

THE BOOK REVIEW

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Climate Diplomacy and the Domestic Discourse: The Impact of Populism on Climate Politics in India

Sucharita Sengupta

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Govindan Nair

The Mahābhārata's Long Life in South Asia

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Celebrating the Essence of the Sacred Feminine

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He joined the Communist Party during his student days. His relentless campaign for social justice enabled him to develop close contacts with politicians, including Nitish Kumar, Lalu Prasad Yadav and many more. He was nominated to the Bihar Legislative Council in 2006, but it did not go well for him. In the chapter 'In House', he described it as a humiliation as he worked for the Party no less than any member and was not expected to be nominated to the upper house. His nomination as an author would have been proper had he not been in politics. Mani has four collections of short stories, one novel, and a biography of social reformer Jyotiba Phule to his credit. His fiction and non-fiction writings reveal a sense of non-conformism, so do his public speeches. In 2010, when Nitish emerged victorious, Mani, in a TV debate, described it as the victory of Right-Wing politics and further added, 'It is a triumph of the BJP. Nitish possesses no ideology. BJP has no decisive leadership. Ultimately Nitish's leadership and ideology of BJP carried the day.' It irked the Chief Minister, and the Government's decision to set up the Commission for High Castes left Mani exasperated. He fiercely opposed it in the House and said, '*Manusmriti* is nothing but the report of the Commission. Does the Nitish government intend to implement it?' It was the final blow, and his membership was annulled. The author justified his stand with a marked sense of self-righteousness.

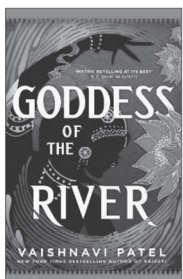
In a poignant and deeply personal chapter, Mani delivers a masterful tribute to his father, crafting a richly layered portrait that celebrates their bond.

Mani's autobiography is filled with fascinating stories about famous authors, offering a glimpse into the lives of literary giants, political leaders and social thinkers. Throughout the book, Mani's unwavering commitment to his values shines as he evaluates the world around him through the lens of radical humanism. This approach is the foundation for his thoughts and experiences, making for a compelling read.

Shafey Kidwai, bilingual critic, is the author of *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: Reason, Religion and Nation* (Routledge, 2020). He is Professor of Mass Communication, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh.

Book News

Book News



Goddess of the River by Vaishnavi Patel, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Kaikeyi*, is a powerful reimagining of the story of Ganga, goddess of the river, and her doomed mortal son. A deeply moving and masterful tale of duty, destiny, and the unwavering bond between mother and son.

Orbit Books, UK, 2024, pp. 409, ₹ 389.00

Travails of a Novel in a Naxal Country

Umesh Kumar

LEAF, WATER AND FLOW

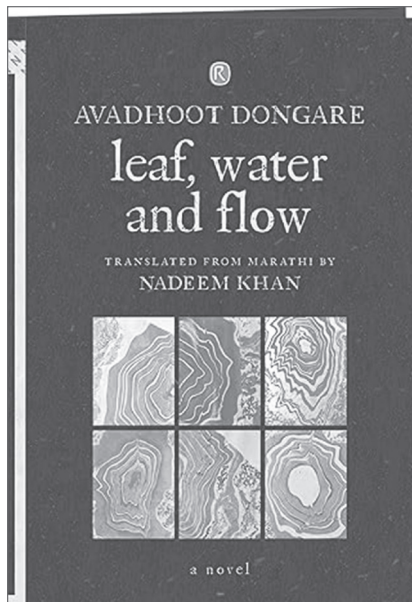
By Avadhoot Dongare. Translated from the original Marathi by Nadeem Khan
Ratna Books, 2023, pp. 243, ₹ 599.00

In his magisterial *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), EM Forster, the British author, calls literary tradition to be a borderland lying between literature and history. However, while imagining the boundaries of this borderland, Forster asks us to believe in two things: a) 'that literature belongs to history and cut it off accordingly', and b) 'we must refuse to have anything to do with chronology' (Forster, 26).

Let me quote here a set of similar sentiments from the *Leaf, Water and Flow*:

What's the subject of the novel?... The subject of this novel is not something that can be expressed in brief... quite the same way, he [the author] saw some people dying too and he felt something. His feeling that something, for him, was a story... given the limited strength of the author, it would be difficult to hunt out the address [of these stories] ... This novel, then, is that work; it is a novel about what this writer feels. It is not as if you [the reader] should be compelled to feel the same kind of feelings. (pp. 9-31)

Dongare begins by alluding to the history of revolutionary Naxal violence in Maharashtra, considering it to be the business of the writer to respond to it. And yet, much like Forster, Dongare refuses to get into the specifics of addresses—chronology of the events as it were. Speaking differently, *Leaf, Water and Flow* is a powerful literary expression and carries twin objects of inquiry: We live as social beings. But how is our social constructed? What is the role of power structures such as language, state and non-state (Naxal) actors in this construction? Further, how can the novel—as an art form, help decode the intrigues of the social, the intrigues of power? With questions such as these, the *Leaf* heralds a significant departure from the convention of Marathi *Kadambari*



(novel) in terms of both form (novel) and content (the Naxal story). The writer's concern for the content is punctuated by his concern for the form. Dongare examines the tropes of novel writing and interrogates the nuances that provide formal and semantic unity to it, or the lack of it. This is not an easy undertaking.

Still, this is not a new undertaking by Dongare. Since 2007, the novelist has published four novels: *Savtahala Faltu Samjanyachi Goshta* (*The Story of Being Useless*, 2012), *Ek Lekhakache Teen Sandarbha* (*Three Contexts of a Writer*, 2013), *Paan, Pani Ni Pravah* (*Leaf, Water and Flow*, 2015), and *Bhintivarcha Chashma* (*Specs on the Wall*, 2018). Though different in plotlines, the novels display a shared concern for form and technique. A typical Dongare novel unsettles the conventional reader with a 'very different' storytelling. The narrative, on the surface, might look vague and misty. But this vague aspect provides the writer maximum freedom. This maximum freedom, in turn, allows readers to look at the novel in different ways and the different ways the novelist can look at the novel. Having said that, the *Leaf* throws the following aspects for discussion: the story; people; fantasy and prophecy; plot (or the lack of it); pattern and rhythm—all very vital in the life of a novel.

The novel undertakes a roller-coaster journey, meeting and navigating individuals who are trapped in a Maoist conflict. There is an element of fable too when an Egret appears and schools the narrator on the prevalence of violence in the human world. We meet an author who is in search of a novel. A 'professional revolutionary', three young women at crossroads, and also the reader who reads this novel. The novel places a heavy demand on the reader and anticipates consistent alertness. Only an alert reader would be able to appreciate the thematic resonance and the embedded histories lying in the novel. The text is deeply rooted in literary realism. Dongare's realism, however, is not the usual realism but a complex and sophisticated one. In the *Leaf*, it is not just mimetic but also illustrative. The novel, therefore, is not content solely with holding up a mirror to social reality but also seeks to analyse and explain it.

Therefore, the key weapon for the writer is the use of irony. Sentences and descriptions do not mean what they

seem to say. Here, most often appearances and reality do not coincide. See for instance:

out of a sense of pride for his caste, Vijayendraraje alias Vijay wears a heavy gold bracelet round his wrist and embellishes the cover photo of his Facebook profile with a collage of pictures of himself and Chhatrapati Shivaji Raje Bhosale. It can be said that generally Vijay reads a booklet or an article every couple of months. Vijay is very alert on caste matters...getting a measure of the property that the Jadhav family owns is beyond our ability... On the third of last month was his birthday...a big flex banner was put up on a street corner...offering good wishes to Shri Vijayendraraje Jadhav on his twenty-ninth birthday. This is an important development (pp. 17-18).

How can one afford to read the above description at face value? The information provided by the narrator is factual as well as interpretative, simple as well as made-up. We are given partial facts that are waiting to be decoded. Here, will it not be sufficient to say that Vijayendraraje's social is constructed and exposed at the same time?

Dongare has written the novel from the perspective of a dying leaf. It is one of the most haunting images in the novel. The journey and the struggle of the dying leaf become a metonymy for the Maoist predicament. For example, 'Call it an arrow shot from a bow, call it a bullet shot from a gun—A sentence shot out: Not a leaf moves without their permission' (p. 8). And again, when the narrator declares, 'balancing that single drop of water from the writer's eye on a teak leaf and storing it in safe place, this is the job we will do through this novel. This job is the subject of this novel' (pp. 29-30). Eventually, Bhaskar, Sayali, Lattakka, Rani and other characters become *sabcharya*—collaborators, in the journey of the leaf. Parallely, Dongare presents a procession of global and local minds ranging from Marx, Gramsci, Kundera, Marquez, Kafka, Orwell, Dostoevsky to Narendra Dabholkar, Sharad Patil, Durga Bhagwat, Anil Barve, Sane Guruji, among others, primarily, to strengthen the

Khan seems to be a follower of the classical school: not displaying any inclination towards transcreation and the dubious freedom it brings...His translations are like a transparent glass-pane—not just to the words of the original but also to the context, tonality, situations, dialogues, mode of narration.

politics of struggle and resistance in the *Leaf*. Without a doubt, Dongare's interjection of continental philosophy enriches the Marathi episteme. The *Leaf*, then, also becomes a book about books.

Nadeem Khan's translation is excellent. In times when we have serious debates on the political and subjective agency of the translator, Khan seems to be a follower of the classical school: not displaying any inclination towards transcreation and the dubious freedom it brings. However, he redefines what is 'literal'. His translations are like a transparent glass-pane—not just to the words of the original but also to the context, tonality, situations, dialogues, mode of narration. My personal favourite is the chapter titled '*Bagla*'—'Egret' (pp. 185-205) where the narrative is trapped in a triangular conversation between a man, a bird, and a dead child. The translator is able to replicate the pathos of the original without sliding into sentimentality. However, this is not to say that the translation is without problems. The following pages should be revised before the next edition: 16, 20, 27, 36, 71, 110. Select sections of these pages are marred by inelegant use of English and the problems of comprehension.

Leaf, Water and Flow is a cerebral novel focusing on the interiorities of a nation's fault lines. It is a book of ideas, meant to be digested. Slowly.

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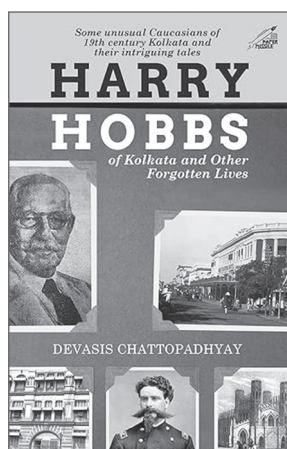
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Umesh Kumar is a translator and literary critic. He teaches English literature at Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi.

Book News

Book News



Harry Hobbs of Kolkata and Other Forgotten Lives is a collection of nine carefully curated chronicles, some of them discovered in dusty files in government archives, many retrieved from the pages of old newspapers, and others prised out of private family memoirs. They give us relatively unknown narratives about Kolkata in the 19th century. We step back in time to look

at this period of change and upheaval, when Kolkata's syncretic identity was moulded in part by these European and American settlers when the things we take for granted today were yet to be invented or experienced.

Niyogi Books, 2024, pp. 316, ₹ 595.00

Stories Reflecting a World in Transition

Anidrita Saikia

CRACKED GLASS JAR AND OTHER STORIES

By Chandra Latha. Translated from the original Telugu by C.L.L. Jayapada

Ratna Books, 2023, pp. 231, ₹ 599.00

A part of the Ratna Translation Series, this collection of fifteen short stories by Telugu writer Chandra Latha speaks of a world in transition, uneasily accepting and getting swayed by capitalism's glossy goods. The stories have been published in Telugu from 1993 till the present, although most of them were written in the 2000s.

Many of the stories are sharply relevant today. 'White Paper', written in 1994 about a young girl who topped her State exams, and is singled out from her class to receive the question paper of an exam well in advance to secure a top rank again, is uncomfortably reminiscent of the NEET and NET question paper leaks of 2024. The trope of burdening children to shoulder the aspirations of parents and institutes is not restricted to simply this story. Chandra Latha makes a jarring juxtaposition between childhood, which she paints as innocent and idyllic, to the grimy moralities of adulthood. In 'Once Upon a Time', a beloved daughter's upbringing is strictly governed by doting grandparents and parents who aim to push her across the ties of mediocrity—childhood was one dance lesson after one singing lesson, tennis practice, and swimming training being mandated by family authority, turning aspiration to competition, and leading to tragedy.

In the eponymously titled 'Cracked Glass Jar', one of the finest stories in the collection, the protagonist weaves the past and the present to navigate a patriarchal world, playing second fiddle to the men in her life—a brother, a lover and a husband—who have continuously deceived the social order to benefit themselves. On interfering with this balance driven by empathy, she finds herself amidst prying eyes that are quick to pin the blame on her—manufactured culpabilities that she recalls became familiar from school where friendship and education were quick to fracture under the authority of teachers who found fault at accidents. While the author's descriptive prose about womanhood seems to be drawn from familiarity, the articulation of loneliness and isolation of womanhood falters in the more stream-of-consciousness inner monologues of narration.

Foliage and gardening find repeated expression throughout the stories—Chandra Latha's protagonists marvel at chrysanthemums, are awed by rose bushes,