

Book Review on G. N. Devy's *After Amnesia*

Navdeep Kaur

Indira Gandhi University Meerpur, Rewari, Haryana, India

G.N. Devy is a prominent name in the Indian Literary Criticism. He is the present chairperson of People's Linguistic survey of India. His book *After Amnesia* which is subtitled as "Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism" is categorized into three sections "tradition and Amnesia", "A Never-ending Transition" and "After Amnesia". The book is an original research on the plight of bhasa Literary Criticism since the beginning of nineteenth century when the transitional change in the Indian Bhasa Criticism, which began from the fourteenth century, was grafted with the colonial Euro-centric Criticism. The book deals with the 'memory disorder' in bhasa critics who are unable to trace the relationship between the modern Indian Criticism and bhasa criticism pre- British era. First it defines the crisis of 'cultural amnesia' in Bhasa Criticism, and colonialism is seen a culprit. Secondly it travels through the transitions in sociology of bhasa literatures and reaches at natives attempts to revive the bhasa criticism.

In the first section, Devy takes the great pain to research how different dialects got accreditation and transformed into fully developed literary languages. Devy prefers to use 'bhasa' over 'Indian' keeping in view the diversity of languages that have fully developed into literary languages. These languages such as Marathi, Gujarati, Sindhi, Punjabi etc., broke away with the Great Indian Sanskrit Tradition and emerged, by the 15th century, as independent literary languages. By this time, Sanskrit had already touched the peak in language and linguistics in scholars like Panini, Vamana, Bhoja etc. Of course, bhasa criticism imbibed many a foreign trends for its continuous development yet the western influence during the British era on the native took away the very vitality of the criticism even though bhasa literatures kept on flourishing.

Devy sets his focus on colonial period in which Indian Literary tradition cuts itself from the past and sees western thought in Theory and criticism as the fresh beginning. The author calls this trend as cultural amnesia whereby modern Indian bhasa intellectuals become incapable of tracing the roots of bhasa criticism not in the 15th century intellectual thought rather in western Euro-centric theory and criticism. Amnesia is a mental disorder whereby patients tend to forget events of the recent past. Similarly, Bhasa Literary Criticism and theory tend to ignore the history of literary theory of period just before the beginning of the British rule, resulting in damage to 'literary history of five to ten centuries'. The essay focuses

on how the pressure exerted by the colonialism on the native intellectual thought took away “healthy relation between modern bhasa criticism and its history”.

Devy lists many lethargic and non-productive tendencies of modern bhasa critics who attempted in futile to delineate the outline of Indian literary theory. He holds a grudge against those Indian critics who applied western theories forcibly on bhasa literature without conditioning them in Indian context. But basically, he blames the colonial policies such as ‘Doctrine of Lapse (1848)’ that disoriented and denigrated Indian bhasa literary heritage so that modern bhasa critics look upon western Eurocentric theories as fresh beginning.

G.N. Devy delves deep into the paradoxes and resultant sickness that modern bhasa criticism is suffering from. Indian intellectuals whereas looked down upon colonialism as evil on the other hand, became complete parasite on western knowledge and look upon it as an ideal for the modernization of bhasa literary criticism. Through the introduction of education, Devy records, the British produced “many undesired tendencies” in bhasa literature. It discouraged exchange of ideas rather presented Western Literary knowledge as superior by orientaling the Indian. Many a Indian intellectual revolted against this “universalizing” trend of western canons, for instance, Sudhir Kakar in the field of psychology endorsed cultural based child psychology.

On the other hand, modern Indian critics, though, admit that India has a glorious Sanskrit tradition of literary criticism but could not find a relationship between the past and the recent history of criticism. They fail to understand the history always filters through ages adding and abstracting. They fail to see the modern Indian literary criticism as result of past native bhasa literature criticism. This total forgetfulness of 15th onward literary bhasa literatures is the amnesia that modern Indian criticism suffering from. He writes:

“If modern India can connect itself emotionally with ancient India, whereas it cannot – or does not want to- relate itself to the pre-British past, the phenomenon will have to be described as a disorder in the culture’s psyche.”

Second essay “Ever Ending transitions” is more focused on the sociological changes that help the emergence of bhasa literature and decline of Sanskrit tradition of literary criticism. For that Devy formed a historiography of bhasa literature. In such an endeavor, Devy admitted having faced many difficulties such as lack of reliable material prior to British period that throws light on the Indian sociological set up and literature. Moreover British period is like “epistemological stumbling block” to know the pre – British past. Following the illogical course that history of bhasa literary criticism took, Devy records how different languages like Gujarati, Kannada, Mathari, Bangla etc., developed faster than other languages, reason being the official patronage of these languages. Regionalism was

promoted with advent of Islamic rules in India which later on became a major cause of decline of great Sanskrit tradition.

Bhasa literatures emerged as a revolt against the brahmanic monopoly since Sanskrit used different dialects only to emphasize social hierarchies. Therefore, in bhasa literatures can be seen a reflection of transition that Indian society was undergoing. Emergence of bhakti movement is a great testimony to this. Most bhakti literature, from 14th to 18th century, is written in regional languages. In spite of the fact that the printing press – a gift of Colonialism – helped bhasa literature to touch the skies, it remains a matter of concern why bhasa criticism could not flourish as fast as literature. Devy finds many reasons for it such as the masculine/ aggressive attitude of colonial powers, their intentions to preserve their own cultural identity, their negative attitude towards India arts and architecture.

In the third section “After Amnesia”, Devy challenges the accepted relationships between Indian Renaissance and Colonialism, and between Modernization and Westernization. Renaissance in Indian context, according to the author didn’t mean an organic relationship between the east and the west rather a ‘hotchpotch mixture of ideas’ which got market value in the colonialism. There remains a tussle between Indian critics and Indologists (western authors mastering Indian subject) on the efforts of self definition. Westernization

promoted 'social climbing' rather than modernization, - an Indian who got masters in English could service the colonial powers in many different ways and improve his relationships with the colonizers. Therefore, for Devy, western trends created material betterment, which further 'perpetuated the colonialism'. In the last, Devy highlights three Indian Renaissance Writers – Rabindra Nath Tagore, and Ananda Coomarswamy and specially, Sri Aurbindo who in a way rejected western thought and appealed to have "correct sympathy to appreciate bhasa Literature".

The book draws heavily from south-west Indian languages which leave a reader from the north India perplexed. In the three sections, his focus on bhasa literatures and Criticism remains on Marathi, Gujarati and Tamil. Due to the lack of knowledge of these bhasa literatures, one feels paralyzed to better review the book. Overall, it is a genuine and a rare research done by an Indian who is deeply concerned why the modern critics could not appreciate the native bhasa criticism and develop a theory based on the native thoughts.

Navdeep Kaur teaches at Indira Gandhi University Meerpur, Rewari, Haryana, India.

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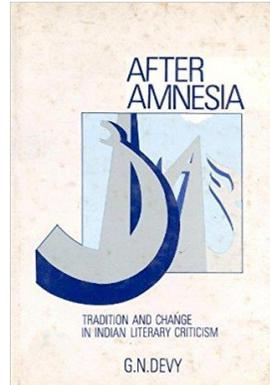
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