

***Indian Traffic: Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, by Parama Roy. Berkeley: U of California P, 1998.**

Mimicry, Imitation, and Impersonation: Deconstructing the Dynamics of Identity Formation

Valuable insights into the processes of identity formation, difference, mimicry/imitation/disguise have been produced within post-colonial theory. These processes are of key significance not only within post-colonial studies but also within feminist, queer, and African-American studies. Frantz Fanon described the interpellation of the colonised as an inescapable objectification which precluded subjectivity and was productive of profound pathologies. Homi Bhabha on the other hand has deconstructed mimicry in the colonial situation to show that instead of a subjective death sentence for the colonised, it introduces a menace to the coloniser by subverting the identity which is being imitated and by rocking the balance of power. Bhabha's concept of the ambivalence of colonial mimicry is based on an understanding of the construction of Otherness by the dominant discourse as productive of anxiety about its own authority. Parama Roy's *Indian Traffic* is a stimulating critical text which addresses interesting questions about identity within the complex grid of colonialism and nationalism in the Indian context. In Roy's own words, the attempt is to foreground the question of originality/imitation "as an irreducible if sometimes camouflaged component of our models of colonial and postcolonial identity formation as well as nation formation" (3). Roy pursues the notion of mimicry in configurations other than that of the English-educated colonised male mimicking an Englishness largely internalised from literary education. Symptomatic instances of imitation/mimicry are deconstructed to demonstrate how a vigilant reading must consider it not as an essence but in terms of a cultural relation within the specificities of the conditions of enunciation and address.

The motif of traffic is a useful one suggesting identity formation as a continual and shifting, many-sided process marked by negotiation and fluidity. Roy situates the question of identities in colonial and postcolonial India within the "immense and heterogeneous terrain of sociopolitical, ethicoreligious, legal, and popular-mythic discourses that have mediated Indian and British experience in the last century and a half" (6) and uses as primary sources novels, travelogues, colonial administrative documents, and popular cinema. In addition the examples of religious mentorship and discipleship [Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Nivedita] and of the figure of the mimic woman in Indian nationalism [Sarojini Naidu] introduce a nonliterary dimension to the argument. The eclectic selection of texts contributes to the liveliness and readability of the writing but while it might serve to illustrate the range of texts where these questions have remained largely ignored, it also gives the book a rather strung-along quality of disparate essays only loosely connected by the notions of identity and imitation/mimicry.

The Introduction betrays the anxiety which is the lot of anyone writing in the area of cultural studies. Roy places the work in the area of "postcolonial (cultural) studies"—the parenthesis, if needed at all, would perhaps be more appropriate around the first term: "(postcolonial) cultural studies." The book should interest those working

not only in the fields of cultural and historical/post-colonial studies, but also Victorian studies since many of the key texts and figures are from nineteenth-century British India with a predominantly Victorian ethos among the Anglo-Indian community and the English-educated Indian intelligentsia.

The opening essay focusing on the career of Richard Burton in order to explore the colonial drive to occupy the place of nativeness is probably the best in the book. Burton is regarded as “a specular version” of the colonial subject constituted through the process of mimicry—the colonial observer attempting to assume authenticity and to displace the native informant rather than the hybridised native. The impersonation of a Muslim Indian identity is for Burton clearly tied up with the colonial investment in knowledge as an arm of colonial power. His text therefore is analysed here not merely as a thrilling tale of adventure and of the challenge of overcoming considerable difficulty and danger, but as the “authorised script of colonial impersonation, inscription, and occupation” (23). The essay poses interesting questions which deflect those arising in relation to the persona of the not quite/not white mimic man of Homi Bhabha. Roy argues that while the imperfect doubling of the mimic colonised man posed a threat by implicitly challenging the notion of a colonial self that was normative, authoritative, and reproducible, the project of native impersonation by the colonised underscores the “self-possession and single-mindedness of colonial discourse” (27). It is these reformulations of the tropes of mimesis, mimicry, fluidity, and exchange that Roy examines in the case of Burton here and Kipling in a later essay. Burton’s narrative of his successful impersonation of native identity is read by Roy as one which not only underscores imperial faith in a stable and unassailable self but also produces the colonised as an imitable, permeable, essentialised other who has to be known, categorised, and fixed.

While Roy treats Burton as a symptomatic figure, a key point of difference is not developed but noted only in passing—the difference between “going native” as in the open adoption of native ways in the eighteenth century by Company officials and Burton’s disguises—impersonations which are based on subterfuge and which must remain secret in order to succeed. This is a difference Burton himself is careful to underline by presenting himself as an “unduplicable” case of a white man who “alone can be a native as successfully as a sahib” (35). Similarly not enough importance is given to the fact that Burton’s disguises depended for their success on careful choice of marginal native identities with which the majority of natives themselves would be only incompletely and casually familiar. Despite the nuanced reading of Burton’s career and his *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Mecca* (1885), Roy’s argument falters at places such as the claim that although Burton can occupy the place of the native only from a position of “a ubiquitous and uncanny liminality” (8), he resignifies rather than imitates native identity “so that the native, in order to have access to a subject position as a native, can only do so by modeling himself after Burton” (8). Roy here collapses the plurality of native identities into an overarching single category of “the native.” Another tightly-argued essay focuses upon *thuggee* in nineteenth-century India through the “optic of identity formation and subjection” (41). The discussion does not limit itself to questions of colonial knowledge, representation, and colonial identities but extends to law, order, criminality, and reform in the early decades of the nineteenth century and, in Roy’s words, the “discursive problems associated with

generating the moral subject of the civilizing mission of British colonialism" (42). The discourse of *thuggee* is used as a point of entry into the consideration of various inflections of mimicry such as the fascination with going native, English miming of Englishness, or native miming of native subject positions.

The remaining essays deal with various mimic figures within Indian nationalism—Anglo-Indians, the western woman, the Indian mimic woman—while the last essay considers Nargis—the Muslim film star—as an icon of Indian womanhood. Together these essays pursue the question of identities in various interesting configurations of class, gender, and sexuality. The essay on Kipling's *Kim* makes the rather startling argument that its primary discursive object "is to produce the idea of the nation and of the citizen" (79) and to present the Anglo-Indian as "the true insider" (85)—an argument which is not very convincingly made. In another essay the life and career of Sarojini Naidu, the nightingale of India, is deconstructed to argue that while her status as a poet in English accorded her a special position in the Congress, this mimic woman persona could not be accommodated within nationalism and had to be troped in terms of irresistible allure, extravagance, corporeality, and triviality. While Gandhian nationalism embraced the feminisation of nationalist activity, Naidu's case shows that certain forms of femininity had to be exorcised from nationalism. Although the treatment of Muslimness and of the career of Nargis's actor-son Sanjay Dutt in the last chapter leaves many questions unanswered, the essay is interesting in its focus on the figure of Nargis in whom star/icon status, Muslimness, and femininity intersect and demonstrate the problematic nature of postcolonial Indian identities and politics.

In these essays of mixed merit readers will discover a number of minor things at which to cavil. However, mimicry and impersonation are intelligently—although somewhat provocatively—theorised in a lively and thought-provoking reading of a wide range of symptomatic texts. Readers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds will find the book useful and stimulating.

Meenakshi Sharma

***Shakespeare's Victorian Stage: Performing History in the Theatre of Charles Kean*, by Richard W. Schoch. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.**

Richard Schoch's detailed study of Charles Kean's Shakespearean productions is one of a number of books published recently which makes a serious attempt to place the Victorian theatre in the mainstream of Victorian cultural history. Books such as Schoch's, Gail Marshall's *Actresses on the Victorian Stage*, Elaine Hadley's *Melodramatic Formations*, and Deborah Vlock's *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* are long overdue contributions both to theatre history and Victorian studies, although they are perhaps more useful in alerting Victorianists to the significance of the theatre than in providing theatre historians with new material. But I'll return to that point later. For too long the theatre has been the discomfiting poor relation of Victorian studies—something we know is there and should be significant but somehow we keep finding reasons for dodging or dismissing. But in the last twenty years some of the intellectual reasons for the omission of the theatre from the scholarly