

## Book Reviews



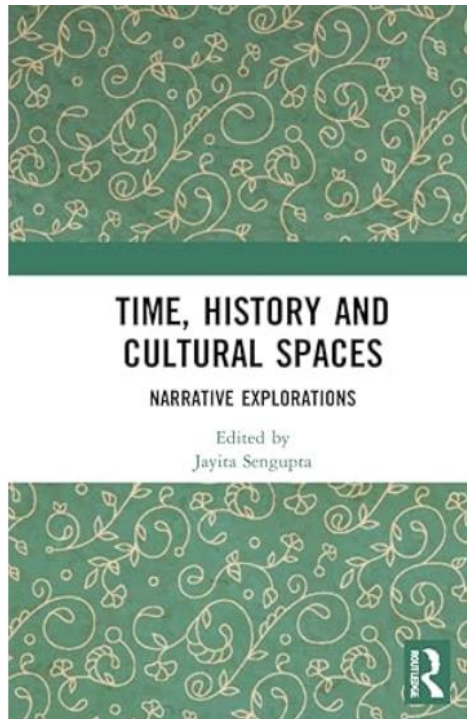
*CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION*

Volume 6: 1

(ISSN 2454 -9495)

July 2024

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***Time, History and Cultural Spaces: Narrative Explorations* edited by Jayita Sengupta. Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group), London and New York. 2023. i-xvi+1-194. £39.99. Rs. 1295/- (South Asian Edition). Reviewed by Tathagata Sagar Pal.**

What is a narrative? Simply put, a narrative is a story of an event(s), involving the actions and experiences of a character(s). It can be expressed through a sequence of written or spoken words, still or moving images, and also through a combination of these. Be it verse or prose,

fiction or non-fiction, nothing remains outside the periphery of narrative. If one takes into account the etymology of the word ‘narrative’, which originates from the Latin word ‘*narre*’, conveying the process of making individuals know about the world; then “silence too can be eloquent, suggesting the story of cultural repression or erasures of history from cultural memory” (1). The narrative experience, which is also dependent on the narrator and his medium of discourse, is rooted in time and space, affecting different forms of storytelling. *Time, History and Cultural Spaces: Narrative Explorations*, edited by Jayita Sengupta, takes diverse forms of human creativity, looks at their culture-specific narrativization and explores their connections with time and existence.

In the “Introduction” of the book, Jayita Sengupta’s overview of narrative theories in the twentieth century help the readers in contextualizing the new contributions in this field of study. This volume contains thirteen articles which are organized into three sections. The five essays in the first section titled, “Narratives of Life, Time and History: Some Reflections on Theory and Cultural Traditions,” explore philosophical discourses on time across cultures. Saitya Brata Das, in the first essay, explores the burden of history and memory on human consciousness. The idea of history, emerged under the influence of the Enlightenment, was viewed as a progressive continuum moving towards its *telos*. Das’s essay opposes the Hegelian theodicy of history, celebrating the totality of the Absolute, through the Nietzschean concept of “singularisation to come” (14). It also shows how the violence of law, which holds life as “being mere alive” (26), has been countered by Walter Benjamin’s idea of “sovereign violence” (30) and Rosenzweig’s concept of redemption. Mousumi Guha Banerjee’s essay differentiates the historic-naturalistic concept of time from the metaphysical idea of time which presupposes history as the ontology of that being. Resorting to Hayden White’s concept of the “deep structures of historical imagination” (34), Guha Banerjee shows how history and historical discourse do not always contend with “scientific objectivity” (35). The essay also explores the

relation of tradition and modernity through the perspective of time being in “an incessant state of flux” (40). Deb Kamal Ganguly, in his essay, examines the Deleuzian view of time as a flow, how the concept of the “event” is different from “occurrence”. The essay also explains that the Deleuzian categorization of “Chronos” and “Aion” helps to understand the content of the “experience object” (50), associated with cinema or any other diachronic form of art. Lastly, through a critical reading of Jibanananda Das’s poem “Bodh,” Ganguly explains that the Deleuzian idea of ‘sense’ has its counterpart in the Indian concept of ‘*bodh*.’ This endeavour to make the readers acquainted with the understanding of life and time in non-Christian cultures is evident in next two essays too. Time, as “a Power of the Divine, subtle, latent, and imperceptible in the Lord in His Unmanifest state” (64), has been brought out in Divya Joshi’s essay. Taking recourse to ancient Indian texts, she explores the mechanics of time and space, preparing the ground for enquiry into the philosophical frame of *Vaastu*. The continuum of space, time and existence has been explained through *Paramanu* which is “the most diminutive conceivable unit of time” (64) as well as “a minute space possessing Energy” (67). Joshi’s attempt to highlight how our conception of the physical world is incongruous with proper understanding of *chit*, *achit* and *ishvar*, resonates with Sanchita Choudhury’s essay on Shamanic philosophy of existence. The essay delves into how shamanism invokes an “altered state of consciousness” (71) and attempts to maintain a harmonious balance between the human realm and that of the spirits, allowing a shaman to act as a bridge between life and death. It also draws on different kinds of shamanistic practices in the world and ruminates on the mastery of five vital energies.

The second section of the volume draws attention to how history and memory have been narrativized in literature, art and music of different cultures from the late nineteenth century onwards. Kusumita Dutta’s essay documents the presence and erasure of the murals in Ireland and the liminal space between the two. The essay highlights how the mural aesthetics

is replaced by a burgeoning bourgeois looking for capitalistic progress as the commodity culture replaces the political revolution. Dutta has shown that while murals are related with the “postmemory” (84) of martyrdom, their erasure is also a way of reengaging with the narratives of conflict. The essay by Harish C. Mehta discusses the literary revolution in China after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1917. As Mehta’s essay interrogates “modernity” in the Chinese cultural context, it focuses on the trope of cannibalism Lu Xun’s writing which conveys the author’s concern about the backwardness of his compatriots. With extensive references to contemporary Chinese history, the essay talks about the differences between the approach of the Communist party and that of the writers and Mao’s effort to stamp the authority of the party. However, it also acknowledges that the Communist control helped to formulate the Chinese literary techniques. Corinne Alexandre-Garner’s essay argues how certain historical facts have been mingled with the imaginary settings and different levels of narrative have been overlapped in Lawrence Durrell’s fiction, *Avignon Quintet*, to foreground the idea of plurality of truths. At the same time, through the issue of Jewish portrayal, the essay alerts the readers about the risk of creating an “ambiguous narrative” (119) when one is turned into a mere instrument of time and fiction. Sagnik Chakraborty, through his essay, explores how music served as a source of both pain and pleasure during the Holocaust. He connects Paul Celan’s poem, “The Fugue of Death,” with Szpilman’s memoir, *The Pianist*, and the text’s adaptation as a film by Roman Polansky. Their search for consolation and solace is shown to be evident in their creative narratives of history, aided by music. Nishat Haider’s essay on Qurratulain Hyder’s *River of Fire* highlights that narrative, accommodating competing voices, can challenge the grand narratives and engage in restructuring of memories. It also makes clear that while Hyder has treated memory and imaginal as valid forms of “(hi)story” (134); instead of dismissing historical facts, she has in fact resorted to changing the historical coherence in the narrative.

The essay is attentive to the fact that linear history is subjected to the changeable relation between past and present in *River of Fire*.

The last section of the volume deals with the diasporic cultural history. Julie Banerjee Mehta's essay examines how the immigrants' traditional cuisines have become the means to assert their identity and resist against forced cultural acculturation by the white hegemonic Canadian state. The essay, which includes classroom discussions with second and third-generation Asian-Canadian immigrants, has shown that Asian-Canadian and Asian-American diasporic writers "have been infusing a new oeuvre into the North American literary canon" (148). Moreover, the author has drawn attention to the fact that food, in the process of negotiating the third space that can make space for the articulation of cultural hybridity, has subverted "the masculinist attempt to dominate both the women and the emigree" (158). The section includes Cécile Oumhani's short story, "The Zebra Finch," where the metaphor of the "zebra" reverberates with diasporic connotations. The story is powerful in its telling message about cultural adaptation and relationships across geographical spaces. The conversation between Geetha Ganapathy Dore and Cécile Oumhani on the latter's works also reveals the ability of the words to traverse across time and space.

The volume is significant in offering a discursive terrain of ideas related to narrative, connecting them with concepts of life, time and history. By including a fictional narrative and an interview, the book seeks to explore the diverse forms of narrativity, in theme and content. Careful planning is evident in its narrative structure too, as the readers are guided from the abstractions in philosophical discourses to specific narrativizations since the late nineteenth century. Though most of the essays are structured within western theoretical framework, attention has been given to find resonances in non-western cultures too. It prepares an ideal ground for the readers to understand the points of commonalities and departures across cultures and disciplines.

**\*About the reviewer**

**Tathagata Sagar Pal** has a Master of Arts in English from University of Hyderabad (2021). His research area includes Tantric deities and iconographic analysis. He has presented papers in UGC-approved national and international conferences. Presently, he is a Ph.D. scholar at Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University.