Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Anonymous Authors

Robert Wood · Friday, April 27th, 2018

I have loved many works that bear no trace of who wrote them. These are books where the authors are anonymous. When I was last in Kerala, the land of my mother's people, I picked up volume three of *Medieval Indian Literature: An Anthology*, edited by K. Ayyappa Paniker. The first thing I did was to turn to the Malayalam section, which is the language group I belong to. Malayalam means the 'land between the mountain and the sea' since *malai* means 'mountain' and *azham* means 'sea'. There is no single origin myth of the language itself – some believe it has roots in Sanskrit, others in a blend of the Adivasis and Adi Dravida, and still more in the shifting sands of Tamil. The tale of the 'land between the mountain and the sea', of Kerala today, comes from Parasurama's axe. God took mortal form as Parasurama and vanquished the neighbouring Kshatriyas. Afterwards, he became depressed and went into penance in the Western Ghats to the east of the coast. From here, he threw his axe into the sea and Kerala, a land shaped like an axe, rose up from the waters to return it to him. With it came paddies of red rice and groves of coconuts.

Since that time, since the gods made it so, Kerala has been connected to the world. When King Solomon's palace in Babylon was to be decorated, ivory was exported through Kochi. When Queen Sheba moved to Jerusalem, spices and sandalwood came from all along the coast, from Calicut to Cranganore and Kovalam. When St Thomas, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, arrived in the port of Muziris in CE 52, many locals became Syrian Christians, preparing the soil for today's polytheistic practices.

All these stories seemed mythic to me when we first visited in 1994. I was a suburban boy from Perth, the 'most isolated city in the world', whose claim to fame was turning on the lights for an astronaut. I had been taught the false idea that my place in the world was disconnected, long lost, cast out. Where I was from, we did, of course, have an Indigenous Noongar tradition and occasional contact with Europeans such as Dirk Hartog (1616) and Willem de Vlamingh (1697). This was before permanent white settlement in 1826. A few years later, Karl Marx argued that the social relations of this new settlement, the Swan River Colony, were different. For him, there was not enough labour, which meant that the working classes could not be exploited like they were back in the United Kingdom. It was more egalitarian out there on the west coast of New Holland.

Growing up, I knew that Perth had a different logic, oriented itself to the sun a little oddly compared to Marx's United Kingdom or the India where my mother's family came from. Kerala with its palaces, with its temples, mosques and churches, with its princes and fishing fleets, with its villages and rituals, seemed like a fairy-tale place, a place for romance, treasure, empire. It was a place where the classics came from. This was not an unknown place like the suburb of my youth. It had a *history*. But I also knew it in my body, in the fish curries of my mother and aunts and grandmother. I knew it through my father's boyhood books too. Kipling, Stevensen, Defoe had imagined something like this tropical paradise before I had even set foot on Parasurama's axe itself. The land here was not anonymous in the history of 'the West'. What I learned from Kerala was to see the story of where I was from, to read into the landscapes of my youth what was already present. It was a process of making oneself a home in the world that was as big as any library in the universe.

Many years later, as I sat in the town of Kochi in Kerala listening to the crows at the window and catching the faint scent of small plastic fires, sweat beading on my forehead, I turned the pages of *Medieval Indian Literature*. There was 'The Story of Rama' by Cheeraman and 'The Song of Krishna' by Cherushsheri, but there were also poems without authors – 'The Art of the Courtesan', 'The Tale of Unnichirutevi', 'The Message to Unnuneeli'. They were all by different people, from different places and different centuries but they shared now, in this book, a claim to being written by 'Anonymous'.

These poems are sensual poems, poems about the body as a site of erotic potential and realised pleasure. Hair is 'luxurious', teeth are 'radiant', ears are 'gem-studded', ankles are 'adorned', thighs are 'shapely'. In 'The Tale of Unnichirutevi' 'her sweet melody, and his resounding voice, merge into one in perfect harmony.' The people of these poems, like the anonymous poet who wrote them, could be anyone. This is a gesture towards the world; a reaching towards the every person who is unnamed. They become a silhouette, a shadow, an idea that could come from anywhere. And yet, this embodiment has a place, is particular to 'Kerala' or so it seems in the poems – the coconuts sway, the light falls a certain way, Parasurama's axe glints in the sun.

Although the anonymity of medieval Malayalam literature and the anonymity I once sought are different, they share a faith in the power of language itself not the author. This is a faith that the poet can speak through time and towards what we might become when all is said and done, a faith that the classics share with us now over and above death itself. This is about books in the library that are gifts from the unknown, works that are freely shared beyond the celebrity authors. As Anonymous writes:

Charm the celibate ones with words, the friends with smiles,

The dependents with gifts,

The family men with affected indignation,

The lovers with bewitching glances,

The foolish ones with tears of joy,

The king with enticing charms;

The sensualists with tact;

The noble ones with magic potion,

The poets by lending your ears to their verses,

And your own relations in other ways.

In this poem, there are words for everyone from the celibate to the fools, from the poets to the nobles, from the king to our own relations. The people who are anonymous can write these books and poems across all the waters of the world, from India to Australia, Kerala to suburbia. This means that we are able to carry ourselves in the letters and hopes of people who are strangers and not quite real, which might be what reading still offers in today's world.

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