

Veronica Ghirardi. 2021. *Postmodern Traces and Recent Hindi Novels*. Wilmington: Vernon Press. 234 pages. Hardback. 52 Euros. ISBN 978-1-62273-880-9.

Postmodernism is a category that developed in the 1960s, even if the term had been used before with regard to the crisis of the western civilization. Political, social and cultural radical movements came into being, that had liberation as their goal, meant as liberation from any intellectual, social and sexual constraint. The deconstruction of hegemonic culture reflected new lifestyles, civil rights movements and new political aspirations, with an exuberant creative production, an ironic and playful attitude, and the disaggregation of the logic of integration and cohesion. There are many definitions for the postmodern condition, all characterized by the end in the dominance of meta-discourses and *gran récits*. Pluralism, fragmentation and constant mutation are the keywords of a phenomenon about which I wrote in my study on the Hindi literary field (Consolaro 2011). Veronica Ghirardi has searched for an answer to the question “What kind of post- is suitable to the Indian case?” In fact, postmodern and postcolonial do not necessarily coincide, and the debate about modernism, postmodernism and postcolonialism developed only in the past three decades in the Hindi literary field. Yet, the anxiety to define oneself ‘postmodern’ is not a novelty.

The mainstream Hindi critics have long ignored the issue: in the 1980s only the eminent critic Namwar Singh discussed postmodernism, in order to reject it. Postmodernism is often discredited as a Western fashion and Sudhish Pachauri, one of the first critics who took the issue seriously, faced a lot of opposition for that reason. In his path breaking work *Uttar-ādhunīk sāhityik vimarś* (‘Postmodern Literary Discourse’), first published in 1996 (Pachauri 2010), Pachauri argues that new factors such as the market, information technology and the media have entered Hindi literature and they have raised new questions that even writers have to deal with. Ghirardi investigates the features that include the Hindi novel into the larger context of postmodernism, showing to what extent they build up to the conventional definitions of postmodernism, as defined by Western models. She demonstrates the usefulness of exploring the traces of postmodernism in a literary and cultural context that is still largely unknown to Western readers and scholars, where most of the knowledge of Indian literature is drawn by Anglophone works. Building on Pachauri’s interpretation of postmodernism and Sanjay Chauhan’s *Uttar-ādhunīktā aur hindī upanyās* (‘Postmodernism and Hindi Novels’), published in 2011, Ghirardi investigates in the growing disillusionment with established institutions and social structures and how this became an influential factor in the Hindi literary field after the neoliberal turn in Indian

economic policy in the early 1990s. She introduces to the international audience a less known debate among India's intellectuals on postmodernism and how this notion can be put into use in the Indian literary field, specifically in the literature in Hindi. Today, younger Hindi writers show that Hindi literature has developed the ability to accept multiple narrative structures and many reject the idea of a purist truth and a prescribed theory. At the turn of the century, there was a considerable number of new voices that express in very different ways the impact of contemporary life on Hindi literature, from fiction to poetry to criticism to non-fiction. The new generations of Hindi writers are very familiar with world literature, but they also know everything about the Hindi tradition. And they are familiar with the web, blogging and discussing the relationship between literature and the internet.

The volume is structured in five chapters. The first chapter sets the methodological frame of the work starting from the Hindi novel that is considered "a postmodern zero-point," *Hariyā 'Harkyūlīz' kī hairānī* by Manohar Shyam Joshi (1994). Chapter two discusses the possibility to accept the notion of postmodernism in the Indian context examining the positions of a number of Hindi literary critics. The next two chapters carry on the discussion on a textual basis, using as sources a remarkable number of contemporary relevant Hindi novels, such as Virendra Jain's *Dūb* (1991), Prabha Khaitan's *Chinnamastā* (1993), Jay Prakash Kardam's *Chappar* (1994), Manohar Shyam Joshi's *Ṭ-ṭā profesar* (1995), Manzoor Ahtesham's *Dāstān E Lāptā* (1995), Mridula Garg's *Kaṭhguḷāb* (1996), Vinod Kumar Shukla's *Dīvār mem ek khiṛkī rahtī thī* (1997), Geetanjali Shree's *Hamārā śahar us baras* (1998), Alka Saraogi's *Kali-kathā: vāyā bāipās* (1998), and Uday Prakash's *Pīlī chatrīvālī laṛkī* (2001).

Ghirardi discusses issues such as ontological plurality or instability, emphasizing the presence in the mentioned works of otherworldiness, metafiction and particularly historiographic metafiction. She analyzes the impact of these notions on the text's structure and style, producing multi-layered texts and intertextual games, multiplication and fragmentation. On an aesthetic level, these features challenge the realist imperative of much Hindi literature, giving space to the poetic of small things and the literature of pleasure. Last but not least, there is a discussion of literature as a medium to challenge traditional totalizing powers, as can be observed in the subversion of conventional gender roles in women's writing, and in stories of marginalization from Dalit and non-Dalit accounts.

I have been working with the author of this book for quite a few years, as I supervised her PhD thesis at the University of Turin. I have seen the research process that is behind this volume, and I can state that *Postmodern Traces and Recent Hindi Novels* is based on a solid methodological ground and it is the result of an ongoing rich and fruitful debate between the author and the best scholars in the field. Veronica Ghirardi created a seminal study that provides thought-provoking reading not only to

scholars and students specializing in South Asian studies, but to all those who are interested in literary criticism, postcolonial and comparative literature, and world literature.

### References

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