

## Unfolding the Baroque, Scaffolding the Postcolonial: Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetics Md. Rezaul Haque

**Paul Sharrad, *Postcolonial Literary History and Indian English Fiction* (Cambria Press, 2008)**

Postcolonial literatures are not so new as they are so often presumed to be. Without exception, they anticipated as well as contributed to the formation of anti-colonial nationalist movements that finally brought about the disintegration of the European colonies the world over. It is, in fact, the prefix 'post' in the term 'postcolonial' that is responsible for upsetting the chronology, making postcolonial literatures appear to have followed rather than preceded the dissolution of colonialism.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, postcolonial criticism is a comparatively new critical practice, coming into prominence in the late 1970s. Edward W. Said is famously credited with having initiated the trend in 1978 with the publication of his ground-breaking work *Orientalism*.<sup>2</sup> However, what is amazing about postcolonial criticism today is the array of analytical frameworks it has been able to evolve in so short a time. *Postcolonial Literary History and Indian English Fiction* (2008) by Paul Sharrad is yet another attempt to construct a critical framework for the analysis of postcolonial literatures. As can be gathered from the second half of the title, Sharrad applies his theoretical apparatus to Indian fiction in English to see how effectively it works in relation to that fiction. In addition to exploring 'theoretical questions about how postcolonial literary history might be rethought against ideas of History as a dominant epistemology,' the book also investigates 'the place of Indian English fiction in the national literary story' and examines 'the strategies of "postcolonial" texts in English in their tussle to both acknowledge and break from the cultural traditions attending the use of a European and colonial language' (1-2).

The quotation above has three key words, neatly pointing to the kind of critical model Sharrad is going to construct: 'rethinking,' 'History,' and 'tussle.' The 'tussle' in question is between (European/Western) 'History' (and all it stands for) and the multiple challenges mounted by the emergent postcolonial literatures to its on-going hegemony. The proposed 'rethinking' will enable a reading of postcolonial literatures in which the privileged terms in the binaries informing the European/Western conception of History are not privileged. Such concepts as chronology, progress, and reason are to be put aside, for they are the strongholds

<sup>1</sup> A personal anecdote may help further clarify my point here. In a syllabus committee meeting in the Department of English of a Bangladeshi public university, I had once proposed *Nil Darpan* (1860), a play in Bengali by Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-73) on the exploitation of Bengal peasants at the hands of the indigo planters (mostly Anglo-Indians), to be put on the postcolonial literatures course the Department was offering at the time. One of my young colleagues objected on the grounds that the play was written almost a century before India and Pakistan achieved political independence in 1947. *Nil Darpan*, according to my young colleague, was *colonial* rather than postcolonial. The term 'postcolonial' remains at the centre of an ongoing debate. See Ann McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Postcolonialism",' *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 84-98.

<sup>2</sup> Said has come to be seen as one of the founding figures of colonial discourse analysis. Some scholars consider the Saidian emphasis on textuality as depoliticising the actual dynamics of colonialism/imperialism. But the irony is that Said was ever so careful to bring text and context together. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1983) 4, for example, he expressed his critical credo in unambiguous terms: 'My position is that texts are ... a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.'

Unfolding the Baroque, Scaffolding the Postcolonial: Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetics: Review Essay.  
Md. Rezaul Haque.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

of European/Western (cultural/political) supremacy on the one hand and work to disempower postcolonial cultures/nations on the other. A possible 'model' is, therefore, one that works with 'a generic affinity rather than a clear chronology' (5). Sharrad is confident that such a model will 'empower postcolonial newness and difference' which is commonly explained away with recourse to 'global hybridity' (16).

Sharrad is quite explicit in acknowledging his conceptual indebtedness to postcolonial/postmodern/poststructuralist theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, Jacques Derrida and R. Radhakrishnan. While he finds Bhabha's 'third space,' Derrida's '*tain*' (20), and Radhakrishnan's 'axiological temporalities' (9) all capable of 'negotiating newness' (20), it is however Gilles Deleuze who provides Sharrad with the basic theoretical tool with which he can begin reading as well as theorising about postcolonial literature in general and its Indian incarnation in particular, without succumbing to 'the tyranny of History' (20).

The tool in question is 'the fold' as theorised by Deleuze in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. How does the fold liberate one from History? Or, more accurately, how does the fold itself manage not to be 'handcuffed to History'? Before an answer is attempted, it is important to situate the Baroque in its historical context. Scholars term the (European) seventeenth century as the Baroque age. The epoch is thus suspended between the Renaissance and the neoclassical era, between the worlds of Shakespeare and Pope, between the royal court and the parliament house.<sup>3</sup> In all its manifestations, the Baroque is therefore marked by tension.<sup>4</sup> Yet the tension is finally resolved, because everywhere there is a suggestion that though things are falling apart, the centre can hold.<sup>5</sup> The reassuring centre is 'the imperial frame of orthodox Catholic Europe' (57).

Being a period of/in transition, the Baroque allows binaries and boundaries to flourish but hesitates to let them congeal so as to stop all manner of correspondence between the opposing camps. It is during the Enlightenment that the dominant European episteme comes to see life and reality in terms of absolute binaries, with one of the two view(er)s (the European Self) privileged over the (non-European) Other. The Baroque fold cannot be folded into History because it *can* dispense with the binarism undergirding the Enlightenment episteme: arrival/origin, depth/surface, finite/infinite, inside/outside, matter/mind, other/self, and so on. With the disappearance of these fond enlightened binaries, boundaries (of all sorts) begin to crumble down: chronology becomes confused, genres get mixed up, language proliferates into *lects*, and the neat Euclidian space loses its compartmental tidiness. More importantly, being becomes becoming. All these departures bring a radically different system of (literary) valuation into play.

Deleuze revisits the Baroque and Leibniz 'not so much to destabilise, and not just to relativise, but radically to dynamise reading, writing, and social relations, everything as an endless process of folding and unfolding' (44). Sharrad turns to the Baroque fold via Deleuze. Thus Leibniz, Deleuze and Sharrad fold into one another. However, for Baroque fold to

---

<sup>3</sup> On the antagonistic relationship between the Baroque and the Enlightenment, see Rémy G. Saisselin, *The Enlightenment Against the Baroque: Economics and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> One might take the famous soliloquy in *Hamlet* (Act 3, Scene 1) beginning with 'To be, or not to be – that is the question' as announcing the advent of the Baroque on the one hand and the passing of the confident humanism of the Renaissance on the other.

<sup>5</sup> Possibly the best example of such a resolution is *Measure for Measure*, one of the so-called 'problem plays' by Shakespeare.

become postcolonial fold, Sharrad argues, it has to be folded into the interiority of (post)colonial politics so that it can unfold itself into postcolonial history:

However, sharing some elements does not mean identity. Sealy and Rushdie may display the many folds of baroque form and style, but they do not work out of a strictly Baroque sensibility. They may inherit certain aspects of the high era of imperialist expansion, but they write in the cause of decolonising the minds of both centre and margin – of destroying the binary itself by triangulating the ground between opposing camps (Sealy), by confusing the troops about which ground they are on anyway (Rushdie, in the Sundarbans section of *Midnight's Children*). (48-49)

The extract precisely articulates the difference between the Baroque fold/aesthetics and the postcolonial one and points to the dynamics that can transform the former into the latter. The Baroque fold (which is always already open to difference and diversity) has to be *re*-folded (at least once) to be applicable to a postcolonial context. The re-folding demands joining aesthetics with politics, countering History with history and, in the particular case of India, aligning Indian literature in English with those in the vernaculars. The politically modified relevance of the Baroque fold to the postcolonial setting underlines the inability of the other folds (if they are folds at all, especially those deriving from the Enlightenment that replaced folds with binaries) to do justice to postcolonial literatures which are predicated not upon identity but upon difference.

The postcolonial fold suspects the Arnoldian/Leavisite move to divorce literary-cultural criticism from consideration of the manifold factors that shape literary-cultural works. Arnold seeks to judge works of literature by what he calls the 'touchstone' method. The new work is evaluated against the so-called classics. The value of the *late* comer is proportionate not to its difference from, but to its conformity to, the precursor text. It is not hard to speculate what value the Arnoldian kind of critical practice would ultimately assign to works coming out of a postcolonial milieu. Applying the postcolonial fold in chapters 1 and 2, Sharrad shows how Thomas Carlyle, G.V. Desani, Salman Rushdie and I. Alan Sealy – writers marked by multiple differences – share both thematic concerns and stylistic features that one can only hope to explain in terms of intertextuality.<sup>6</sup> The concept of the precursor (from Carlyle to Desani to Rushdie to Sealy) influencing the successor will find itself bowled over before such a strange web of connections. The grouping is premised on the assumption that Carlyle, a Scot from the margin, must have found himself in the same ambivalent relationship with the imperial centre as the other three.

In the next chapter, Sharrad discusses diasporic narratives by such writers as Bharati Mukherjee (*Wife*), Vikram Seth (*The Golden Gate*), Amitav Ghosh (*The Circle of Reason*) and even Anita Desai (*Bye Bye Blackbird*). The hyphenated identity of the diasporic subject is a site open to ceaseless invasion: opposing forces perpetually pulling it in contrary directions, generating in the process a sense of apprehension and insecurity. However, the fluidity of the diasporic identity works to deconstruct the solid colonial/national binary that pits 'insider' against 'outsider' on the one hand and 'unsettles the stable national space' that goes with 'ideals of national unity' on the other (72, 73).

---

<sup>6</sup> Altogether there are twelve chapters in the book, including an introduction and a conclusion.

The complexities and tensions of diasporic experience (in *Desirable Daughters*, *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World* and *Wife* by Mukherjee) and its shifting contours across generations (in *Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri) are more fully treated in chapter 9. Of the two (be)holders of the diaspora, it is Mukherjee who delineates the precarious position of the migrant woman in the diaspora much more forcefully than Lahiri in that by the time the latter comes to engage with the 'diasporic shuttling' it 'has become, in itself, a ritual part of modern life' (193).

If diasporic narratives form a fold in the cloth of Indian literature, narratives invaded by ghosts (Namita Gokhale's *The Book of Shadows*) and by 'spirits of place' (Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*) form another (75). Chapter 4 offers a reading of these two texts, using the lens of postcolonial baroque. The formal dictates of the realist novel, one of the most formidable legacies of the Enlightenment, are subverted when contrary temporalities (cyclic and linear), different modes of ontology (embodied and disembodied) and divergent worldviews (colonising and colonised) intersect in these texts. These departures and discrepancies are best accounted for by the postcolonial fold as it works with an awareness of the historico-cultural context out of which such *anomalous* works emerge.

Perhaps the most impressive chapter in the book is chapter 5. Here the postcolonial fold is given a 'sociological' twist to explain the recurrence of the incest motif in Indian English fiction from Raja Rao (*The Serpent and the Rope*) to Raj Kamal Jha (*The Blue Bedspread*). Sharrad reads incest less as a site of transgressive energy than as a zone of liminality, projecting the anxieties and apprehensions of the minority communities in Indian, including the community of Indian writers in English, whether based at home or abroad, who are always already in a double bind, both attached to and detached from the motherland. A minority community such as the Syrian Christians in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy closes in upon itself just as a diaspora does in another context. The fear is the fear of being swamped by the greater national community, while the worry derives from the painful inability to become part of the nation in a meaningful way.

Chapters 6, 10 and 11 can be read together as forming yet another fold. They focus on texts that enact the small struggles of history against History. Another common element in all the texts dealt with in these chapters is the analysis of the textual strategies each deploys to enable history 'survive being swallowed into the dark maw of History, even if the latter will never go away or relinquish its grasp on power' (133). In *The God of Small Things*, discussed in chapter 6, the strategy is that of 'dispersive citation' as developed by Helen Tiffin in her essay 'The Body in the Library' (118). Roy cites both European and Indian classics such as *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Heart of Darkness* and *Kathakali* dance in her text not so much to pay homage to them as to disperse the cultural/textual authority they tend to exert across continents and generations. Citation is thus both recitation/re-citation in Roy, 'at once a confession of complicity and a sign of defiance' (118).

In chapters 10 and 11, Sharrad turns to what one may safely call Indian historical metafiction in English. The label itself sheds light on the strategy to be found being employed in such texts as *Looking through Glass* by Mukul Kesavan, *The Ground beneath Her Feet* by Rushdie, *The Calcutta Chromosome* by Ghosh and *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* by Vikram Chandra. The postcolonial fold figured in the trope of 'looking through glass' in these diverse texts works to point to the constructedness of all discursive/representational practice, be it history or literature: the observer is part of what is being observed, with the 'glass' further

complicating the process of observation and its textual outcome. By folding the producer of meaning and meaning itself around each other, *Midnight's Children* and *Grandchildren* undermine the fearsome authority of historical/universal truths and thus pave the way for the emergence of alternative/contingent truths.

Sharrad further demonstrates the effectiveness of his critical model in chapter 7. With a view to showing how the postcolonial fold works more efficiently with the postcolonial text than either 'postcolonial allegory' proposed by Stephen Slemon or 'language as metonymy in the postcolonial text' theorised by Bill Ashcroft, he turns to those narratives of the (Indian) nation that resist constructing the 'imagined' community of the nation as family, '[o]ne of the consistent metaphors of nation' (142).<sup>7</sup> Such metonymic attempts as the ones made by Chandra (*Red Earth and Pouring Rain*), Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*), Sealy (*The Trotter-Nama*), and Shashi Tharoor (*Riot*) to dislodge the trope of nation as family in (re-)imagining the Indian nation deserve commendation in that they envision 'nation as a loose collectivity of multiple class/religious/ethnic/caste groups' – 'a vision that challenges closed "filiative" fundamentalist ideals of the nation as one family' (152). These various metonymic 'national' texts, Sharrad contends, are best explained by the postcolonial fold for '[i]t allows the kind of affiliative "family" (or series) that the postcolonial historical novel seems to work with, without forcing on it a filiative uniformity – and in this, supplies a metaphor of metonymic postcolonial nationhood not bound by metaphoric ahistorical myths of original [*sic*] and identity' (157).

*Postcolonial Literary History and Indian English Fiction* is an impressive study of Indian fiction in English, read with sensitivity to its complex socio-cultural background. However, it has its deficiencies. First, by presuming a little too much of prior knowledge on the part of the reader of both the theory and literature it deals with, it speaks to the adept rather than the initiate. Secondly, a work otherwise so conscious of the importance of contextualisation in literary-critical practice should ideally have at least a broad overview of the historical circumstances out of which the Baroque (fold) emerged in seventeenth-century Europe. Finally, in some chapters the critical fold loses its critical rigour and tends to lapse into a kind of epic simile merely enabling an intricate fold of comparisons, while in some others the fold folds itself up and is to be seen nowhere.<sup>8</sup> Despite these limitations, it has to be acknowledged that Sharrad has done postcolonial literatures in general and Indian English writing in particular a notable service by way of folding theory and criticism around each other on the one hand and unfolding text into context on the other.

---

<sup>7</sup> The reference is to Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> An obvious example is chapter 8 in which Sharrad discusses Ranga Rao's *The River Is Three-Quarters Full* (2001) and Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* (1994) – two south-folding texts that one is hard put to fold together.