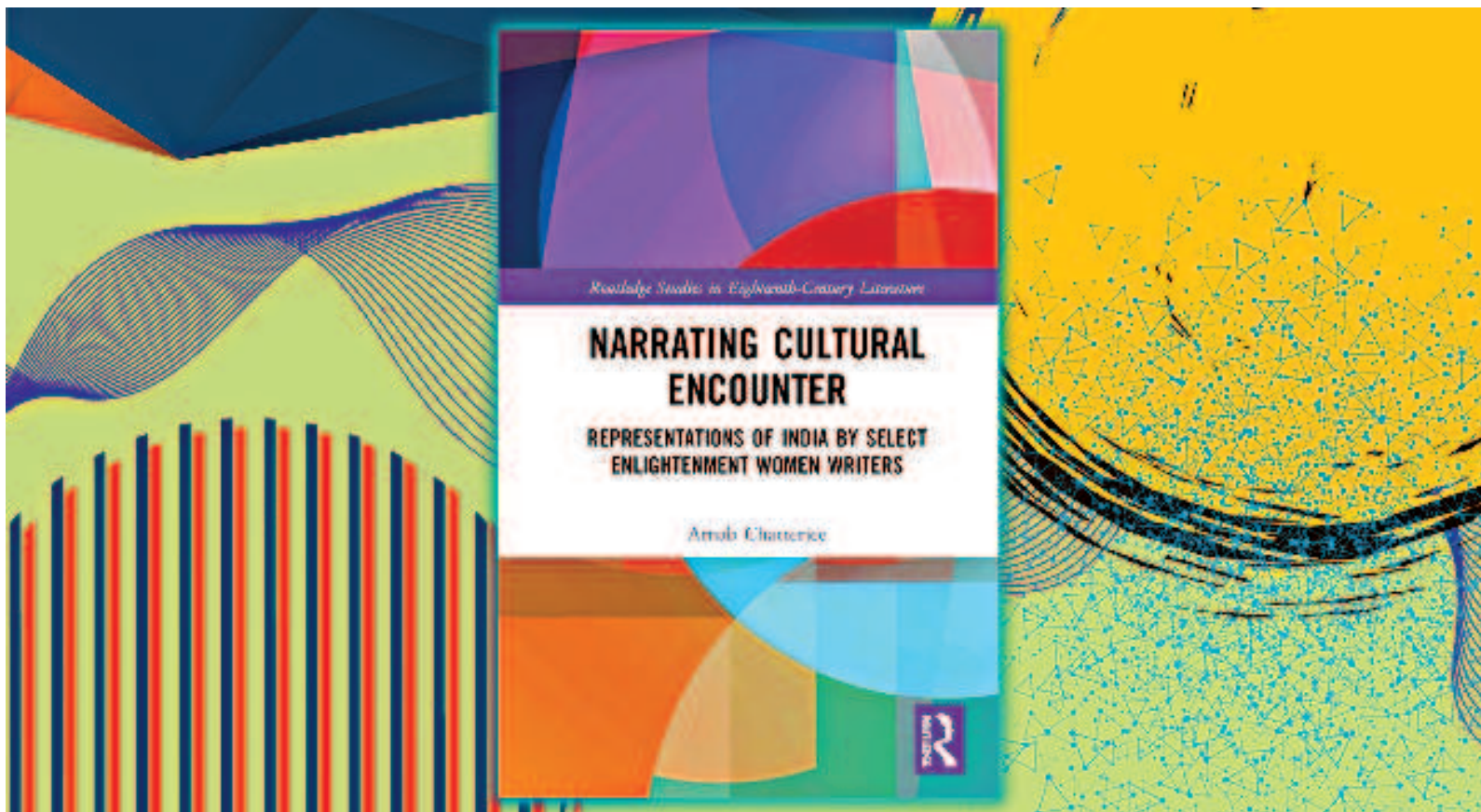


BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

18th century British women writers and their Indian others

Review of 'Narrating Cultural Encounter: Representations of India by Select Enlightenment Women Writers' (Routledge, 2022) by Arnab Chatterjee



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

In the case of Eliza Fay, he finds her critiquing widow-burning among the Hindus as a ritual stemming from patriarchal power at least partly because she was suffering from the actions of her own husband then.

FAKRUL ALAM

In recent decades, fictional and quasi-fictional late 18th century works about real or imagined visits to the Indian subcontinent, and even interesting travel narratives written by relatively little known British women authors about India, have attracted considerable critical interest. Some of these books are every now and then being reprinted as well. Such works reveal women writers writing imaginative narratives often filled with sharp insights, not merely into India, but also of the Britain they knew. Inevitably, these authors are drawn to comparisons between the way things are in their country, and the part of the subcontinent they are delineating for their readers.

I remember in this context how a visit to the Dhaka British Council

Library in 1994—then easily accessible and full of books catering to all kinds of readers—introduced me to Eliza Fay's vivid, and at times intensely felt account about her years in the subcontinent, *Original Letters From India* (1779-1815) in an edition enriched by E M Forster's introductory comments. In *Narrating Cultural Encounter: Representations of India by Select Enlightenment Women Writers* (NCER), the Indian academic Arnab Chatterjee includes Fay's book as part of his analysis of narratives of British women writers in attempting to depict India imaginatively for their readers. In addition, he describes illuminatingly Phebe Gibbes's 1789 novel, *Hartly House, Calcutta*, Elizabeth Hamilton's 1796 novel, *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, Lady Morgan's *The Missionary: An Indian Tale* (1811),

and Jemima Kindersley's travelogue, *Letters from the Island of Tenerife, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies* (1777).

Following diligently the track laid down by previous scholars writing about such 18th century female authors, Chatterjee finds "ambiguity" and "ambivalence" revealed in their narratives. To him their "marginalized female status" often made their reportage nuanced in a way not evident in the accounts of the male writers of the period. They were, of course, also representing India through the gaze of the colonialist, but theirs were perceptions nuanced as well by their status as people marginalised in an overwhelmingly patriarchal English society. In following this track, Chatterjee finds again and again evidence of the subversive perspectives

of these women writers, bent on expressing their reservations about the domineering attitudes of the white male rulers.

The postcolonial and feminist lenses Chatterjee deploys in his discussion of the works of the selected women writers seem to suit his analysis of the works of these "enlightenment" period British women writers, for their biases, fixations, and anxieties often come into view then. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Chatterjee starts his discussion of the postcolonial theoretical frameworks he has been influenced by with Edward Said's critique of Orientalist representations. But Chatterjee feels that he had to go beyond the Palestinian-American theorist's orbit and include notions of ambivalence and mimicry presented in Homi Bhabha's works. From women critics like Lisa Lowe and Sara Suleri, Chatterjee says he has learnt to appreciate fully the "heterogeneity of Orientalist discourse". In sum, he suggests that he is adapting a balanced theoretical perspective that enables him to go beyond the kind of binaries found in Said. From this perspective, he claims, he reads the white women writers narrating in their work things that the white male gaze had turned a blind eye to. From Mikhail Bakhtin as well Chatterjee says he has learnt to adopt a "dialogic" viewpoint in discussing critically the works of the British women writers he has focused on.

In addition to adopting postcolonial, feminist, and Bakhtinian lenses in his reading of late

18th century works by British women writers in the wake of critics like Suleri and Lowes, Chatterjee is able to enhance his discussion by contextualising them in an 18th century where enlightenment discourses had been impacting on western ideological formations. These women writers, he suggests, could take note of the unrestrained behaviour of the British colonisers of India and their rapaciousness. Chatterjee indicates that it was possible that most of the women writers he has chosen to discuss were also disturbed

by the excesses of British soldiers regarding Indian women revealed, for instance, in the proceedings of the Hastings impeachment trial, even when they sided with Hastings and opposed Burke's criticism of the British Governor-General of India. Chatterjee also believes that imbued by Enlightenment ideals, the British women authors he writes on were bent on critiquing Indian male abuses in a manner that implicitly interrogate white male mistreatments of white women in the 18th century.

Chatterjee notes too that some of his chosen British women writers of the enlightenment period depicting India in their works had been influenced by their origins outside mainstream British society. He suggests that Elizabeth Hamilton's Ulster-Scott background and Lady Morgan's Irish origins enabled them to portray English excesses in the subcontinent critically. In the case of Eliza Fay, he finds her critiquing widow burning among the Hindus as a ritual stemming from patriarchal power at least partly because she was suffering from the actions of her own husband then.

In sum, Arnab Chatterjee's work on British women writers of the late 18th century representing India is a balanced work, and one making good use of recent postcolonial musings about empire, imperialists, and feminist writings about gender and power. But I find the title of the book a bit awkward. Is the book dealing only with a "cultural encounter" and not "cultural encounters"? Also, I feel that the book could have benefited from more editing. But it does make an important contribution to the subject of cultural encounters in British India during the late 18th century because of his thorough analysis of texts worth reading by anyone interested in travel writing, the literature of colonisation and the lot of the women of the period—Indian or British—seen through postcolonial, feminist lenses.

Fakrul Alam is Bangabandhu Chair Professor, Department of History, University of Dhaka.

ESSAY

Where are Bangla literature's female detectives?

Unfortunately, early copies of most detective novels in Bangla literature, like 'Goyenda Krishna' and 'Narayani' by Adrish Bardhan, cease to exist to this day due to a noticeable lack of effort to preserve this vast corpus of literature for study.

ANIKA ZAMAN

Before I lay out my case on how females have been portrayed as detectives in Bangla literature, I would like to clarify that I am not at all an expert in this field of thriller or mystery. Detective novels have never been my cup of tea, yet I am aware of prominent detectives like Feluda, Masud Rana, Byomkesh, and Kakababu. They have reigned in the 'case-closed' genre and are celebrated throughout the entire spectrum of Bangla literature. And just as seen until very recently, male protagonists were almost always the norm in Bangla literature. Whodunnit stories aren't an exception either. So I started my very own investigation on where the other half of the demography is shying off to. Turns out, while there surely are literary pieces centred on female private investigators, the only character that made it to the mainstream attention of readers in recent times is Tuntuni from the famous detective series *Tuntuni O Chhotacchu* (2014) by Dr Mohammad Zafar Iqbal.

The series features Tuntuni, a juvenile mystery enthusiast-cum-amateur detective and her uncle, affectionately called Chhotacchu, who is a full-time professional private detective. Together the two go on to crack various cases from stolen shoes to murdered tycoons. However, the point is that even though Tuntuni is the protagonist of this thriller series, her whole persona seems to be created under the parasol of Chhotacchu being the "real detective". Hence I am still hesitant to put her in the same tier as our prior-mentioned panel of investigators.

But I still know one detective who came to the limelight and showed

off her puzzle-solving skills with full pride: *Goyenda Ginni*. This was an Indo-Bangla television soap opera that my 85-year-old grandma would religiously watch every evening. I remember catching a glimpse of one episode she was watching where the Ginni tried to detect who displaced the rotis from the kitchen. Really? While I'm fully aware that many imperial destructions root back to felonies happening in the kitchen, the premise of that TV show seems to suggest otherwise.

But where are they in the realm of Bangla literature? Turns out, female detectives have existed since the mid 20th century. It all started with *Goyenda Krishna* (1952), a young college girl who started as an amateur detective and searched for her parent's murderers for vengeance. At a time when crime fiction in Bengal was popular, during the late 19th century to early 20th century, this novel by Probhati Debi Sharashwati was the first attempt to stamp down the male prevalence in the genre.

Unfortunately, early copies of most detective novels in Bangla literature, like *Goyenda Krishna* and *Narayani* by Adrish Bardhan, cease to exist to this day due to a noticeable lack of effort to preserve this vast corpus of literature for study. Although the first detective novel in Bangla language dates back to 1892, crime fiction only became popular in Bengal after the 1970s. But if we look back to literary history, the first detective novels were made during the first nationalist movement, when the participation of intelligent, sharp-witted middle class Bengali men with strong physiques were needed. During this time, the male detectives or goyendas with heroic valour, physical dynamism, and



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

capability of decisive action became popular among the educated middle-class commoners as they took those characters as ideal men.

In addition, the influence of Western literature that paved its way into the subcontinent along with British colonisers was seen in such detective stories. Thus, hyper-masculinised books such as *Sherlock Holmes* were widely famous among men and women, who had by now become important as readers of regional literature following reform measures taken towards women's education. In the 1950s, *Goyenda Krishna* and Tapan Bandapaddhayay's *Goyenda Gargi* (1958) emerged with a college girl and a mathematics major student as protagonists respectively. Although the prominent masculine figure hindered the entrance of women in such a genre, these authors paved the way for girls who could go on adventures and endeavour against injustice. Notably, though, both of these characters start off chasing the evil as a form of vengeance due to personal loss. In the first book of

the *Goyenda Krishna* series, *Gupto Ghatok*, Krishna's parents were murdered by a pack of serial killers most of whom were avenged by Krishna herself. Most of the detectives I mentioned never sought crime-fighting as a profession, unlike most of their male counterparts who are either police investigators or work under a private agency.

During the mid 20th century, when female wordsmiths somewhat flourished with their newly published works, they were still suppressed under the dominance of male authors. Their rise in the literary world was perceived as a threat to the traditional feminine values of the Bhadracharya who were supposed to reside in the Andarmahal. For this, most novels, including *Goyenda Krishna* which was published in 1953 by Deb Shahitto Kutir, didn't get enough exposure or even enough printed copies by the publishers to be passed on later on.

One of the more well-known detective series was *Goyenda Gondalu* (1961) by Nalini Das, Upendrakishore Ray's granddaughter and Satyajit

Ray's cousin. *Goyenda Gondalu* was first published in the children's magazine *Sandesh*, also created by Upendrakishore Ray and later having Satyajit Ray as editor. However, it begs the question: if the writer wasn't related to these famous men, would she have had the same opportunity or the platform to become this popular?

I would argue that the *Mitin Maashi* series by Shuchitra Bhattacharya is probably the most-read novel with a female detective in it. Created as the stern refusal to accept analytical intelligence solely as a male attribute, Progyaparamita (known as Mitin Maashi), not only cracks mysteries but also the apparent misogynistic taunts that come along from her surrounding people. Mitin depicts the role of a 'perfect woman' narrative as a counterpart of the 'perfect man' narrative in male-centred novels.

Nonetheless, it's a shame that we lost so many potential masterpieces through the course of time and the unbound curse of unjust societal systems. Though writers like Tapan Bandapaddhayay, Adrish Bardhan, and Monoj Sen have tried to bring the female counterparts of the well-known male detectives, they still seemed to stay in the shadows of patriarchy, misogyny, and androcentrism: The Holy Trinity. The survival of these endangered characters can only be ensured if we read them, preserve them, and talk about them. They were the forerunners for lady detectives defying all odds of society; just like how *Goyenda Ginni* defied all odds to get that bowl of rotis back.

Anika Zaman is a 12th grader studying at Bishreshtha Noor Mohammad Public College. Suggest her fun cat names at zanika369@gmail.com.