stones unturned to curate the volume in a way that would address the purpose of the series quite efficiently. Apart from that, the importance of this volume also lies in the way it initiates multiple discourses within the structure of Ecological Anthropology, albeit through the marginalized voices of the people who remained unheard in the postcolonial context since decades. Indigenous responses are documented through the stories collected in this volume, each of them displaying a peculiar adaptation to the environment, in their own quaint ways.

The inclusion of the ‘General Introduction’ by the series editors at the beginning explains the relevance of the series in the context of Comparative Literature, the rationale behind its initiation and the outcomes envisaged at the beginning of the project, while also tracing the rich intellectual history that contributed to the conception of this major endeavour. The ‘Editor’s Introduction’, however, is rich in its capacity as a well-directed scholarly intervention, not only in introducing the field of study but also in introducing the narratives through subtle comments which are both analytical and informative to the core, thus intriguing the readers to study the narratives and the issues embedded within the texture of the texts. This introduction is divided into two sections, well measured as far as their scope is concerned. The first section introduces the readers to the nuances and requirements of Ecological Anthropology and how they can be addressed thereby, through its negotiations with the field of cultural ecology. This section goes on to introduce the locale, the Sundarbans, while also catering necessary demographic and cultural details of the region which are essential for the contextualization of the narratives. It also goes on to chart the earlier literary and cultural representations of the locale and its people across the globe.

The second part of the ‘Editor’s Introduction’ is dedicated to the introduction of the translated stories while explaining the relevance of them in the context of foregrounding the voices of the marginalized, at times relating the rationale behind the incorporation of these narratives in the volume. The editors also point out how each of the stories can also be studied in contrast to each other, in order to gauge the relationship between the centre and the margin and decipher the dynamics of power structures at play in the region.

The choice of the narratives for the inclusion is quite adequately contributing to the purpose of the volume. Meticulous effort on the part of the editors in selecting the pieces to be included in the volume is quite evident from the diversity that the

narratives display, while also touching upon the issues that define the reality of the people of the Sundarbans. Collectively, the narratives successfully evoke the emotional vulnerability that is experienced by the people of the region while powerfully voicing the various issues that enunciate their subjugation. The demographic reality and the cultural appropriations can well be seen as a form of addressing the issues in the narratives chosen by the editors, displaying the lives of the dwellers fraught with perpetual threats, both natural as well as perpetuated by men.

Bimalendu Halder's "Neader" displays the helplessness of the marginalized people, the trauma associated with displacement, and the sacrifices they are forced to make in order to ensure bare minimum in the name of living. Through the character of Manti, we are shown a picture of resistance that would define the lives of her people thereafter. "The She-Jackal of Bawaali" by Panchanan Das provides a surprising narrative that would otherwise be hard to believe, yet displaying resistance through indigenous agency practiced by the grandmother. Das's other story in the volume, "Dokhno", presents a picture about the people of the region that would help in relocating their cultural identity and image among the people in the centre through the character of the Secretary of the school, who, here, becomes a representative of the marginalized. "The Museum" and "Shaplas" by Das are powerful portrayals of the local lifestyle, their struggles for livelihood, and a hope for an alternative reality. "Shaplas", specifically, ends with a sense of hope and a universal reminder of hard work and honesty paying rewards.

"The Second Death" by Jaykrishna Kayal tells the story of the people whose lives depend on collecting honey and timber from the forest that threaten to kill them every passing moment. Even though Chhibas was able to escape the threat of the tiger in the forest, he was subsequently killed by the forest guards, displaying another source of fear and exploitation hovering over the fate of the people in remote locations of the Sundarbans. Shyamal Kumar Pramanik's short stories, six in number, are well constructed, each creating a picturesque terrain that is different from the others, each addressing an issue unique to them. However, Pramanik's stories collectively contribute to the construction of the identity of the marginalized people of the Sundarbans to perfection, like never before, effectively giving the unheard stories a voice that they always deserved. "The Crocodile" addresses the threat that lurks in the rivers for the people of the region whose livelihood depends on these very rivers, many of them meeting unfortunate ends. "Kshantoburi's Family" displays a sense of hope and liberal thought on part of the protagonist through her decision of getting her younger son married to the widow of her elder son, living in a space that was usually believed to be extremely orthodox and primitive. "Pathshala" adequately addresses the poor educational facilities in the Subdarbans, which consequently renders the

people of the region incapable of having a financially stable career. The educational scenario is also negotiated in “Dokhno” and “My Childhood: An Oral Narrative”.

Biswajit Halder’s “Kanu” and “The Will to Live” are heart-wrenching narratives that voices the inevitable crisis that lingers in the lives of the people of the Sundarbans, always finding themselves helpless. This also gives us a picture of a culture that is still inherently superstitious. Most of the stories of the volume display the tendency of adhering to superstitions on part of the characters. The belief in the legends of Bonbibi and Dakshin-Rai is seen featuring quite prominently in the stories through the lives of the people who venture into the forest quite regularly. The other stories too, can be seen upholding the evidences of contribution to the formation of a culture that interpolates the standard ecological anthropology through indigenous cultural appropriations.

Through the inclusion of these narratives in the mainstream, the editors, Indranil Acharya and Sayantan Dasgupta have tried to give voice to the subaltern concerns that have been neglected otherwise. Acharya and Dasgupta have meticulously curated the content of the anthology, carefully picking the literary works negotiating their merits, while also accommodating a wide range of issues addressed by the authors.