

ALI ALIZADEH

Vicki Viidikas: New and Rediscovered

edited by Barry Scott, with a foreword by Kerry Leves

Yarraville: Transit Lounge, 2010

304 pp, ISBN 9780980571769, RRP \$32.95 pbk

Kerry Leves, *A Shrine to Lata Mangeskar*

Sydney: Puncher & Wattmann, 2008

90 pp, ISBN 978097240588, RRP \$24.00 pbk

In his latest book, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), philosopher Slavoj Žižek advances a powerful critique of the work of the post-colonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty. According to Charkrabarty, modern India is a model of seamless transcultural hybridity, with its “much-celebrated effortless combination of traditional spirituality [and] modernity” (281); for Žižek, however, apparently authentic motifs of Hinduism and Islam as found in contemporary India only survive in “mediated ‘de-naturalized’ forms [that] have already been ‘mediatized’ and incorporated into global capitalism” (283). In other words, images and rituals that one might perceive as elements of a genuinely non-Western cultural milieu are in fact fetish commodities produced for, and in many cases by, Western/capitalist subjects and contingencies. Such a radical, Marxian perspective provides an apt perspective for reviewing two fascinating recent books by Australian poets Kerry Leves and the late Vicki Viidikas, which comprise many poems and short stories written about the authors’ travels, expeditions and explorations, often in each other’s company, across modern India.

According to his Foreword in *Vicki Viidikas: New and Rediscovered*, Leves first met Viidikas in Sydney in 1967. That year Viidikas published her first poem and began establishing herself as a member of the so-called Generation of ’68. The publication of her debut collection *Condition Red* in 1973 further established Viidikas as a participant in the burgeoning literary

scene that was in the process of transforming Australian writing. Leves' own first collection *Green* was published in 1978 by a press under the direction of two active members of Sydney's avant-garde literary scene. However, while some other poets of this scene would go on to consolidate their positions as Australia's leading poets over the coming decades by writing mostly about life in metropolitan Australia – or, in Robert Adamson's case, by articulating an intense interaction with quintessentially Australian environs and fauna – Leves and Viidikas left Australia and its literary circles to travel across and write about the picturesque, the grotesque and the mystical in modern India.

While, as the title of his book suggests, the poems in Leves's *A Shrine to Lata Mangeshkar* are all dedicated to his experience of – according to the note on the book's back-cover – travelling “down, up and across India” with Viidikas during 1980s, Viidikas's newly-published posthumous collection (skillfully edited by the Melbourne-based poet and publisher Barry Scott) includes many poems and short stories, as well as drawings and an excerpt from an unpublished novel, written before and after her journeys to India. Notable among her non-Indian works are the poems "Punishment and Cures", "Red is the Colour" and "Knives" which, in their raw, Plathesque allusions to violence against female sexuality, can be seen as works of literary feminism; and "They Always Come" and "Family Images", in which her startling self-reflexivity evokes the postmodern.

India first appears in Viidikas's work in the short story "The Silk Trousers", originally published in her 1974 book *Wrappings*. The protagonist of this story, an Australian tourist called Helen, finds herself both sexually aroused and viscerally repulsed by a street performer in Calcutta with whom she has shared a chillum of hashish (drug use is a regular theme in much of Viidikas's writing):

The thought of lying with this man underneath his dirty lungi, of touching his pocked cheeks and running her tongue over his scarlet teeth, of spreading her fingers through that oily rope hair was ... too much, too much to keep her in sanity. She had no room to escape. She was in a maelstrom of desire with no intelligible moral code to rationalise her feelings towards him. The reason she felt love for him was the reason she was terrified to touch him (94-5).

Such complex, paradoxical feelings – as well as the acute observation that, as another Indian character in the story observes, the street performer is a “fake”, only interested in the Western woman’s “rupees” (90) – are, however, subdued as Viidikas evokes a rather conventional image of India in "Listening Backwards", a prose poem published two years later, in which the speaker “dream[s] of deserts where the exotic will be a palm tree, a baying goat, the lick of a drum” (173). Interestingly, this poem is dedicated to Leves, and can be seen as a documentation of the two poets’ decision to leave for India as a result of what seems like their mutual frustration with Australia’s literary scenes.

There are instances of the exotic in both books – in Leves’, for example, the imagistic depiction of Varanasi in a sequence named after the city, particularly in the "Temple" section of the poem which begins with: “Down shadowy sidestreets, clay is articulate: / on a temple wall, a daub of Hanuman scarlet / flashes the heartbeat of the Goddess inside” (18). Such representations of sites in India, while vibrant and, indeed, “articulate”, are re-presentations – of, for example, India’s amorphous, spiritual Otherness – and do not necessarily present something new about either India or the poets’ own apperception of the country. Thankfully, in both publications, such moments of purely objective and objectifying *travel writing* are few and far between; and, for the most part, Leves’ and Viidikas’ writings are highly engaged and actively subjective ruptures with stereotypical notions of India as either the realm of primitive Oriental mysticism or the post-colonial success story generated by the country’s technocratic elites. In my reading, Leves and Viidikas succeed in dissecting what Žižek would describe as the “de-naturalized” or “mediatized” image of contemporary India by presenting ostensibly Indian cultural signifiers as products of the Western subject’s demands and desires.

In the long poem "Monkey Balconies", for example, Leves chronicles an expedition to the Himalayan city of Shimla by subordinating the depictions of the city’s stunning sights to the workings of his “brain’s interior” (61). In the section of the poem titled "Bazaar", Leves vividly describes the city’s general scenery – “floating pagodas, turrets / of fairyland on the ridgetop” – before immediately establishing that such a view is in fact the product of the speaker’s own foreignness: “So this is seeing the world / without Hindustani” (64). At no point does Leves pretend to speak as a so-called White Indian, and it is precisely the consciousness of his intrinsic alienation from the innate Otherness of India that provides his poems with a sharp and engaging ability to see beyond the visible. Even at the end of the previously mentioned poem about

Varanasi, the earlier lyrical descriptions of the Hindu temple and later a funeral pyre are negated by the honest insertion of the speaker's own fantasy of transcendence:

Why am I sure
that this rite is what I came for?
Why does this thin smoke
pouring into a windless sky
seem like a triumph? (19)

Viidikas – who makes direct appearances in a number of Leves' poems, with her "blond hair drawn back / severely / slavic cheekbones vast dark eyes" in "Kali" (37), and, later on, as "wry, / & a little bored" (57) – is even more candid in presenting India's mysticism as a spectacle for Western tourists and pilgrims in search of personal "triumphs". In her poem about the northwestern town of Pushkar (190-1), for example, she contradicts the harmonious and celebratory depictions of the town's famous lake with acrid statements apropos the town's commodification and reification as a popular tourist destination:

Holy lake now commercialised.
Chillums for sale in the streets.
Chai shops with refrigerators, at last the big deal.
Malaria month: October/November.

Viidikas' perspective should not be mistaken for a dismissal of or a cynicism toward India per se; as she writes in the prose poem "Rich in Madras", "I learn more here [in India] in one hour than in one year of being alive in Australia" (183). What she "learns" in India, however, is not the clichés of spiritual wisdom and the like – which she insightfully lampoons in the extract from her unpublished novel "Kali and the Dung Beetle" (201-23) – but the truths of inequality and deprivation that, while obscured in affluent Western nations like Australia, are on full display in modern India. As she writes in "Rich in Madras": "Essential reality, and here comes that hotel boy determined to jerk off outside my window, frustrated, seeing Westerners spend more in one week than he will make in a lifetime – who should pay who?" (183)

Such incisive interrogations of an Australian author's own multifaceted responses to India make the works under review refreshing and in many ways radically sophisticated. For these poets "India" is not a natural, or external, reality, but the formation of the expectations, hungers,

and obsessions of the country's Western beholders. Rejecting both colonial/Orientalist impulses of past writers on the sub-continent (Kipling, etc.) as well as the late-Capitalist/Globalist cross-cultural sensitivity of contemporary writers (Dalrymple, etc.), *Shrine to Lata Mangeskar* and *Vicki Viidikas: New and Rediscovered* present the reader with refreshingly personalised and experiential depictions of Indian society, landscape and spiritualities. As Leves observes in his own poem about the town of Pushkar, "All sorceries are personal in the end" (53).

The author wishes to thank Kerry Leves for clarifying a few points during the writing of the review.