Remembering to Forget

**Lying on the Postcolonial Couch:**
The Idea of Indifference by Rukmini Bhaya Nair;
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It is a fact universally acknowledged that no book written under the sign of postcolonialism can go about its business in the world without performing a ritual murder of its authorising discipline. Postcolonial criticism is, arguably, distinguished by this peculiar tension between conflicting impulses of disciplinary eschewal and avowal; ever rehearsing the predicament of an incurable analytic compelled obsessively to speak about that which is being denied. In part, the fraught filial ties between academic postcoloniality and its practitioners are symptomatic of the vocational guilt consequent upon the charge (levelled by Arik Dirlik and Aijaz Ahmad, among numerous others) that the postcolonial critic is a career opportunist trading in the historical tribulations of her people for preferment in (the fleshpots of) the metropolitan academy. Yet, whatever their source, the anxieties of influence suffered by postcolonial theorists have probably prevented postcolonialism from resolving itself too readily into a disciplinary orthodoxy: a portly counter-canon easing itself into the mainstream, a ‘minor’ critical form arriving raucously into the field supply the fraught but cornucopian source of much postcolonial critical creativity, giving substance to its curious conflicted mix of scholarship and irreverence, research and whim, verve and annotation, trivia and *gravisitas*, homily and confession. Such is the admixture skillfully at work in Rukmini Bhaya Nair’s new study in postcolonial complexity.

Killing her field several times in the course of her profoundly postcolonial work, Bhaya Nair self-consciously foregrounds the psychopathy of such self-division in her title. **Lying on the Postcolonial Couch** captures the recurring therapeutic drama of postcolonial disciplinary patricide while gesturing simultaneously at the alleged political indolence of postcolonial critical practice; that lamentable conversion from subaltern margin to metropolitan centre, from collectivity to solipsism, from history to autobiography, from Marx to Freud. But the analytic couch of this book is not merely harnessed as a figure of theoretical self-parody, retaining at its core the possibilities of therapeutic recovery, the work of remembering the colonial past contra the miasma of postcolonial amnesia. Like many other contemporary theorists Bhaya Nair extols the task of colonial re-collection as the single most important antidote to the postcolonial condition: “Postcoloniality is a condition requiring a cure, and the passage to that cure involves a return to buried memories of colonial trauma. In effect, to understand how the postcolonial self differs from other selves who people the late twentieth century, it would be strategic to begin by exploring that infantile period colonialism, which by definition preceded the convulsions of postcoloniality”.

In Bhaya Nair’s terms, scrupulous colonial recall may well be the only counter to the besetting sin of postcolonial ‘indifference’. We are all too well aware now of postmodernism’s insistent privileging of ‘difference’ or ‘alterity’ as the sum-mum bonum of ethico-political labour, wherein to be meaningfully ‘good’ we must scrupulously confer the benefits of equal recognition upon those dissimilar from ourselves, or in some way alien to enclosed communities of likeness founded upon rigid determinants of blood, birth, genealogy, race, religion, culture, etc. But how to lesson ourselves in the difficult texts of difference, the author asks, without first unlearning the bad habits of indifference? Undoing indifference, then, is ethical pre-school to the postdoctoral demands of postmodern alterity, and, as such, remedial therapy for the pedagogic mess inherited from our colonial forbears, shameful authors of bureaucratic apathy: “...creating a disjunctive institutional culture of supremely bureaucratic, indeed godlike, indifference was part of an overall linguistic strategy of conquest for colonial power to establish and perpetuate itself”. Central to what Bhaya Nair calls the “poetics of colonial institutions”, indifference, she claims, has now become the flawed vocabulary of postcolonial governance, showing up, variously, in and as “the attribute of fatalism among the mass poor...as apathy among the upwardly mobile middle classes...revealed as bland and total unconcern among those who hold positions of awesome political and/or bureaucratic power”.

What follows in the book is inventive and esoteric, an idiosyncratic gleaning at the margins of colonialism in a bid to see through the ‘invisible ink’ of ‘postcolonial inscriptions’. We visit the baffling mediocritry of colonial verse, charged here, a la Gauri Vishwanathan, as “a means of control...a mask of appropriation”. An IIT undergraduate class comparing short stories discloses data for colonial contagion and postcolonial recovery. ‘Dispossessed women’s accounts of disaster’ hint at possibilities of resistance in a feminist critique of bureaucratic blandness. And as we proceed the themes of indifference blur into multiple strategies for postcolonial reading, writing, teaching, being; launching, at the very least, a protest against intellectual inertia simply through feats of indefatigable authorial energy.

Nonetheless, while the book performs a protest against indifference, its search for viable modes of resistance remains somewhat constrained. Writing within a distinctly Saidian rubric, Bhaya Nair draws heavily upon the ‘orientalism’ paradigm to insist upon the comprehensiveness, contagion and success of postcolonial indifference and bureaucracies. Yet, surely, for every pernicious ‘rule book’ and travel-form to be filled-in-triplicate, Indian sociality reveals the reverse: a carnival of rule-breaking, a pantomime of endless impossible ‘adjustments’ within cramped railway carriages and pear-shaped queues. For can we not claim as measure of anti-colonial success precisely our refusal to be governed comprehensively, indifferently? Indeed, in its Gandhian momentum, anti-colonialism ought to be postulated as a circuit-breaker, interrupting utilitarianism in its bid to install fully into south Asian polity the mechanisms for the automatic, mediated, faceless functioning of a bureaucratised and panoptical governmentality. And, finally, perhaps it is also important to recall, from the postcolonial couch, memories of other, local and non-bureaucratic forms of positive indifference: those that find expression, if brokenly, as non-partisan sentiment, impervious to difference, installed at the heart of all serious traditions of tolerance. But even in provoking such questions Rukmini Bhaya Nair achieves her end, compelling readers to think, again. **Lying on the Postcolonial Couch** is serious food for thought.  

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