



Sensitive reading: The pleasures of South Asian literature in translation

edited by Yigal Bronner and Charles Hallisey, Oakland, University of California Press, 2022, 272 pp., £30.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780520384477

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BOOK REVIEW

Sensitive reading: The pleasures of South Asian literature in translation, edited by Yigal Bronner and Charles Hallisey, Oakland, University of California Press, 2022, 272 pp., £30.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780520384477

South Asia is a literary cosmos unto itself. Hundreds of languages coexist there in many different ways with vernacular orality and the history, ritual, and traditions of classical Sanskrit. In *Sensitive Reading*, an assortment of literature written in several South Asian languages translated by eminent Indianist David Shulman, was assembled by the editors along with works of music as well as a work of visual art. Each of the selected texts addresses love in one way or another, including professions of love, desires, longings, love for the divine, and the agony of separation. The classics from ancient and medieval India's history are combined with a few pieces from the 19th and 20th centuries to make the collection comprehensive.

The volume highlights that sensitive reading, defined as reading with sensitivity to others, may bring about satisfaction, comfort, and pleasure as well as discomfort and disapproval. The text emphasizes that ever-present in sensitive reading is the question of the reader's identity while reading the various pieces. The editors also include commentaries written by a range of specialists, some of whom read the works as "near" readers (readers familiar with the original text, language, and literary tradition) and others as "far" readers (readers approaching the text from particular perspectives other than an attempt at close reading).

The book is divided into six units that have disparate strengths. The translated works span a range of Indian languages, genres, and eras. Short essays are included with the translations in order to encourage readers' appreciation of varieties. Fifteen Indian literary works are discussed in the book. Some of these pieces, *Life of Naishadha* by Shriharsha (translated from Sanskrit to English by Gary Tubb and Thibaut d'Hubert) and *Life of Naidhata* by Ativirarama Pandyan (translated from Tamil to English by N. Govindarajan and Sheldon Pollock), include background information to make the translation easier to understand, while others show how to broaden enjoyment via comparison and readers' own perspectives. Second, the book shows the reader that reading a work in translation is reading in the sense of "one's own mind dancing with another's" (23), not "a kiss across the veil" (24). When we read a literary work, we are asked to suspend our objections and suspicions in a leap of faith. From that perspective, a good translation is a heightened reading act that uniquely embodies and boldly invites co-imagination.

The collection works as a reading compass, since close and far readings of texts assist readers to zoom in and understand a text's nuances as well as to zoom out and compare it to a work from a different tradition or period. Finally, it can also serve to encourage readers to develop their own interpretations by zooming in and out of certain passages and contrasting South Asian expressions of love and other values with those from other cultures. While the book is important as an application of literary critics, the criticism made by non-South Asian readers and translators, who did not find pleasure in reading the literary works, might be problematic.

Despite this shortcoming, the volume makes a significant contribution to the area of translation and literary studies, especially in the South Asian context. This is an indispensable resource for those interested in South Asian literature and art, the translations, and the associated studies in the foreseeable future.

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