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Book Reviews

The Literary Thing: History, Poetry and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere
By ROSINKA CHAUDHURI
Peter Lang, 2014, 333 pp.
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Within Anglophone postcolonial studies, no other region of South Asia has been more closely examined than the northeastern one of Bengal. In recent decades, much of this attention has been due to the work of scholars such as Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sumit Sarkar, and others affiliated with the subaltern studies movement. Rosinka Chaudhuri's work in *The Literary Thing* shares a similar regional focus, centering on the historical period of the Bengali "renaissance" (1831–1881). Where others have attended to the politics of historiography and nationalist imagination, however, *The Literary Thing* turns to poetry and literary criticism as an index of Bengal's cultural modernity.

The chapters of *The Literary Thing* are organized by author, thus focusing on figures like Bharatchandra Ray, Iswarchandra Gupta, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, Michael Madhusudan Datta, and Rabindranath Tagore. Rather than offering a linear, evolutionary history of these key figures, Chaudhuri takes a more dynamic approach by revisiting the controversial debates surrounding the poets, their works, and their peers, as well as critics, journalists, publishers, and historians. This polyphonic engagement serves well to support the book's central argument that poetry, rather than the novel, was the primary site of Bengali literary modernism, and more importantly, the crucible of a vibrant and highly urban public sphere throughout nineteenth-century Bengal.

According to Chaudhuri, one of the key debates was over the definition of Bengali literature, particularly in terms of canonicity and genre conventions. Unsurprisingly, much of the discourse surrounding the construction of the modern Bengali canon was with regard to which works were to be excluded from it. For example, the poems of Bharatchandra, a late eighteenth-century court poet, were excised from the new tradition because their content was supposedly crude and racy, but also because they employed forms such as the *kabi-gan* and *akhyan*, which were associated with the subaltern classes. A similar critique is made against Iswarchandra on the grounds he was a vernacular *kabi* (Bengali for poet), rather than a true poet worthy of a place in the Anglophone corpus (79).

These cases of canon formation-through-marginalization were significant for reasons that went beyond the legacies of the aforementioned poets; rather, the devaluation of these "low" poets marked the construction of a "high" culture. Although the distinction of the latter was hardly a new one for Bengali culture, the uniqueness of such articulations in nineteenth-century Bengal was that they were

predicated on the values of English literary tastes. The Englishness of Bengali poetry is highlighted in Chaudhuri's discussions of Rangalal and the iconic Madhusudan, both of whom were products of colonial education as well as members of the native elite in British India. Madhusudan introduced sonnet forms and Miltonic blank verse into Bengali poetry; he also distinguished himself as the "first free user of the semicolon in Bengali poetry" (134). In addition to similar experiments, Rangalal drew on English literary theory in order to *purify* and therefore modernize Bengali literary criticism.

The Literary Thing is a rare work of research that speaks to two different audiences: scholars in Bengali cultural studies and Anglophone postcolonial studies. Its relationship to the former is ironic, given that the language of this study is not the same as the language of the literary discourse at hand. Similarly, the unfamiliarity of the key figures and texts discussed here may pose a challenge to the wider audience of Anglophone postcolonial readers. Yet, such challenges succeed in expanding and intersecting the fields of both Bengali and postcolonial studies. One of the most striking insights of Chaudhuri's work is that the culture-and-theory wars of recent memory in North American universities had an analogue almost a hundred years earlier in colonial India. This work also concludes with a novel reading of Tagore, reintroducing him as neither a romantic nor a modernist, but an "avant-garde" Bengali poet (322).

It would be foolish to read *The Literary Thing* as a summative statement on nineteenth-century literary and public culture across the subcontinent. Instead, this work should be viewed as a much-needed stimulus for future investigations into parallel modernist movements within other linguistic contexts of early modern South Asia.

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In the Name of the Mother: Reflections on Writers & Empire
By NGŨGĨ WA THIONG'O
James Currey, 2013, 146 pp.
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In his latest collection of critical essays, novelist, dramatist, and literary critic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o explores a selection of African and Caribbean texts, focusing on their political function and their literary merits. Though the choice of texts is disparate, the collection is unified by each essay's consideration of the continuing effects of colonialism in post-colonial (or neocolonial) states and the means by which literature serves a social and political function through what Ngũgĩ refers to as "the aesthetic of resistance."

That the collection is the end result of a project that began many years ago is evident in the choice of texts discussed, which range in publication date from the 1950s to the 1980s (with a brief discussion of film from the early 1990s). Readers hoping for a consideration of more contemporary works and their relation to the current state of affairs in the various locales and literary milieus that Ngũgĩ (accents are missing) explores will not find it in this collection which, nevertheless, offers a