

Beyond Alterity: The English and Otherness in India

a review by Vinay Lal of

Sara Suleri. *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Pp. ix+230.

It is with a frontal assault that Sara Suleri, who established her reputation a few years ago as a formidable writer of English and a major voice in the literature of the South Asian diaspora with a finely nuanced memoir entitled *Meatless Days*, begins her new study of "English India", a work that she locates "within the discourse of colonial cultural studies" while questioning some of the assumptions which have governed that discursive field. Suleri argues that the study of colonial discourse has been too bound to the idea of otherness, to the binarism of East and West, female and male, colonized and colonizer, to allow the decentring of master-narratives to which it aspires, and which has been so critical for the arguments now associated with postmodernism and postcoloniality. No doubt the idea of alterity was indispensable to the formulation of a critique of the ideology and epistemological imperatives of the colonizer, and as Suleri would hardly deny, the brunt of historical and literary scholarship before the advent of "colonial cultural studies" did not have the political edge that most sensitive readings of colonialism are able to furnish today. Nonetheless, the binarism in the study of colonial discourse has obfuscated the "necessary intimacies that obtain[ed] between ruler and ruled", which created a "counter-culture not always explicable in terms of an allegory of otherness", much as it has occluded an awareness of the fact that "colonial cultural studies" is beset by its own binarisms, such as "the assignation of 'cultures' to colonialism; of 'nation' to postcolonialism" (pp. 3, 7). Suleri maintains that "to interpret the configurations of colonialism in the idiom of such ineluctable divisions" is to overlook and deny the "impact of narrative on a productive disordering of binary dichotomies"; the overdetermination of difference hides the "anxiety of empire" found in colonial and postcolonial imaginations (pp. 4-5).

Suleri rounds up the usual suspects -- Kipling, Forster, Naipual, and Rushdie -- and a few more, most surprisingly Edmund Burke, by way of furnishing more detailed readings of her argument. If Burke was to point to Warren Hastings as a man obsessed with power, driven by greed, a monster who never dined "without creating a famine" (p. 64), the trial of Warren Hastings was routinely summoned in the colonial record as an instance of the unique capacity of Britain (and the West) for self-criticism, of Britain's adherence to norms of justice and fairness and its impulse towards decency, and of the colonial power's mechanisms for safeguarding itself against its own excesses. In the conventional reading, Hastings and Burke, men of passionate intensity, appear as largely opposed figures: while Hastings is shown as being intent on plundering India, and on laying the foundations for British rule in India, Burke is

described as being committed to the preservation of India's ancient institutions, eager to introduce accountability into the regime of colonialism, and even prepared to believe in the ability of Indians to govern themselves.

It is this picture of Hastings and Burke as implacable antagonists that Suleri, in the first instance, seeks to disrupt. Burke never offered a critique of colonialism, and he was more inclined to view the failures of Hastings and his associates in crime as excrescences upon a system that held out the promise of doing good: as Suleri puts it, his impeachment proceedings were compromised by Burke's inability to realize that "Hastings's misdeeds were merely synecdochical of the colonial operation" (p. 52). Colonialism was a larger enterprise than Burke was willing to allow, not reducible to the person of Hastings himself or even to the institution of the East India Company, and a truly meaningful prosecution would have required the levying of charges "for which no language was ready" (p. 55). Burke's interest lay in making colonialism accountable, by which he meant that the East India Company was to dispense with the subterfuge of functioning in the name of the Mughal Emperor, as well as commensurable with Indian customs, traditions, and modes of governance. He was more interested in the preservation of authority than in exposing abuses of power, and he could not countenance, in the language of his famous work on the French Revolution, "the cashiering of kings".

In Suleri's account, Burke begins to emerge as a figure uncannily similar to Hastings, but she goes much further than that, principally by focusing on the trope of the 'sublime', which seems to have had, in the eighteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, as wide a currency as did the tropes of 'wonder' and the 'marvelous' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Burke employed the trope of the sublime to render India obscure: he was to insist on the unreadability and unknowability of India, a land -- "a very remote object" -- that could not be represented through the English language, and that could be viewed only through "a very false and cloudy medium" (p. 27). Drawing on the work of Donald Pease and others, Suleri argues that the sublime has always had an association with conservatism, and Burke turned "the sublime on its head in order to represent India as a catalog of the uncategorizable" (p. 28). Indian 'intransigence' allowed Burke and India's colonizers to advance the idea that, far from being the object of Britain's colonialist aspirations, India was positioned to contain the British and, as it had with previous conquerors, absorb and tame them. If the native was unknowable, he was always in a position to strike at his purported masters, and to be impermeable was to be in a position of empowerment; on the other hand, intransigence demanded that India be rendered less obscure, and this inspired the "colonial will to cultural description". The terrain was to be thoroughly surveyed and mapped; each Indian was to be counted; and vast compendiums of Indian customs and traditions were to be commissioned. It is this same will to description, this

institution of a regime of truth, that inspired the *People of India* project, a photographic record that proposed to provide a specimen of each race and caste to be found in India, as well as Burke's catalog -- a device used to great effect by his contemporaries like Swift to convey the notions of the absurd and otherness -- of Indian geography (see pp. 29, 103-110).

More than Hastings, Burke appears to have rendered India into the other. Suleri's intent here is not to reinforce the importance of otherness in colonial cultural studies, but rather to see how Burke, the 'friend' of India, was complicit with Hastings, his purported opposite, in the colonization of India. No doubt Burke had "sympathy" for Indians, but as Suleri shows, Burke's own work on the sublime suggested that "sympathy . . . is a dynamic of alienation rather than of association" (p. 38). Ultimately the trial, as she maintains, was scarcely a "battle between East and West", and its "most significant influence occurs troublingly elsewhere, and even there, offstage" (pp. 66-67). This is a point that Suleri could have pursued further, for many of the debates purportedly about colonialism, about 'us' and 'them', were often masking other concerns. Burke was evidently more concerned, for example, about the effect of the ill-begotten riches of Hastings and other nabobs on English politics, the diminishing influence of the aristocracy, and the consequences of the entry of plebeians into the political life of England than he was about the political future or cultural life of India.

The idiom of otherness, Suleri argues, simply rehearses "the colonial fallacy through which India could be interpreted only as the unreadability of romance"; "the language of alterity can be read as a postmodern variant of the obsolescent idiom of romance" (pp. 11-12). British women in India, while "implicated in the structures of colonialism", were themselves victims of confinement (p. 76). In some respects, indeed, Indian women appeared to have the edge over British women. The *zenana*, the women's quarters to which Indian women were confined, included children within its space; by way of contrast, throughout Anglo-Indian narrative, as is well documented, the separation of mother and child appears as "a sentimentalized motif that repetitively reveals the extent of its traumatic betrayal" (p. 80). More troublingly, certain Indian women, such as nautch girls, were held to exercise an undue influence even over men bought up in England. These nautch girls, or courtesans, uncomfortable reminders of the fact that Englishwomen had been imported to perform the same function that Indian courtesans served to provide, were for British women a source of "a fear of proximity rather than of difference", and this fear was transformed "into the obscure discourse of the picturesque" (pp. 77, 92-93). Through the picturesque, British women traveling in India, such as Harriet Tyler and Fanny Parks, while condemned to remain on the periphery, and compelled to sustain "the psychic

strains of self-censorship" (p. 75), could nonetheless "transfix a dynamic cultural confrontation into a still life" (p. 76).

Most strikingly, it was the Anglo-Indian woman who appears to have been engaged in "an incipient questioning that dismantles colonialism's master narrative of rape", and who understood the imperial dynamic "as a dialogue between competing male anxieties" (p. 77). Without seeking to deny the place of rape in the terrain of colonialism, Suleri is, however, critical of the "unquestioning recuperation of the metaphor of rape", noting that for too long this "dominant trope for the act of imperialism" has served "as a subterfuge to avoid the striking symbolic homoeroticism of Anglo-Indian narrative" (pp. 16-17). In the depiction of the colonized as a violated female body, the discourse of otherness is given full play, and the binarisms -- male and female, colonizer and colonized, white and black -- within which the discourse, pivoted upon the metaphor of ravishment and possession, is encapsulated conceal the fact that the figure of "male embattlement . . . more authentically dictates the boundaries of colonial power" (p. 61). Thus, while most of the critical gaze has been turned upon Aziz's alleged ravishment of Adela in *A Passage to India*, Suleri points to the presence within the text of an "alternative colonial model: the most urgent cross-cultural invitations occur between male and male, with racial difference serving as a substitute for gender" (p. 133). Suleri finds the embodiment of homosexual desire in the famous scene where Fielding borrows Aziz's stud collar, and -- less predictably -- in the scene where Aziz takes him into his confidence, allowing Fielding to have a look at his deceased wife's photograph, and thereby lifting the veil within which the Indian woman must otherwise be confined (pp. 138, 142-43). But the novel enacts a more complex reversal of the metaphor of ravishment: when Adela takes too literally Aziz's casual and wholly unintended invitation to visit him at home, we are witness not to the male possession of a "feminized territory", but to the rather more unfamiliar scene of a female seeking to make an entry into "the habitat of colonized domesticity", thereby pushing Aziz, "the little Indian", into changing the venue of that meeting to the "exotic but empty space of an unvisited cave" (p. 139). The centrality and intensity of male desire, Suleri goes on to argue, determines "the confluence between colonial and postcolonial stories", a point that she seeks to establish through a complex interpretation of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*" (p. 195).

Suleri's reading of colonial texts as enactments of homoeroticism is largely persuasive but not without its problems. If there is a colonial trope, *effeminacy* was certainly one, and the Indian male, when he was not a member of one of the so-called 'martial races', was bound to appear in the colonial text as a rather delicate creature. So is Aziz, the quaint native: he is described by Forster as being "daintily put together", and in the courtroom Adela saw her alleged ravisher as a "strong, neat little Indian with very

black hair and pliant hands" (p. 136). That Suleri should leave the possible association between homoeroticism and effeminacy in colonial discourse unexamined is quite inexplicable. Secondly, she naturally recognizes that Forster's "own curiously [why "curiously"?) class-conscious and cross-cultural homosexual experiences" may have contributed to the "homoerotic strategy" of the novel, but that detail is dismissed a trifle too easily. Kipling's life also appears to have been shaped by a latent homosexuality, and in any case it is rather surprising that Suleri makes no mention of the sensitive reading of Kipling furnished by Ashis Nandy, who has also been among the first scholars to alert us to the nervousness of masculinity generated by colonialism, besides pointing to the difficulties with the trope of otherness when the colonizers and colonized were bound together by common anxieties. Thirdly, as a large part of feminist discourse, with which Suleri has undoubtedly an extensive familiarity, has already argued with considerable force and clarity, much of colonial discourse is to be read as a communication between men. This discourse was often conducted over the bodies of women: thus the overdetermined metaphor of rape almost invariably layered another politics, the politics at once of desire and domination.

It is, in the last analysis, to Suleri's critique of otherness, to the prevailing hegemony of the trope of alterity, to which we must return. That is certainly the signal contribution of this most difficult book, a work of powerful if excessive elegance. Suleri moves, in the *Rhetoric of English India*, from the eighteenth-century figure of Burke to the post-modern figure of Salman Rushdie, and this obedience to temporality, in a work that otherwise bids farewell to conventional readings and predictable structures of narration, is somewhat disconcerting. If colonialism is not contiguous with the actual exercise of domination, existing long after the colonizers have departed, and postcolonialism is complicit with colonialism, then does colonialism get inaugurated only with the formal institution of empire? Despite Suleri's strictures against Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (p. 7), her own book suggest that she has not entirely liberated herself from viewing modernity as a movement of temporality. The question of temporality aside, the last chapter on Rushdie suggests that alterity is already a diminishing trope in what Suleri describes as "colonial cultural studies", for the location from which we speak, as postcolonial critics have been arguing, is critical to the determination of the politics of our utterances. *The Rhetoric of English India* remains, in any case, one of the most enduring testaments of a "colonial cultural studies" imbued with a more enhanced degree of self-reflexivity about its own practices.

Originally published as: "Beyond Alterity", review of Sara Suleri's The Rhetoric of English India, *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 5 (4 February 1995):254-55.

