

THE BOOK REVIEW

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Saga of One Individual's Vision

Prashant Kidambi

**Women's Experiences of Dissent and
Detention in Postcolonial India**

Sabah Hussain

How Extremist Outfits Managed to Scar the Face of a Faith

Mirza Asmer Beg

A Fiery Iconoclast Remembered

Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee

How Nirala Became *Nirala*

Umesh Kumar

**Partition Violence Revisited: Picture of a City
in Turmoil**

Ranjana Kaul

A Novel on the Making of the Novel

Ajitabh Hazarika

An Awe-Struck Alice in Bibliophiland

Malini Seshadri

Consequences of Technological Advancement

Pranavi Sharma

**Where the Living and the Non-living Walk and
Talk: Children's Writing a Hundred Years Ago**

Nivedita Sen

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C o n t e n t s

Prashant Kidambi	<i>Swadeshi Steam: V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and the Battle Against the British Maritime Empire</i> by A.R. Venkatachalapathy	4
Amol Saghar	<i>The Republic Relearned: Renewing Indian Democracy, 1947-2024</i> by Radha Kumar	6
Sabah Hussain	<i>Of Captivity and Resistance: Women Political Prisoners in Postcolonial India</i> by Sharmila Purkayastha	8
Mirza Asmer Beg	<i>Fault Lines in the Faith: How Events of 1979 Shaped the Islamic World</i> by Iqbal S. Hasnain	11
Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee	<i>Selected Essays</i> by Kazi Nazrul Islam translated from the original Bengali by Radha Chakravarty	12
Malati Mathur	<i>Another Sort of Freedom: A Memoir; The Dilemma of an Indian Liberal</i> both by Gurcharan Das	15
Umesh Kumar	<i>A Portrait of Love: Six Stories, One Novella</i> by Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala'. Translated from the original Hindi by Gautam Choubey	16
Rajesh Sharma	<i>The Diary of a Sex Addict (Ek Sex Mareez Ka Roznamcha)</i> by Vinod Bhardwaj. Translated from the original Hindi by Brij Sharma	18
Ranjana Kaul	<i>A Game of Fire (Agg Di Khed)</i> by Nanak Singh. Translated from the original Punjabi by Navdeep Suri	19
Ajitabh Hazarika	<i>Yatra: An Unfinished Novel</i> by Harekrishna Deka. Translated from the original Assamese by Navamalati Neog Chakraborty	21
Annie Kuriachan	<i>Maria, Just Maria (Maria Verum Maria)</i> by Sandhya Mary. Translated from the original Malayalam by Jayasree Kalathil	23
Shrishti Dey, Sree Lekshmi MS, Aratrika Das	<i>Medical Maladies: Stories of Disease and Cure from Indian Languages</i> edited and introduced by Haris Qadeer	25
Malini Seshadri	<i>An Inky Parade: Tales for Bibliophiles</i> by Pradeep Sebastian	28
Maneesha Sarda	<i>The Djinn Waits a Hundred Years: A Novel</i> by Shubnum Khan	29
Dipavali Debroy	<i>My First Prayer to Lord Ram: A Translation of Tulsidas' Prayer that Kids Can Read, Understand and Enjoy</i> by Chitwan Mittal, Sarita Saraf and Aparajitha Vasudev	30
Lakshmi Kannan	<i>Rain in Bulandshahr: A Novel</i> by Achla Bansal	31
Samikshya Das	<i>Biopeculiar: Stories of an Uncertain World</i> by Gigi Ganguly	32
Amrita Ajay	<i>Coda: Selected Poetry</i> by Rupendra Guha Majumdar	33
Pranavi Sharma	<i>Dream Machine: AI and the Real World</i> by Appupen and Laurent Daudet	35
Nivedita Sen	<i>The Collected Stories of Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury</i> translated from the original Bengali by Lopamudra Maitra	37
Neera Jain	<i>Mehar's World of Colours</i> by Arti Sonthalia	38
Indira Ananthakrishnan	<i>You've Got This, Arjuna!</i> By Lissa Coffey	39
Nidhi Gulati and Shivi	<i>I Won't Wash My Hair</i> by Aparna Kapur	40
Shivi and Nidhi Gulati	<i>Ostrich Girl</i> by Lesley D. Biswas	41
Dipavali Debroy	<i>Priya the Jungle Dancer</i> by Sathya Achia and Janan Abir	42

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[Gurcharan Das's] life is inextricably intertwined with the political, international, and social changes that take place around us all the time. His marking of these milestones in his personal and professional journey as well as in the journey of our nation, are an objective, incisive look at the policies that decided the trajectory of our country's progress.

too often, 'liberals' espouse liberal ideas only when it applies to others but here, he walks the talk as he refers to decisions and attitudes in his own life that reveal him to be basically one who subscribes to 'humanism', if one has to slot him into any kind of 'ism' at all. And with the perspective of one who has been there, done that, seen it all transpire in the cosmos of commerce, Das's comments on the economic policies that shaped the country, where we went wrong, and what needs to be done to set us on the stable path of progress can be viewed as the sincere desire of a man who loves his country and wishes to see it take its rightful place in the world. There can be no doubting his nationalism although he does make the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' nationalism, pointing out what sets one apart from the other. The author's discomfiture with polarizing narratives and his own disillusionment with certain aspects of liberalism and socialism go hand in hand with his ruminations on Indian society and contemporary life. And there can be no doubting his genuine engagement with Indian philosophy either, with our scriptures—without however feeling the need to be bound in by religiosity of any kind. His self-confessed agnosticism does not prevent him from studying our age-old epics, myths and 'holy books'; from trying to find their meaning and attempting to establish their relevance in contemporary professional and personal life—as amply attested by his books which explore various aspects of life like *Dharma*, *Artha*, and *Kama*.

These two books together delineate the life of a citizen and the life of a nation, in tandem. It is a life well lived in both cases—hiccups, mistakes and an occasional fall from grace notwithstanding—but what should surely count is the journey, the desire and the attempt to accomplish something even if it may seem foolhardy at times.

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How Nirala Became *Nirala*

Umesh Kumar

A PORTRAIT OF LOVE: SIX STORIES, ONE NOVELLA

By Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala'. Translated from the original Hindi by Gautam Choubey

Penguin Books, 2024, pp. 222, ₹ 399.00

The literary scene in India is witnessing an unexpected surge in translations lately. One cannot help but speculate the reasons behind this unprecedented boom in translations. A few justifications are in order: [That] the difference between the 'vernacular' writers and Indians writing in English has not been so much of sensibility or quality as of linguistic affiliation and often social class (Trivedi); translation helps in the unification of India; the occasional celebration of an Indian book at the global platforms such as the Booker creates a fanatic interest, pushing thereby a string of new translations. Having admitted to the relative merit of the above points, this author too has noticed a peculiar trend, often working as a catalyst for new translations. That a significant number of new translations are undertaken to set right a 'historical wrong' done to the writer by his episteme is one of the invisible undercurrents in Indian translation practice. There could be, in fact, multitudes of such historical wrongs. To name a few: unfair treatment by the critics; absence from the canon; the writer/writing being 'misunderstood' by his episteme; and failure in getting the writer to win over his natural boundaries of linguistic expression, among others. It is at this juncture that translation becomes crucial. A translation becomes the device of reassessment and reaccreditation, and also an instrument of recovery of the writers.

It is, then, in the context of a positive recovery that Gautam Choubey's *A Portrait of Love* should be looked at. It is an English translation of six stories and a novella by Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala' (1896-1961). The pen name, 'Nirala'—meaning the different one (not the 'strange one' as is often translated) was no misnomer, for Nirala was positively different from the writers of his day. An important contributor to the Chhayavad movement in Hindi alongside Romanticists such as Jaishankar Prasad, Sumitranandan Pant, and Mahadevi Varma, Nirala enchanted the readers with the sheer beauty and multi-layered structures of his poems. After all, who could forget the layers of meaning in Nirala's *Badal Rag* (Cloud Music) and *Ram ki Shakti Puja* (Ram's Worship of the Goddess Shakti)? Or the iconic *Kukurmutta* (Indian mushroom)—a satirical fable in free verse in which the common Indian mushroom launches a blistering attack on a beautiful but imported rose. It is considered one of

the most important moments in the arrival of new poetry in Hindi.

Nirala was the only Chhayavadi whose writings were in total sync with the problems and questions of the day. Be it the socio-economic reality of rural and small-town India, or that of the changing world order, the harsh reality of caste, alternative sexual preferences, the themes of pain and suffering, etc., Nirala wrote and wrote fearlessly. Though one of the finest of his times and beyond, Hindi episteme failed to provide Nirala the reputation, fame, and recognition that he so richly deserved. The Hindi critics of his times wasted a lot of ink in branding him a maverick, rebel, reckless in money matters, prone to developing feuds (both literary and personal), mentally unstable, and so on. At the level of literary craft too, Nirala was continuously at a receiving end. As David Rubin points out, 'surveys of twentieth-century Hindi literature rarely fail to point out that Nirala's language was not so chaste as Prasad's nor so mellifluous as Pant' (Rubin, p. 111). This mistreatment could well have been the reason for Agyeya's diatribe against the then-prevailing trend in Hindi criticism: 'Modern Hindi literature has known three great campaigns against individual writers—against Nirala, against Jainendra Kumar and against Agyeya' (Mukul, p. 359).

Without a doubt, Nirala was one of the finest Hindi poets of the twentieth century. However, to ignore the versatility of his prose would be an instance of literary violence. Way ahead of its time, Nirala's prose is fearless, provocative, and startlingly original, argues Choubey. The stories and the novella that are part of this anthology speak volumes in validating Choubey's claim.

The book begins with 'Sukul's Wife', a story of *vidrohi tevar* (revolutionary zeal). While celebrating the idea of a choice marriage between an inter-faith couple, it is traversed by organized orthodoxy—there is much discussion on *choti*—the tuft of hair epitomizing exalted caste, female autonomy, gastronomical preferences, the psyche of man-woman relationship, and so on. To cite a quick example, see how Sukul's Bibi schools the narrator, 'I'm sorry to be blunt, but I have noticed men suffer from an innate idiocy, which comes to the fore particularly when they interact with a woman' (p. 16).

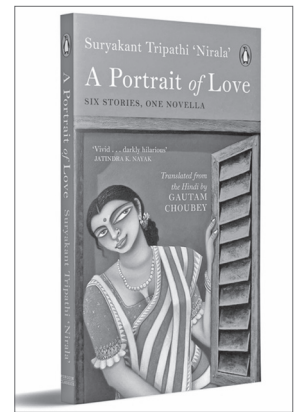
Jyotirmayee cuts through the hypocrisy of modern education. What is the use of this education when it can't empower a man to marry a woman of his choice? Vijay is a prisoner of this self-deception. 'Look here, she has indeed stolen my heart. But as for my body—it belongs to my father, Viren. And in this matter, I'm quite helpless myself' (p. 34). From there, the reader is led to the 'Portrait of a Lady-Love'—an 'unfulfilled' romance narrative. Using an epistolary method and the backdrop of the Lucknow of the 1930s, the story is comic and teasing at the same time. It rests on the absence of

communication media and will look somewhat primitive to the readers of today. If 'What I Saw' explores the now-forgotten association of writers and courtesans in colonial times, Nirala's 'Devi' recasts the very notion of ability and disability by focusing on a mute beggar woman with a small child. Also called 'the insane', she exposes the 'eminence' of the world ruled by so-called sanity. In Nirala's words, 'But while they were all artificial, everything about Pagli seemed real... The poor mute was trying to teach her child the voiceless language she spoke. The child, too, never called out its mother; it spoke to her merely with its eyes. Could anyone guess what it wanted to convey? Well, the mother could. Would you still consider her *pagli* and mute?' (p. 111).

In 'Chaturi' and '*Billesur Bakriha*', Nirala moves on to the rural. Nirala's rural is not that stock idyllic and romantic place but a place with obvious flaws. Written in 1934, 'Chaturi' is an extraordinary tale of friendship between two individuals standing at the opposite poles of caste hierarchy: one a Brahmin, the other a Dalit. With many glittering moments—such as the Brahmin narrator asking for a continuous supply of meat from Chaturi and that of Chaturi, as a spiritual preceptor, schooling his Brahmin friend in understanding the finer nuances of *nirgun* (attributeless) God. Noted scholar Vasudha Dalmia calls this friendship a rare homage to Dalits, unthinkable since the days of Kabir (Dalmia, pp. 363-364).

Half comic, half-ironic, and the one laced with a mocking tone, '*Billesur Bakriha*' (along with '*Kulli Bhat*', 1939) is one of the most significant prose works of Nirala. Employing the Bainswadi dialect, it reveals the hardships of a poor Brahmin struggling to move up in a society infected by innate jealousy and caste-determined hereditary occupations. In '*Billesur*', Nirala unfailingly captures the social discourses of caste, class, and even religion without sounding polemic. Billesur's life becomes the battleground of theoretical-philosophical reflections on silently but surely changing Indian society. Social theory explores the themes of caste and class from the outside, but Nirala's Billesur explores them from inside—through experience.

Gautam Choubey's translation is engrossing and excellent. He has taken trouble matching the translations with the originals. The exercise reveals Choubey's adequate command of the two languages, enough care, and humility to the originals. There are many obscure references in the originals that the translator has elegantly contextualized and comprehended for the English readers.



The polyglottic and polyphonic Nirala is a translator's nightmare. Choubey, however, seems to know that the watchword to handle such a situation is to chase the literalness of the texts. This pursuit of literalness has given Choubey the coordinates through which he could reach very near to the original and produce an impact no less than the original.

However, this quest for literalness has also resulted in troublesome situations. For instance, the translator has continued with the caste qualifier followed in Chatur's name by Nirala. Such a usage was accepted in Nirala's time. The translator could have dispensed with the usage for that would not have affected the narrative in any way. In one place it should be Hindu, Muslims, Christians (not farmers, p. 7). It seems the translator read the word *Kristaan* as *Kisaan*. A clear case of oversight. In 'Sukul's Wife', Nirala makes his characters speak proper English sentences (p. 7, p. 12)—a deliberate ploy to juxtapose the speakers with the writer-narrator. The translator could have kept these utterances in italics instead of the usual running sentences. The choice could have saved the cultural value of the dialogues. On occasions, it is not the intent of the translator but the paucity of English vocabulary and the genius of Nirala that has put the translation in troubled waters. For instance, the word *aparivartanvaad* has been translated as orthodox and conservative in the same paragraph. Similar is the fate of the word *sahadharmiti*. The translation 'my faith' is but an inadequate shadow of the original. '*Billesur Bakriha*' suffers from a semantic surplus of translation in many places. Nirala calls it a 'piece of art', the translator—a novel (p. 127). Nirala did not give titles to chapters in '*Billesur*', a signature stylistic feature for an uninterrupted psychological peep into the mind of the titular character. The translation provides titles to all the chapters which pre-empt the surprise that lies without them.

The reason attention is drawn to these occasional inelegancies is to take nothing away from an otherwise very spirited, authentic, highly readable, and compassionate translation. Had it not been for Choubey, it would have been difficult for the English reader to know how Nirala became *Nirala*.

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A Misogynist's Tale

Rajesh Sharma

THE DIARY OF A SEX ADDICT (*EK SEX MAREEZ KA ROZNAMCHA*)

By Vinod Bhardwaj. Translated from the original Hindi by Brij Sharma

Vani Prakashan Group, 2023, pp. 108, ₹ 295.00

Coming from a publishing house with some prestige, crowned with a provocative though banal title and commended by Uday Prakash, this 'diary' seemed to promise a literary feast, if only minor, of the kind the writings of Marquis de Sade, Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin and Marguerite Duras offer. But it turned out to be the huff and froth of a frustrated, sick artist who has no idea of what a diary is, nor of how to write about art. He is obsessed with sex because he both craves and dreads it. The trite, uptight porn he punches out is his way of evading the call of Eros. The title of the original in Hindi uses the word *mareez* for him.

The Diary spans eleven years, beginning with 2008 and ending with 2018. It has eleven chapters. Our great-minded artist, who comes out as a wimp with a frayed and faded sensorium, writes in broad brushes and won't stoop to mention days, weeks and months, or each of those particular years for that matter. The chapters indicate only the drift of the chronology, not the chronology. The period is obviously meant to anchor the rambling narrative in a frame of India's recent past, but the frame turns out to be too feeble and blurry to hold anything. The lament on the dire conditions of the artists after 2008 doesn't evolve into an analysis. The protagonist's inhibitions seem to overwhelm the writer and paralyse him too. He doesn't look hard at the insidious ways in which Big Tech and the corporatized marketplace are forcing the artists into serfdom. He might have used irony and obliquity to plausibly invoke the incomprehensibility of the situation and the artist's helplessness. Instead, the larger historical problems are reduced to private failures, adolescent resentment and a passé ethos. One wonders if the reader is expected to follow Polonius's counsel and find direction by indirection. But is there anywhere to go? Does the book go anywhere?

The book reads like a collection of salacious and malicious gossip hung from the washline of a drab and nuanceless narrative voice to look like a novella and seductively titled as a 'diary'. It is neither literary, nor anti-literary. The characters—artists, curators, gallery owners, critics, art dealers, models and maids—are cardboard figures. Only dogs and mice have some life and seem interesting. There is too much booze and all of