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The retrospective Raj: Medicine, literature and history after empire

by Sam Goodman, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, 248 pp., £90.00 (hardback)., ISBN 9781474448741

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BOOK REVIEW

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In the closing moments of J.G. Farrell's ([1973] 1997) *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the Collector reflects that perhaps "a people, a nation, does not create itself according to its own best ideas, but is shaped by other forces, of which it has little knowledge" (313). It is a thought that speaks to the dilemma facing both Britain and newly independent nations across the former empire in the decades following decolonization. In the Indian subcontinent, those "other forces" included the prioritization of religious affinities that underpinned Partition and the subsequent rise of Hindu nationalism. In Britain, imperial nostalgia has coincided with neoliberalism to stoke anti-immigration sentiment and isolationism.

It is these two interrelated historical trajectories that are brought into focus in Goodman's excellent new monograph, in which a range of authors are shown to explore the forces shaping both British and Indian culture after the end of empire. Alongside Farrell, Goodman explores the novels of Salman Rushdie (e.g., *Midnight's Children* [1981]), Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (e.g., *Heat and Dust* [1975]), and Paul Scott (e.g., *The Raj Quartet* [1965–75]), bringing to light a corpus of Anglo Indian literary texts from the 1970s. These novelists are united, Goodman argues, in "their shared sensitivity to the rapidity of British decline on the global stage" and in their attentiveness to how the end of the British Raj is key to understanding a "shifting sense of nationhood" (9) in the former imperial centre and its erstwhile "jewel", India.

Goodman's choice of this corpus is directed by several persuasively argued affinities between writers who are rarely read together. These include: the fact that all are Booker Prize winners; they each occupy an "outsider status" that affords them a "split perspective" (17) on the formation of post-imperial national identities; their works evince a range of postmodernist confrontations with historical metanarratives; and they "acknowledged health and medicine as a vital part of the colonial British past", seeking "to fold it into the broader literary approach to history" (24). This final affinity allows Goodman to deftly align postcolonialism's traditional preoccupation with nationhood with the analysis of cultural depictions of illness, dependency, and competing medical orthodoxies.

Medical themes structure Goodman's comparative analysis, enabling him to bring disparate texts into dialogue with each other, while also forging new insights into works – especially those by Rushdie – that already constitute a scholarly field in their own right. In chapter 1, "On Being Ill in the Anglo-Indian Novel", Goodman examines how the "British presence" in India was "continually configured [...] in relation to illness and the perennial risk to health" (40). Chapter 2, "Medical Practitioners in Anglo-Indian Fiction", explores how doctors are depicted as a means of critiquing colonial authority and subverting the "teleology of imperial progress" (76). In chapter 3, "Space, Environment and Medicine", "spaces of care" – hospitals, clinics, and nursing homes – are read as facilitating "the gendered, racialised and hierarchical prejudices of colonialism" (116), while the centrality of alcohol to the British lifestyle in India is revealed as being satirized by Anglo Indian novels in chapter 4, "Diet, Health and Well-Being". The final chapter, "Medicine, Health and the Legacy of Empire", interrogates how preoccupations with death intersect with "instances of

endings, memory, hauntings and nostalgia" to "create the culture of memorialisation that exists within Anglo-Indian fiction" (177).

Together, these chapters contribute to the growing body of research that frames writing of the mid-20th century as being influenced by modernism whilst displaying postmodern characteristics. Goodman shows how E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Virginia Woolf's *On Being Ill* (1926) are important intertexts for understanding how post-imperial literature depicts medical beliefs, illness, and the colonial past in a way that is self-reflexive and often parodies the conventions of the historical novel. In this way, Goodman expands the possibilities of postcolonial and medical humanities scholarship whilst inviting readers to envision postmodernist aesthetics as being informed not only by the consolidation of global capitalism (as Fredric Jameson (1991) maintains), but also by the special ability of literature to put the forces unleashed by the end of empire under scrutiny.

References

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