

JOHANNA HAHN, *Mythos und Moloch: Die Metropole in der modernen Hindi-Literatur (ca. 1970–2010)*. Heidelberg: CrossAsia E-Publishing, 2020. 284 pages, open access (online) or €26.90 (print). ISBN 978-3-9467-4271-5

The present volume, which is a revised version of a dissertation submitted at Heidelberg University, constitutes an important contribution to the field of modern Hindi literary studies by providing an overview of the most prevalent motifs and topoi occurring in the city-themed novels, short-stories and selected poems. Johanna Hahn explores a corpus of works belonging to the Hindi canon (by Manglesh Dabral, Mridula Garg, Kamleshwar, Sara Rai, Bhasham Sahni and others), without denying the importance of lesser-known narratives, occasionally juxtaposing her chosen works with analogous texts in English, as well as referring to Bangla literature or works of popular culture such as Hindi cinema.

Contrary to its title, *Myth and Moloch: The Metropolis in Modern Hindi Literature (ca. 1970–2010)*, the monograph investigates changes in the North Indian literary sphere beginning from 1947 up to 2010. The scope of the study explains its selective nature, and consequently most of the works are not analysed thoroughly. Instead, the author concentrates on theorising the significance of the city in Hindi literature, as well as answering the crucial question: “Which literary images and conceptions of the city and society are furnished and through what kinds of narrative strategies?” The selection of primary literature was content-driven (or, as the author says, dictated by “content-systematic criteria”) and hence, the city appears here not merely as a background but as the core theme of the text.

In her introduction, the author proposes that Hindi urban literature forms a privileged sphere for reflections and critical inquiries concerning modern developments and discourses on social and national belonging, in conscious opposition to global English-language discourses and patterns of interpretation. She further argues that Hindi literature, as a dominant mode of literary production in North India, possesses a certain political power, functioning as an “authentic” mode of representation for non-English speaking readers. At the same time, the author acknowledges the reality of Hindi publishing post-1950s, with writers recruited predominantly from academic circles, often with a Hindi or English literature background, which could explain their interest in combining the potential of Hindi as a “subaltern” medium with postmodern ways of storytelling. The writers of this new generation are, according to Hahn, “creators of the textual city” (p. 226), combining writing and telling, academic competence and journalistic approaches with literary merit.

The author investigates works by more than sixty authors, categorising literary discourse in mainstream Hindi literature on the basis of recurring themes and motifs and subjecting the corpus of urban literary texts to a critical classification with regard to their function and meaning. She uses the concepts

of “urban ethos” (Georg Simmel) and “city as text” as instruments of analysis, seeing her texts as forming and deforming the view people have of a city. Hahn argues that Hindi urban literature has had a stabilising effect on social as well as national identity formation processes of the Hindi-speaking middle classes in India, as can be seen in the continuous use of older figures of thought and models of social utopia.

Focusing on the recurring motifs, Hahn identifies three phases that this genre underwent – the post-1947 phase of industrialisation and modernisation (only marginally treated in the volume); the phase of capitalism and technological development between 1970 and 1990 that saw the proliferation of various utopias and dystopias, themes of fear and alienation, discourses of the self and the other, etc.; and the third, post-1990 phase, characterised by the use of postmodern methods of narration and experimentations with form.

The book is structured along five chapters, followed by a list of Hindi authors (interestingly the Urdu author Saadat Hasan Manto is also included) whose works are discussed in the volume. The first two chapters outline the popular and stereotypical representations of Mumbai as a city of illusions, *urbis prima indis* or a demon, then proceed to the analysis of the most prolific literary topographies – local spaces, such as a tea stand or a footpath, which build a cognitive structure for the perception of the protagonist. Hahn identifies three ways of designing spatial descriptions – the micro view of local spaces, the “supertotal vision” of a flaneur (p. 110) and sensory cognitive triggers. The figure of the flaneur, so well researched in Western literatures, has thus far not been the subject of a thorough investigation in the context of South Asia. The current study, through an examination of dozens of narratives, identifies three distinct shifts between the 1960s and 2010s: from the flaneur as a stranger in the city, to the alienated outsider struggling with the familiar cityscape, to the non-normative, mad figure of the 1990s, reflecting the state of the nation.

Chapter 3 demonstrates the idea of “chaotic modernity” by focusing on narrative responses that entail social critiques and utopian alternatives for sharing the urban space. Works of Rajendra Awasthi, Jitendra Bhatia, Manoj Rupra and others are shown as either subscribing to the ideals of (neo)Marxism or offering conservative critiques of capitalism.

The fourth chapter, “Of Citizens and Strangers: Urban Belonging and Identity”, examines postcolonial city literature focused on the protagonists’ search for their own and the nation’s identity. Hahn focuses on two works published in 2002 by Kashinath Singh and Uday Prakash, presenting two distinctive ways of storytelling. Singh’s insider perspective of a Benares *mohalla* (roughly, “neighbourhood”) is contrasted with Prakash’s non-citizen gaze; both, however, are shown as deconstructing the clichés associated with the traditional ethos of coexistence in a mega-city.

There are some minor inaccuracies in the book, and the quotations are not accompanied by transliteration of the original Hindi if a published English or German translation already exists. Personally, I do not consider this a convincing choice, given the intended academic readership. Transliteration could have helped expose the Hindi terms, scarcely used in the volume, which could have been an excellent occasion to familiarise the readers with the vernacular vocabulary. For instance, the author offers a short investigation of a few Hindi verbs describing activities of the Indian flaneur, the *sarakmāp*. But the reader, confronted with the German translation of a passage from Alka Saraogi's novel, is not able to determine whether the term is used in the text itself or how frequently (p. 115). Not all the titles are accompanied by a date of publication or identification of their genre; for example, short stories include only the date of publication of the collection and not the stories themselves. Considering the number of books analysed in the volume, and the fact that the author switches between periods, languages and genres, often referring to works published before the period in focus, such an omission can create confusion (for instance, Nasira Sharma's short story is dated 2011, thus slightly extending the period declared in the title, p. 93; and Amritlal Nagar's work lacks a genre identification, p. 114). The list of authors at the end of the volume is not particularly helpful, since it does not include the names of the works analysed.

The volume might have profited from engaging in the larger discussion of the vernacular canon (the author herself notices that Hindi city literature does not have a canon, p. 17) or trying to form a more comprehensive aesthetic theory of post-1970 Hindi literature by engaging in the discussion on periodisation and origin of the genre – as do Hindi literature critics such as Gopal Ray, who recently revisited the widely accepted periodisation undertaken by Ramchandra Shukla, or Indranath Madan, who dated the origin of the modern Hindi novel to 1936. Still, the thematic approach presented by Hahn is one of the most practiced in Hindi literature scholarship and engages in a dialogue with similar recent works by Vasudha Dalmia and Nikhil Govind.

One wonders, however, why the author chose the period of post-1947 as her primary focus, since she does not explicitly state her methodological intention in this regard. The pre-1947 literature was also not devoid of city narratives and even earlier authors like Premchand developed an interest in the emerging middle class in urban spaces like Benares at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, considering the wide range of source material analysed, which is a particular strength of the volume, such shortcomings do not diminish the value of the book and it will surely prove to be a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate on world literature and the place of South Asian literatures within this paradigm.