

REVIEW

Animesh Mohapatra

Rosinka Chaudhuri. (2014). *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

In the last few decades much critical attention has been paid to the two stalwarts of modern Bengali literature: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore. Though they deserve all the scholarly attention and more, it has come at the expense of ignoring several other, as Rosinka Chaudhuri modestly puts it, 'minor' poets. But when we go through the chapters that revolve around such writers as Iswarchandra Gupta, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, Nabinchandra Sen, et al, we realise that these poets were anything but minor, and in fact were pioneers in redefining 'literature'. If at all they appear 'minor' to us—to readers not-so-familiar with Bengali literary culture—it is because of the lack of scholarship on their work, especially in the English-language academic space. Rosinka Chaudhuri's *The Literary Thing: History, Poetry and the Making of a Modern Cultural Sphere* is a welcome intervention to fill that void.

Focussing on the transitions in literary production and circulation in nineteenth century Bengal (the period popularly known as the Bengal Renaissance), Chaudhuri, in the course of her seven chapters, traverses yet another field that has been neglected in recent decades: poetry. Countering the claims of prominent literary critics and political thinkers such as, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, etc., Chaudhuri contends that "the 'modern' and 'national' are not naturally contiguous terms" and that the 'regional public' and 'local controversies' substantially contributed to the formation of literary and political modernity. Thus she deliberately keeps the scope of her book outside the overworked parameters of the nation and the novel, and attempts to bring to the forefront regional discussions concerning poetry. She argues that the concepts '*sāhitya*' and '*kabi*' were reformulated and

reinvented during this period to acquire their present-day meaning. Such processes led to the construction of categories such as 'high' and 'low' within the literary field and there was significant reshuffling in the literary canon.

The canonicity of several poets who were earlier considered major, came to be questioned for the components that earlier made a piece of writing 'literary' underwent significant upheaval. One of the first poets whose credentials were questioned was the author of *Vidyāsundar*, Bharatchandra Ray. If on the one hand Iswarchandra Gupta attempted to rescue the 'forgotten' poetry of Bharatchandra, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay labelled such writing as "immodest, mean body of poetry." However, such dismissal of early-modern poetry from practitioners of modern poetry could not always be seamless as this meant a repudiation of the 'national' literary heritage. Let us take, for instance, a chapter entitled "Another Wonder of the Nineteenth Century": Rangalal Bandyopadhyay (1827-1887)," a close and contextual reading of two key documents: first, the author's Preface to *Padminī upākhyān* (1858), and then, a 1852 pamphlet (based on a lecture delivered at the Bethune Society) translated in English as "An Essay on the Subject of Bengali Poetry". The reading of these two documents is consonant with Chaudhuri's intent to study "the detail or the moment in time rather than on the march of history" (xix). In the "Preface," Bandyopadhyay advocates a decisive break with the past towards a future that is simultaneously "more Indian and more English". In the same manifesto, he stresses the need to discard existing mythical content and encourages 'modern, historical material' as subject matter for new poetry. In his zeal to reform poetry, he also condemns the "vulgarity of the Bengali Indigenous inheritance". However, in the pamphlet mentioned earlier, he ardently defends Bengali poetry and language in the presence of "English-educated babus," and emphasises the coevality of Bengali poetry with that in English. Further, he presents a genealogy of Bengali poets and in the process participates in canon formation. Chaudhuri does not attempt to resolve the apparently oppositional viewpoints but rather places the documents in their context and highlights the ambivalence that gripped the contemporary intelligentsia.

In the same vein, in the introductory chapter aptly captioned "Disjunctions, Conjunctions," she reexamines two oppositional yet contiguous literary traditions (British contributions as well as indigenous inheritances) to demonstrate that modern Bengali literature is premised on a condition of multilingualism. Such multilingualism emerged not just from the writers' familiarity with European literary tradition (both classical and modern) but also

from their involvement in neighbouring literary spheres. Similarly, the chapter that discusses the work of Iswarchandra Gupta shows how the reception of the poet in Bengali literary criticism has at best been ambivalent, due to the fusion of 'country' style and 'city' content in his poems.

The chapter "History in Poetry" analyses Akshaykumar Maitreya's questioning of the representation of history in Nabinchandra Sen's epic poem *Palāśir Yuddha* [The Battle of Palashi] and its relation to truth. In the process of analysing this poetics *versus* historiography debate, Chaudhuri also provides her readers with a detailed account of history as a discipline in Bengal, from Romesh Chunder Dutt through Jadunath Sarkar to Ranjit Guha. She further demonstrates that the misgivings about rationalist historiography one finds in late twentieth century in the works of Hayden White and Michel de Certeau, had taken place in late nineteenth century Bengal, when Indian historiography in the Western sense of the term was still in a nascent stage. In a different section she examines the politics of the exclusion of *Palāśir Yuddha* from school textbooks and then the changes the author incorporated in order to gain acceptability.

The book, then, is as much about contemporary debates concerning literature and formation of the literary canon as it is about their subsequent reception. In spite of the author's best attempts (taking the help of highly sophisticated theorists who routinely celebrate fragments and ruptures) to convince the readers of the lack of a structure, one still pines for a stated overarching narrative framework. However, if one looks at the authors and issues closely enough, one could clearly sense a linear chronological arrangement. The multitude of references to recent theoretical formulations, while lending density to the book, can divert the attention of the reader from the narrative and may at times seem redundant. The amount of fresh material that the author unpacks can be a little intimidating for a reader who is unfamiliar with the Bengali literary tradition; but the same element can be very enriching for someone who is even partially familiar with it. A reader familiar with other literary cultures of the Indian subcontinent would positively find resemblances and contrast with the debates and controversies played out in the Bengali public sphere. A reader interested in the mini-narratives of India's literary history would find this alternative account of 'Bengal Renaissance' useful and would hope for scholarly and archival works of similar nature from other languages of India in order to be able to arrive at a composite understanding of the multilingual literary history and variegated political modernity of India.