

of reception theory, is not always made clear. While the specific readings themselves are often highly illuminating, the book's intellectual relationship to the critical methods of comparative literature and New Criticism, which traditionally granted texts a chameleonic power to adapt themselves to altered social circumstances, seems at times a little too opaque.

The nine chapters of *Through Other Continents* are all quite short, and the book might be said to work as brilliant miniaturist criticism, interweaving alternative cultural strands with each other in provocative and evocative ways. Reading *Through Other Continents* is like watching a radically updated version of a Mozart opera, and indeed Dimock might be described as the Peter Sellars of the American critical world, following as she does in the footsteps of the iconoclastic director who has lent much-needed urgency to famous operas by relocating them in contemporary settings. Like Sellars, Dimock is an acknowledged pioneer in her field, but, for her as for him, the weightiest and most enduring work may be yet to come.

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***Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture.* By Aamir R. Mufti. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. xiii + 325 pp.**

***Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language.* By Srinivas Aravamudan. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006. xiii + 330 pp.**

Graduate students in postcolonial studies, understandably anxious to know whether that area will still exist and be recognizable as such by the time they hit the job market, will certainly be among the many readers eager to reflect on these two fine and boldly innovative books. Each can be said to "redirect the field," as the language of tenure reviews might say, though each also reorganizes familiar materials so radically that one cannot be sure that they really belong to the field, after all, or are part of some other and perhaps emergent category. Each book hints at how our biggest stories might be retold, especially the story of secular modernity.

Aamir R. Mufti dates the inception of his project from the commu-

nal violence that expressed itself in the destruction of the Babri Mosque in December 1992 and afterward. His focus is the relationship between Hindus and Muslims. At one level *Enlightenment in the Colony* can be said to “blame” European liberalism, which bequeathed to India the model of political secularism that failed so dramatically in 1992. Yet Mufti also acknowledges an impulse to “nudge” postcolonialists “away from an undialectical rejection of the Enlightenment as colonial domination” (5), away from “the banality of the anti-secularist gesture” (5). His “secularist critique of modern secularism” (13) amounts to a qualified defense of secularism that both includes and exceeds a defense of the imperiled legacy of his teacher Edward W. Said, champion of “secular criticism.”

In its first hundred pages the book offers rich readings of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise*, George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, and various texts in between to demonstrate that European liberalism could deal with the “apartness of the Jews” only by offering them a choice between Jewishness, which entailed continuing pariah status, and universal citizenship, which entailed assimilation, or else their disappearance as Jews. The impossibility of this choice signaled a crisis for the liberal state. The eventual creation of a Jewish state—“assimilating into a Europe of nations *as a nation*” (109)—did not so much solve this problem as transport it, unsolved, into a non-European space opened up by European imperialism. This event is Mufti’s segue to the Muslims of India and the problem they posed first to the British, then to the majority Hindu state: “This manner of settling the Jewish Question is thus *the first instance historically* of those modes of thinking that seek resolution of the minority crisis of the (majoritarian) nation-state through a *partition of society*, modes of thinking that have become the norm” (110). The remainder of the book works out the analogy and, in even denser detail, the failure of secularism to make Indian Muslims an offer more acceptable than minority status. Since minority status has resulted in society’s “violent reorganization: breakdown of communities, massacres and transfer of populations” (175), the problem is not a small one.

Why has minority status worked out so badly? Mufti argues that in the guise of offering respect and protection for existing lines of religious identity, the secular nation in fact produces and inflames these lines where they did not exist. It was the British who treated Muslims as “an alien presence” (144), provoking a movement to purge the common language of northern India—what they called “Hindustani,” though, as Mufti notes, no native speakers called it by this name: “of all the ‘foreign’ (that is, Persio-Arabic) influence of the centuries—a classic linguistic project of modern nationalisms” (145). Thus the vernacular of northern India, formerly shared between Muslims and Hindus, was broken down into “Hindi” and “Urdu,” the latter coming to be seen as the distinctive possession not just of a minority but of a *religious* minority. The so-called clash of civilizations, on which

this book could be seen as a critical commentary, took place between religious identities that came into being only with the modern state.

So what existed before? What “Muslim” identity would a wiser sovereign or a different form of sovereignty have dealt with otherwise? The answer, movingly teased out of a number of authors, is a hidden heritage of South Asian cosmopolitanism. The great Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz told his readers and audiences that

the cultural prehistory of Pakistan, a state created in the name of the cultural distinctness of Indian Muslims . . . is not distinguishable from that of post-Partition India. All Muslim countries, Faiz points out, trace their history to some pre-Islamic culture: Egypt to Pharaonic times, Iraq to Babylon, even Arabia to the so-called *jahiliyya* (Age of Ignorance). But if pre-Islamic, Indic culture is also our own, does that not negate the very basis of the demand for Pakistan? (233)

It is this cosmopolitan prehistory of South Asian Islam that enables Mufti to finish the analogy with the Jews, or “what the Boyarins [Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, scholars of Jewish philosophy and identity] call the diasporic and exilic ‘ground of Jewish identity’—and its relationship to secularism and critique” (7). To put it more bluntly: for Mufti, non-Zionist Jewishness *is* secularism and critique. Considered as perpetual exile from the tempting but toxic comforts of the nation-state, Jewish identity becomes a universal paradigm, magically resolving the contradictions between religion and secularism, ethnic particularism and self-problematizing enlightenment universalism. However ironically, the Jews thus become the living embodiment of Said’s ideal homelessness. This sounds a bit too good to be true. But I will not be the one to accuse Mufti of philo-Semitism. Among the collateral advantages of this argument are its displacement of conflicts over religious belief, which are converted into a somewhat more tractable question of politics, and its invitation to test the nostalgic sketchiness of prenational identity against such social realities as class.

Mufti has little to say on this question about the Jews (who are burdened with no social substance other than Zionism and adherence to the Law), but he says more about the Muslims. If Muslims were not in fact merely backward, as British and then Hindu modernizers saw them, why did they too resist the offer of uniform secular citizenship? The uniform status of citizen was not attractive, Mufti suggests, to elites “who saw themselves instead as the descendants of the pre-British imperial elite” (139). For these elites, memories of imperial greatness were inseparable from class privilege; a drab modern equality threatened both. Mufti is clearly not sympathetic to the “infamous” rhetoric used by the most “characteristic voice” of this *ashraf* class, Syed Ahmed Khan, in whom “even the modest demands” of India’s secular Congress Party for greater equality of access to jobs were “treated as

extreme perversions that would overturn the natural hierarchy and order of Indian society” (112). Mufti does not quite dot the i’s or cross the t’s, but the idea is clear that the demand for Muslim sovereignty was fueled by a class order that he sees as both noble and reactionary. Its melancholy cosmopolitanism didn’t come cheap.

Srinivas Aravamudan’s subject is religious cosmopolitanism: modern refashionings of South Asian religion that lend themselves to anticolonial resistance, commercial export, the creation of transnational celebrities, and other more inscrutable purposes. Some of his authors are canonical (Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rudyard Kipling, James Joyce, G. V. Desani, Salman Rushdie), but many are outrageously lacking in literary or intellectual merit (Madame Blavatsky, Deepak Chopra), and his book struggles both to demonstrate the value of attention to the latter authors and to show that both they and the former ones properly belong to the shared category that the book wants us to value as such, “Guru English.” This double case is not explicitly elaborated, but its core, I think, is the putative pleasure of reverse colonization. The term *theosophistries*, whereby Aravamudan punningly describes (and also offers an instance of) the linguistic irreverence he finds in Guru English, refers to linguistic manifestations of successful Indian cultural influence on the West. We are asked to value these manifestations on the basis of that influence alone, even if (as the term suggests) they may indeed be mere sophistry. So Indian followers of Madame Blavatsky could feel some satisfaction in being told that they were “spiritually superior to their imperial masters” (110); Perhaps they were. There is no questioning here of Madame Blavatsky’s appropriateness as a spiritual yardstick. Aravamudan is an excellent and amusing guide through the thickets of “theosophical mumbo jumbo” (121). The stuff may be drivel, he seems to suggest, but if the foreigners were dumb enough to lap it up, the joke was still on them. Yet he also suggests that punning and spirituality take a similar distance from, or similar liberties with, everyday sentences and ordinary rationality. Perhaps literature itself, he hints, is a form of spiritualism (122).

But is this literature? Many of these texts are close to unreadable. There is a lot of standard nationalist blather (India too as a city on a hill), pathological self-inflation (Protap Chunder Mozoomdar in 1883: “Today I am a celebrated man in America. This change is in a little over one month. Every one pays his homage to me” [53]), and sheer insanity: levitation, making the blind see, the remote repulsion of mosquitoes. Aravamudan has too fine an ear to ask his reader to listen to the prose itself at any length. He makes his point by viewing his writers from a certain distance and drawing a frame around them that urges a more generous evaluation. Nevertheless, he quotes the racist lampoon in *Punch* about the 1870 visit of Keshub Chunder Sen, when Keshub was received by Queen Victoria, in its entirety (it ends with

“So come to tea and muffins then / With BABOO KESHUB CHUNDER SEN”). Rhetorically, this is a delicate game. Are Western readers being warned that disrespect for Keshub’s religious message will be taken as akin to the racism of *Punch*? Or are they being indulged in guilty pleasures? The citations that are interesting enough to stop the eye from skipping are usually examples of mockery, like Bankim on the “babu”: “Like *Vishnu* they will be continually recumbent. Like *Vishnu* they too, will have ten incarnations—namely, clerk, tutor, Brahmo, commercial agent” (68).

In his chapter on Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, Aravamudan seeks, he says, to demonstrate the novel’s “unique value” (185). The reading that follows makes an ingenious and I think original case that the secularism of many of Rushdie’s defenders is in fact analyzed and undone in the novel. But this strenuous sort of “value” is much harder to show in the nonliterary texts that *Guru English* largely takes up. Attributing cosmopolitanism to them comes nowhere near making the case. In the last chapter, which brings us to the commercial New Age celebrities of recent years, this value question becomes acute. Aravamudan writes: “What might seem on occasion to be a frivolous counterculture of free-floating migrancy and diasporic delight can also, at other moments, integrate itself seamlessly with new forms of capitalist exploitation and still elsewhere associate itself with alternative explorations of critical agency and social transformation” (220). There is a lot here about capitalism, including Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh’s ninety-three Rolls-Royces and his slogan “Moses Invests. Jesus Saves. Bhagwan Spends” (254). There is not much evidence of critical agency or social transformation. As for “diasporic delight,” Benedict Anderson’s much darker analysis of the role of modern Hinduism in diasporic politics is mentioned only to be ignored (221). A Derridean appreciation of “excess” (220) cannot be expected to pick up the evaluative slack unless it is taken as a negative theology. That is, I am not sure that these texts can assume their intended value unless the reader is prepared to credit their very existence as a welcome affront to secular reason.

Talking about the “confusion of authentic Celticness and archaic Indianness” in *Ulysses*, as when Buck Mulligan “asks Stephen sarcastically, ‘Can you recall, brother, is mother Grogan’s tea and water pot spoken of in the Mabinogion or is it in the Upanishads?’” (125), Aravamudan argues that “there is a religious theme at the heart of Joyce’s aesthetic enterprise” (117). Is there? Later, in “Circe,” the Irish god of the sea utters “Hindu mystical phrases,” proclaiming, “I am the dreamery creamery butter!” (124). This passage combines, we are told, “the dairy cooperativism of Irish boycotts with the Hindu practice of pouring oblations of clarified butter into the sacrificial fire” (124). Well, all right. Humor need not be irreconcilable with theological seriousness. But is there such seriousness here? Or in “talafana, alavatar, hatakalda, wataklatsat,” Joyce’s high mystic version of “domestic

creature comforts: telephone, elevator, hot-and-cold (running water), and water closet” (123)? Yes, the materials are religious. But the enterprise itself seems resolutely secular.

Aravamudan has few kind words for secularism. He notes emphatically the danger that secularism in its aggressive forms may come to parody its opponent by literally putting its faith in reason. Yet as a security against this danger, he cites Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s practice of deconstruction, which seeks to “find the secular that is not a *secularism*” (19). The formula resembles Mufti’s in accepting some version of the secular as a desideratum. And like Mufti’s, Aravamudan’s story assembles an impressive archive of evidence that secularization is not just a European import but something that was happening within Hinduism and perhaps would have been happening (though it is impossible to know) even without the pressures of European colonialism. Following a number of attempted syntheses between religion and science, not all of them comic, is one of many payoffs of Aravamudan’s rich and eloquent work. Many of us needed to be told that the Bhagavagita did not stand out from among the many sacred Hindu texts until it was “decontextualized from its precise location as one of the books of the epic *Mahabharata*” and “elevated to extraordinary status by neo-Hindu modernity” (153). Mufti’s and Aravamudan’s books both furnish powerful evidence of what might be called indigenous secularism. Both do something to nudge postcolonial studies away from what Mufti calls “the banality of the anti-secularist gesture.”

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