97 | book review

feminism and contemporary women writers: rethinking subjectivity

Radha Chakravarty, Routledge, New Delhi/London, 2007, 260pp.,
ISBN: 978-0-415-46731-5 (Hbk), £65.00

Radha Chakravarty begins *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers* with a quote from Judith Butler that highlights the ambiguity inherent within the term 'subject'; as a noun it indicates self-determining agency, but as a verb it describes the process of being defined and controlled by external forces. She presents this paradox as crucial to understanding the question of women's subjectivity. The route to their self-realisation and development is bound up, she suggests, with an understanding of and re-negotiation with the various cultural and economic forces that shape and limit women's experience.

After a first chapter in which she provides a very useful outline of the philosophical history of subjectivity, Chakravarty goes on to consider how six women novelists: Doris Lessing, Anita Desai, Mahasweta Devi, Buchi Emecheta, Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison, have explored the limits and possibilities of women's identity. In doing so, she takes an unusual and refreshing approach to literary criticism. Instead of developing a theory of subjectivity, which is then used to analyse the work of her chosen writers, she reads the novels themselves as critical explorations of female subjectivity. Fiction thus becomes a means of exploring, re-evaluating and reshaping the familiar, largely canonical history that Chakravarty presents in her first chapter.

The variety of writers explored in the book is one of its major strengths; Chakravarty ranges from canonical figures to lesser-known writers, inviting productive comparisons between them. In this way, she makes fresh insights into Morrison's much discussed Pulitzer winning *Beloved*, while also giving critical space to the lesser known work of Nigerian born British writer, Emecheta. Notably she does not try to measure these novelists against similar standards of literary worth, but concentrates instead on how, within the terms of her own cultural context, each negotiates female 'subjection' and attempts to realise something like an empowered sense of female subjectivity. In the process, Chakravarty raises an important point about how literature is valued. The criteria for great literature are all too often heavily, but invisibly weighted in favour of hegemonic interests, thereby marginalising work that is informed by different values and experiences. Chakravarty, by

contrast, insists on reading novels in terms of the cultural context from which they emerge. For example, in her analysis of Emecheta, she requires us to look outside of the critical conventions of the western academy and to understand the writer's work as a productive 'blend of African and Western narrative traditions' (140).

Chakravarty's concern here with recognising and understanding different cultural traditions is echoed by her use of writers with diverse nationalities; the United States, Canada, Britain, India and Nigeria are all represented. The cultural and national diversity of her chosen writers enables her to explore the ways in which subjectivity is constructed through different value systems and experiences. Echoing womanist criticism that traditional White feminism seeks to represent a universal female experience, Chakravarty focuses on how her chosen writers represent gendered identity as inseparable from religion, nationality, class and ethnicity. In each novel, we are presented with women who attempt, with more or less success, to negotiate prevailing social rules and economic limits in order to arrive at some kind of self-realisation and determination, however, the precise nature of these rules and limits varies greatly. In this way, Chakravarty represents significant parallels between women's experience in different cultural and national contexts, but these parallels are always complicated by cultural specificity. Her discussion of motherhood is a case in point. The essentialist assumption that mothering is integral to the identity of women is common to all of the cultures discussed. Chakravarty finds many examples of women torn between the need for personal freedom and the responsibility of motherhood, and of women who seek to reclaim the idea of mothering from socially prescribed ideals. However, in the work of Anita Desai and Mahasweta Devi, these problems are complicated by the specific nationalistic associations that motherhood accrued in newly independent 'Mother' India. Within this context motherhood is loaded, not only with assumptions about ideal feminine virtues, it also becomes bound up with the aspirations of new nationhood.

In conclusion, this is a thought provoking and very accessible book that provides a valuable exploration of subjectivity in the light of current feminist and postcolonial theory and a broad introduction to the work of six contemporary women writers. The breadth of this discussion means that there is little close reading of individual novels and Chakravarty's observations about stylistic innovations that challenge narrative conventions are not always fully supported. As a general introduction to contemporary women's fiction and to the paradoxical ongoing problem of subjectivity, however, this is a very successful book.

Megan Stern

doi:10.1057/fr.2010.42