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Narrating Cultural Encounter: Representations of India by Select Enlightenment Women Writers by Arnab Chatterjee. New York: Routledge, 2022

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European women's negotiation with the British colonial India remains a rich area for critical exploration. Writing a book on the topic is, however, a difficult task because archival sources are inadequate. Facts and figures relevant to the research of early years of women's journeys are either lost or were not carefully preserved. Women's adventure into the public domain was obviously considered not important. Moreover, for an Indian scholar located in the Indian subcontinent it is more challenging toventure into the area because of the absence of proper critical literature in the country. Considered from this perspective, Arnab Chatterjee's book *Narrating Cultural Encounter: Representations of India by Select Enlightenment Women Writers* is an intellectually invigorating work. Based on his Ph.D. thesis, the book arduously explores literary and historical materials of the long eighteenth century that emerged from Europe and the critical commentaries on them that were published in recent decades across the globe.

Not that no works have been done in this area. With the rise of feminist scholarship, scholars interested in the relationship between British women and British colonialism turned

their attention to the ideological role played by women writers and travellers in the discourse of imperialism. One of the latest publications, an anthology of articles titled *British Women Travellers: Empire and Beyond 1770–1870* (2020) edited by Sutapa Dutta, testifies to the sustained scholarly interest in the field. It looks comprehensively at British women's travels to various parts of the Empire, including India. Ketaki Kushari Dyson's book, *A Various Universe: A Study of the Journals and Memoirs of British Men and Women in the Indian Subcontinent 1765-1856*, originally published in 1978, is a rigorous study carried out in this field. It is, unlike Dutta's book, entirely focussed on India. Chatterjee's book under review is, like Dyson's, focussed on India but differs from the latter as it deals with two specific genres – novels and travelogues.

Chatterjee explores three novels – Phebe Gibbes's *Hartley House Calcutta* (1789), Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translations of the Letters of a Hindu Rajah* (1796) and Lady Morgan's *The Missionary: an Indian Tale* (1811) – as well as two travelogues – Jemima Kindersley's *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe, Brazille, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies* (1777) and Eliza Fay's *Original Letters from India* (1779-1815). Fay's book was first published in 1817. The first work listed above was published in 1777 and the last one in 1817. Chatterjee situates these works in the long eighteenth century, anchoring their motif in the ideology of the European Enlightenment.

The word 'letters,' one may notice, appears in three of the five texts mentioned above, suggesting that they are indeed epistolary in form and style. Interestingly, Gibbes's fiction which does not feature the word too is epistolary in form although Lady Morgan's is not. This raises the issue of relationship between women's preference for epistolary form in the

long eighteenth century, and perhaps later too. We may recollect in this regard Jane Austen's novella *Lady Susan* 'written in 1794 but not published until 1875 after her death' and Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778). In travelogues particularly the epistolary form fits in easily.

One needs to pay attention to the national identities of the authors and travellers whose works are examined in the book. Although they were all British, not all were English. Phebes Gibbes, Jemima Kindersley and Eliza Fay were English while Lady Morgan was Irish and Elizabeth Hamilton was Scottish having close association with Ireland. The dynamics of relationship within Great Britain was, and still is, fraught with tension and even aggression. The hegemony of what came to be called 'Englishness' was contested within the geo-cultural space. The variations of responses of the agents of British imperialism, as seen in the representations of India by the women writers and travellers, can partly be attributed to this factor. It goes to Chatterjee's credit that he has paid attention to this factor although his main focus is gender. He argues that all the authors worked from within the structure of imperialism, but the lens of women's gaze deviated from that of men as they refused to subscribe to all the negative stereotypes about India and Indians that the British imperialists created. The experience of patriarchal subjugation in the British society helped them acquire a more sympathetic attitude towards the Indians. Keeping the gendered identity as the central focus of his discourse, Chatterjee brings other factors such as regional British affinities (Irishness or Scottishness), class locations of the authors or closeness to British imperialist bureaucracy to explain the specific kind of gaze of individual authors he has taken up for critical exploration. Although not stated clearly, his analysis leans on an intersectional critical framework.

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Besides Introduction and Conclusion, the monograph contains five other chapters. In the introductory chapter Chatterjee introduces the works, situates their authors in biographical and historical contexts and explains the objectives of the book. He argues that women's novels and travelogues of the long eighteenth century participated in the Enlightenment project of knowing the Other and enumerates how the women writers encountered the cultural contact zone in India. Some of the authors had direct experience of India, while the others gathered information about the colony from friends, relatives and books. The women authors and the travelling women detected a wide gap between the Enlightenment ideals and the British colonial practices in India. Their representation marked a distinct departure from those of the men, thus fragmenting the supposedly homogenous British Self. In Chapters 2,3 and 4 Chatterjee interprets the novels of Phebe Gibbes's *Hartley House Calcutta* (1789), Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translations of the Letters of a Hindu Rajah* (1796) and Lady Morgan's *The Missionary: an Indian Tale* (1811) respectively in the light of the theoretical framework he develops in Chapter 1. He identifies textual sites where Gibbes largely portrays the Indian society in positive light and contests the negative stereotypes in the Orientalist fictional and non-fictional representations of the time. For example, she, like Hamilton (Chapter 3), does not look at the Hindu rite of sati in a negative light, quite in contrast to Jemima Kindersley who, in her travelogue discussed in the Chapter 5, considered the practice in the usual Orientalist way. Hamilton's text discussed in Chapter 3 is prefaced by a 'Preliminary Dissertation' which was, Chatterjee feels, intended to foreground her "adequate knowledge about India through her reading of the works of the Orientalists," a knowledge that seems to compensate her lack of actual experience in the colony (90). She represents the Hindus as being tolerant and the Islamic rule as being cruel. Chatterjee argues

that given the political situation in India of the time, Islamic rulers were considered to be rivals to British imperialism. The first volume of the novel focuses on British incursion into India while the second one deals with an Indian character Zaarmilla's voyage to England. Chapter 4 discusses Lady Morgan's novel which explores the Platonic relationship between Hilarion, a Christian missionary, and Luxima, a Kashmiri Brahmin girl and the tragic consequences of their love. The novel shows how a missionary's gaze is also entangled in imperial desire.

Chapter 5 explores two travelogues – Jemima Kindersley's *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe, Brazille, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies* and Eliza Fay's *Original Letters from India* (1779-1815). Kindersley and Fay belonged to two different social and family backgrounds. Complex patterns of their gazes gave rise to their 'double voiced' writings. Both paid attention to topographical details of the land they visited and explored socio-cultural conditions of the inhabitants. The former considered the Indians as primitive and blamed the Brahmins for the decadence of the Hindu religion. The latter considered Hindu belief system as irrational, one that fosters monstrous practices such as sati.

The novels and travelogues discussed above project India as a unique topographical and social space. References to historical events like Black Hole, political personages like Warren Hastings and contemporary debates such as Hastings' trials render the narratives palpable. The social space is subjected to rigorous critical scrutiny. All the exotic components such as sati, nautch girls, snakes and snake-charmers are present in the narratives. These elements, despite occasional sympathetic attitudes of the author, Orientalise the country and its inhabitants. However, as Chatterjee rightly argues, the lens through which the writers

gazed at the ‘spectacles’ is not exactly the same as that in the narratives of the male authors. He has never lost sight of the Enlightenment values that characterise the narratives. He has also paid critical attention to the agency of the women who ventured beyond the domestic space to engage with the world outside either by undertaking journeys to the colonies or by writing independently about the colonial world with unique worldviews about the colonial regime that often radically differed from those of their male peers. Unfortunately, there are some typos in the book that blemishes the otherwise high quality of the book.

Works Cited

Chatterjee, Arnab. *Narrating Cultural Encounter: Representations of India by Select Enlightenment Women Writers*. Routledge, 2022. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003152125.