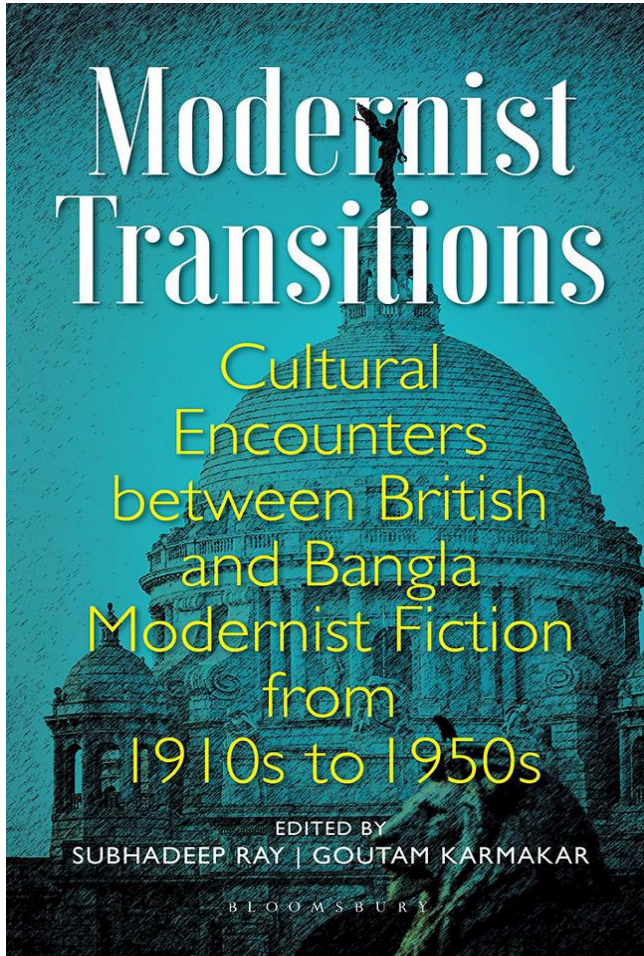


Subhadeep Ray and Goutam Karmakar. 2024. *Modernist Transitions: Cultural Encounters between British and Bangla Modernist Fiction from 1910s and 1950s*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury India, 260 pp. ISBN: 9789356404472



Modernism has always been a contested term, and the most energetic debates about the reach of the term have recently been associated with an emerging interest in global modernism, or planetary modernism. However, horizons of multiple modernisms remain fuzzy, and conflicts and compromises between their range of practices and ideological networks mostly depend on how they were shaped by the history of imperial modernity. In this respect, Indian and British modernism of the first half of the twentieth century shared a

colonial/postcolonial history. Indian modernism, which was primarily shaped in and around the British Empire's second and Eastern capital, Calcutta, contrasted and complemented the European, and particularly British modernist frameworks. Hence, modernism's to-and-fro transitions were the bifold products of imperialism. The epistemology of Enlightenment that permeated the non-European frontiers, including Bangla literature, had brought forth a hybrid form of modernity, mixing the "uncanny sensibilities of a prolonged colonised subjectivity" and a "transnational consciousness" (2). A parallel reading of the literature of colonisers and the colonised can only explain this hybridisation. Subhadeep Ray and Goutam Karmakar have done this important task in their edited volume of twelve essays. The book makes it pertinent to understand modernism's international and transnational contexts. Setting an accord to the theme of *Modernist Transitions*, Promod K. Nayar comments in the Foreword that "the colony is the common geo-cultural space that marks England's literary journey to and from modernism, thereby rendering the entire era and its literature a transnational one" (xv). The editors create a scope and rationale of an analogous study of British-Bangla modernist fiction and specify the limits of such efforts in the general introduction to the book. A comparative critical framework provides intersecting perspectives for studying imperialism, consumerism, social history, war, and violence – a much-needed genealogy for examining Bangla literature vis-à-vis postcolonial studies. Now that the post-postcolonial critics have stopped using British literary canons to interrogate Indian literature, *Modernist Transitions* paves a new path in setting a novel paradigm enquiring the dialogues between colonies and the Empire foregrounding modernism in its postcoloniality and beyond.

The book is divided into three parts, each introducing the contributing aspects of modernity. Each of these parts has four essays. The first part, "Setting the Paradigms: Nations and Narrations," evaluates the relationship between nations and different forms of modernist narrations. Amar Acheraiou's essay probes into the literary-biographical engagements of British canons, their aesthetics, and political standpoints, and culminates in ethical dilemmas. Like most literary figures around the globe, the British modernists were the products of their times and culture – imperialism, industrialisation, anti-colonial struggles, fascism, and the two World Wars being at the backdrop. Actively or passively incumbent to such politics, the modernists were conditioned aesthetically, ideologically, and ethically, seeking redemption through self-critique or refuge in distant lands or imagining a morally/ethically sound primitiveness. Acheraiou's essay includes many British authors, from early modernists to late modernists, from the canonized to the not-so-well-read ones. Ritwick Bhattacharjee's essay

interrogates Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India* as a historical transition within its historicity while alluding to E.M Forster's model of "unbelief." Bhattacharjee highlights Nehru's counter-intuitive framework ineffectually oscillating between "conservative determinism" and "liberal causation" (60). Recalling the editors' introduction to this section, one can trace the intertwined historicity of the Bangla modernist movement with the first publication of *The Discovery of India*, published in Kolkata by Signet Press in 1946. In the next essay, Angshuman Kar dwells on the politics of "canon" formation that often leads to unethical standardisation. He insists on the distinct development of Bangla modernism despite the impact of hegemonic ideologies. Kar examines how school/college curricula, advertisements, and propaganda influence the canons and vice versa. The essay concludes by deconstructing the canon of Bangla modernist fiction, hence stripping off its elitism and parochialism. In the next essay, Santanu Banerjee succinctly follows the Western critical trajectories on hero worship in reframing a glorified Indian nationalist identity. The concept of hero, rejected as a Romantic remnant in Western modernist traditions, contrasts musician-writer D.L. Roy's memoirs on Indian-global heroes like Tagore, Gandhi, Netaji, Rolland, and Russell. Roy's *Tirthankar* (1944) and *Sangitiki* (*On Music*, 1938) are non-linear narratives based on memorable anecdotes, lyrics, poems, and personal letters that counter the Western models of 'hero worship' by Nietzsche, Hegel, or Carlyle.

The title of the second part of the book – "Everything is the Proper Stuff of Fiction": Intersections of Modernism and Realism in Narratives of Corporeality, Subjectively, Alienation and War" – refers to Virginia Woolf's idea of how one should read a book. This section highlights treatments of reality and subjectivity in British and Bangla modernist texts. Supriti Debnath compares modernist-romantic writer D.H. Lawrence's medical narratives on health, illness, and death with those of Bengali doctor-author Bonoful. As the critic suggests, a nuanced account of body, disease, and caregiving should project the psychological and pathological implications of the contesting modernities in British and Bangla literature. Jemima Nasrin's essay on Manada Devi's fictional autobiography *An Educated Woman in Prostitution* (1929) and Katherine Mansfield's short autobiographical fiction *The Singing Lesson* (1922) explores the intricate maze of feminism and modernism. Nasrin interrogates subjectivity in women's writings through a poststructuralist lens, further creating a counter-narrative to the hegemonic male intellectual locus. Manada Devi combats her identity as 'a fallen woman' and fictionalises a 'good self' that adheres to Indian patriarchal sensibilities. On the other hand, Mansfield is franker about herself and delimits the patriarchal boundaries. Bipranarayan Bhattacharya uses a modernist

alienist framework when reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Satinath Bhaduri's *Dhorai Charit Manas*. Interestingly, both the novels are hinged on a classical framework, the Western and Indian mythologies – Homer's *Odyssey* and Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, respectively. Bhattacharya traces two distinct forms of alienation as an outcome of imperial modernity in two different contexts – Stephan and Bloom at the centre and Dhorai at the periphery. Partha Sarathi Sinha examines Bangla's late-modernist war literature, the labyrinthine relations of culturally and historically rooted modernity, and incumbent violence. While steering the argument towards the next phase of the book on modernism from the margins, Sinha's essay opens a Freudian-Marxist portrayal of subjective abnormalities with the societal macro-cosmic abnormalities.

The third part, "Interplay Between Traditions and Genres of Modernist and Late-Modernist Fiction," deals with a multifaceted range: children's literature, domestic writings, working-class narratives, and detective fiction. This section of the book deciphers the crossovers created by imperial modernity, critical re-engagements and interplays between fictional genres across accepted canons and their traditions through the historical phases from colonialism to postcolonialism. Stella Chitralkha Biswas problematises the tenets of British and Bangla children's literature and focuses on women authors, primarily Angela Brazil and Nalini Das. Her study is a postcolonial departure from the British models of modernism. She examines issues like age, gender, modernity, and the shifting terrains between the British and Bangla culture.

The next essay by Nilanjana Chatterjee, Nibedita Mukherjee, and Anindita Chatterjee focuses on the works of Virginia Woolf and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain through the lens of quintessential space politics in gender discourses. This essay critically analyses the domestic modernism genre, thereby authenticating domesticity as a tool for reading and writing about the interwar crisis. It helps us understand the culturally nuanced domestic space of the nineteenth century and shows that women's writings remain critical in restoring authentic female voices. Moving on to one more shaping feature of modernity, i.e., industrialisation, Aratrika Ganguly compares the select coalmine fiction of D.H. Lawrence and Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay through a Marxist lens. Her study unveils the dehumanised face of capitalist exploitations, death, insanity, and complicated/tragic romantic relationships – the dimension where Lawrencian passion meets Mukhopadhyayan realism. Animesh Bag focuses on the generic possibilities of Bangla detective fiction and their content or ideological underpinnings from the perspectives of the Western models. His essay traverses through the genealogy of modernist Bangla vis-à-vis English detective tales, starting from Edgar Allan Poe to Arthur Conan Doyle, and Priyonath Daroga to

Byomkesh Bakshi. According to Bag, detective fiction manifests a modernist nostalgia for an orderly and idealised past through their narratives. The crime stories, murders, and mysteries in twentieth-century Calcutta provide a panoramic view of the psychoanalytic/social transitions and the fragmented selves within their conflicts and ambivalences.

Apart from the fact that *Modernist Transitions* highlights an absence of records on mutual influences in British and Bangla novelists, it contributes significantly to a cross-textual and inter-textual reading of British and Bangla literature. Interestingly, the book is dedicated to “To Democracy and Cosmopolitanism,” which may sound elementary yet critical to understanding the contemporary power struggles across the globe. Modernist traditions advocate for rationality, cultural inclusiveness, and empathy for the colonial ‘other’ in today’s tumultuous world. Overall, this volume is fundamental to studying the intersecting subjectivities of British modernism and the cultural interactions between Britain and Bengal that led to simultaneous modernities.

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