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Ian Almond, *The Thought of Nirad C. Chaudhuri: Islam, Empire, and Loss*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 196 pp., \$99.99 US (hbk), ISBN 9781107094437.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri was born in 1897, in provincial Kishorganj in what was then British India. Over the course of the ensuing century, he wrote nearly two dozen works of book-length non-fiction in English and Bengali, primarily the former, including *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, published just four years after the partition of independent India and Pakistan and dedicated defiantly “to the memory of the British Empire.” Born in colonial India, Chaudhuri was an unrepentant Anglophile and defender of Empire. He died in 1999 in Oxford, where he had immigrated in his seventies, only to have to reconcile the “disenchantment springing from the idea of ‘returning’ to a place one has never been” (130).

Ian Almond’s *The Thought of Nirad C. Chaudhuri* begins and ends with the facts of its subject’s confounding biography. “How,” Almond asks in the Introduction, “does power convince people to love, respect and even defend *cultures they don’t belong to*? When a Bengali intellectual, born in a village in the provinces of present-day Bangladesh towards the end of the nineteenth century, *decides to see himself racially* as a displaced European—what factors are involved in this process” (3, my emphases)? Versions of these questions are posed throughout the book, but it is this opening provocation that best captures the puzzle that Chaudhuri—British by choice, if not by birth—presents. What, ultimately, does it mean to “belong,” whether to nation, culture, language, religion, class, or milieu? How, and by whom, is such belonging adjudicated? What, in the context of pre- and post-colonial India, constitutes racial self-seeing? Can one “decide” how to see oneself, or is self-seeing unmediated by intention? Writer of one of the great autobiographies of the twentieth century, did Chaudhuri actually “see himself” or “the real essence of what he was” (95)?

The book then unfolds in four primary chapters, which respectively consider Chaudhuri’s relationship to Islam and the Muslim world, the multiple archives through which Chaudhuri writes and thinks, the latent and manifest melancholia that characterize his oeuvre, and his conflicted relationship to Empire (primarily but not only the British Empire). This essayistic structure serves to temper the reader’s expectations of a single line of argumentation (is Chaudhuri an “alienated Indian” or a “displaced European” [92]? Anglicized or English? Such provocations are left unresolved). By that same token, it effects a different form of argument by twinning Chaudhuri’s congenital ambivalence and “rotating attitudes” (26) on subjects including Islam and Empire, on the one hand, and Almond’s own rhetorical commitment to uncertainty, on the other.

Chapter 1, on Chaudhuri and the Muslim world, exemplifies this commitment. In Almond's words, Islam is "a useful barium meal to reveal the internal contours and nodulations of [Chaudhuri's] intellectual constitution" (23). Islam is a preoccupation threaded throughout Chaudhuri's corpus. He wrote on the formation of India and Pakistan, about Hindu-Muslim conflict, on Bengali and Urdu poets including Ahmed Saadi and Kazi Nazrul Islam, and on the fourteenth century Arab historiographer Ibn Khaldun, and he read significant Indian Muslim thinkers including Nizam ul Mulk of Hyderabad and Syed Ahmed Khan (23).

Almond is attuned to such details; he points out, for example, that both Medici prints and Moghul pictures were displayed in Chaudhuri's first postnuptial flat in Calcutta: "Muslim India could stand alongside Renaissance Italy as a model of civilizing influences for Chaudhuri" (30). But accumulating such references is not Almond's primary interest. What is significant, he argues, is how Chaudhuri's various textual "engagements with Islam" alternate between "nonrecognition, demonization, exoticization, and instrumental affinity" (24)—how, in other words, the same religion and people inspire contradictory and even mutually exclusive responses from Chaudhuri, who not only modifies his opinions over the course of years, but between chapters in a single text.

Confronted with the challenge of thinking Islam, Chaudhuri presents many faces to his reader: that of "secular enlightenment humanist" (26), "East Bengali Hindu" (33), "political theorist" (36), "Romantic Orientalist" (41), "Aryan" (48), and "relentless historicizer" (52). For example, as a secular intellectual, Chaudhuri is committed to the shared humanity of Hindus and Muslims. Writing of sectarian violence in East Bengal in the early 1930s, he points out, against conventional narratives of Muslim looting, that Hindu teenagers, too, "behaved as if they were werewolves" (27). But when Chaudhuri is wearing his "tribal" East Bengali Hindu hat, he views Muslims as "a brooding, faintly threatening underclass" (34). As a political theorist, Chaudhuri views the Moghuls as worthy precursors of their fellow imperialists, the British. By that same token, he subscribes to familiar Orientalist depictions of Muslim manliness while exoticizing Delhi as "Baghdad with the burqua off" (47).

Almond's Chaudhuri is a fragmented, polyvocal subject. In his 1965 *Continent of Circe*, Chaudhuri describes Pakistan as "poor and weak" and "half-dead." Some years later, he describes the formation of the nation as "a stunningly successful political experiment, an audacious act of political one-upmanship comparable to the founding of the Israeli state" (39). Almond seems to relish identifying and excavating such "genuine clash[es] of registers" (48), but for the most part he does not seek to effect a rapprochement between them. Is Chaudhuri a man of two minds, or one who cannot help but keep changing his mind? Almond's intention is to short-circuit such questions by moving from the routinized avowal of hybridity to one of "polyphony" (170).

Ultimately, Almond shows that Islam has instrumental value for Chaudhuri, in two distinct senses. First, Islam is "a useful, external vantage point" from which Chaudhuri can better "evaluate" Hindu India (28). Thus, the perspective of the tenth century scholar al-Biruni, who described Hindus as "haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited and...by nature niggardly in communicating that which they know" (28), serves to bolster—and even confirm—Chaudhuri's negative view of his fellow Hindus. Second, Islam serves to illuminate Chaudhuri's own background and congenital prejudices. In Almond's telling, Chaudhuri is self-conscious about this. Thus, in the *Autobiography*, he frankly acknowledges that "indifference," "hostility," "friendliness," and "contempt" comingled in his attitude toward Muslims when he was growing up (29).

Almond's strategy of dividing (or, partitioning) Chaudhuri into the aforementioned aspects is generative beyond the chapter on Islam. It explains, for instance, how the same man could celebrate the British Empire, on the one hand, and decry instances of racial discrimination he experienced at the hands of the British police, on the other. Chaudhuri could "[admire] and desire to belong to something which detested and rejected him" (140) because, in fact, the admiring subject and rejected subject were not, in a significant sense, self-same. One problem with Almond's typological method, however, is that its simultaneous exhaustiveness and specificity occludes other possible readings of Chaudhuri's relationships to Islam, Empire, and the loss of both. For instance, Chaudhuri is fascinated with the figure of the diasporic Muslim, to whom he attributes "a very Semitic sense of homelessness" (50). Yet Almond hardly considers the question of Chaudhuri's own diasporic consciousness. While the book includes numerous theoretical excursions into psychoanalysis, especially in Chapter 3 on "sadness and loss," which has recourse to Sigmund Freud, Homi Bhabha, and Anne Cheng, it does not animate the work of thinkers like Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, James Clifford, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy (to cite only a well-known subset of diaspora theorists), whose respective elaborations of disaggregated identity, roots and routes, positions of enunciation, and double-consciousness might have helped to move the text away from its occasionally psychologizing moves.¹ Much attention is paid to Chaudhuri's personality—he is by turns homesick and melancholic, aggressive and ostentatiously erudite, self-conscious and misogynistic, defiant and obsequious—but there is only so much the reader can learn from a record of temperamental inconsistency, even one this complex.

Almond's approach works best, and is, to my mind, most useful, on the subject of the archive, which is the focus of Chapter 2. As with the typology that structures Chapter 1, the archive is addressed in its various aspects as a "physical place" (72), "mental catalogue" (83), and "foreign mirror" (87). The overarching argument in this section is that the archive is "a tool of alienation" (69), something which takes the subject outside himself, only to return him fractured, as if fallen from a great height, resulting in "disaffection from the community" (76). This story of exilic dislocation, whether resulting from education, the acquisition of another language, or (virtual or real) travel abroad, is not new, nor unique to the South Asian case. It brings to mind the iconic figure of Frantz Fanon's foreign-educated Martinican, who returns to the Antilles from France speaking "like a white man" and having adopted "a critical attitude" toward his compatriots.²

That being said, Almond's focus on archive is a refreshing spin on the familiar, powerful trope of the library in postcolonial literature and criticism. Much ink has been spilled already on the enigma of Mustafa Said's English-language library on the banks of the Nile in Tayeb Salih's 1966 *Season of Migration to the North*, on the Trinidad-born, Nobel-laureate V.S. Naipaul's frequent accounts of his illuminating, self-restorative researches in British libraries and the British Museum, and on the figure of the young scholar Annayya in A.K. Ramanujan's short story, "Annayya's Anthropology." In that story, Annayya not only leaves India to study India in Chicago ("You want self-knowledge?... Things are clear only when

¹ Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, Issue 4 (Summer 1993); James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 9, Issue 3 (1994), 302-338; Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 5-7.

looked at from a distance.”³), but actually learns of his own father’s death from a photograph in a library book, *Hinduism: Custom and Ritual*, written by an American anthropologist who had been in India on a Ford Foundation scholarship. More recently, Saikat Majumdar has argued that Chaudhuri represents a form of provincial, “abstract cosmopolitanism acquired in the musty isolation of libraries on the outpost of empire.”⁴

In Almond’s telling, Chaudhuri is as alienated as Ramanujan’s Annayya. For instance, Almond points out, his 1979 *Hinduism: A Religion to Live By* lists not a single work by an Indian scholar in its bibliography. Where then, the question is implicit, does Chaudhuri’s India come from? *Whose* India is it? On this subject, and elsewhere, Chaudhuri’s ideas are attributed to what Almond terms “polygenesis” (43); a “cacophony of sources” (44) are locatable in his writing. For example, Chaudhuri’s romantic conception of Islam comes from the English Romantics, but also from a “Turkish tale by Byron or Walter Scott, a bona fide original Persian source such as the *Bustan*...[and] precolonial Sanskritic responses to Muslims” (43)—not to mention his own idiosyncratic life experiences.

Here, Almond is ostensibly characterizing Chaudhuri’s “reference-peppered and forever allusive prose” (66). In so doing, however, he sheds light on his own approach. If Chaudhuri “delights in the unmasking of false origins” (52), then Almond delights in the multiplication of possible ones. A veritable “cacophony of sources” are brought to bear by Almond on the reading of Chaudhuri. When the topic is the archive, Almond finds historical comparisons in Fakir Mohan Senapati, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, R.K. Narayan, and Pankaj Mishra. In the chapter on melancholy, Chaudhuri is classed with the Turkish writer Ahmed Hamdi Tanpınar and the Mexican Nobel-laureate Octavio Paz (107). Later, Almond nominates public intellectuals Enrique Krauze, Fouad Ajami, and Fareed Zakaria as “Chaudhuri’s successors” (146), despite the fact that they don’t share Chaudhuri’s literary sensibility or “the almost alienating sense of beauty in the best moments of his prose” (19).

This final series of comparisons is necessitated by Almond’s stated aim of locating Chaudhuri between the positions of “native informer” and “exilic intellectual.” Almond calls Chaudhuri a “comprador thinker,” one whose work is characterized by his “negative essentialization” of India, “a relentless cynicism towards any form of self-government,” and “an admiration for” and “benign historical perspective on” British imperial power” (6-7). If this sounds familiar, it’s because many of the tropes Almond appends to Chaudhuri are also associated with Naipaul. Of the two, Naipaul is the better known “postcolonial mandarin” and “Third World Cassandra,” the choleric littérateur who has made his name through unsparing critiques of India and a politically suspect commitment to Britain.⁵ But before there was Naipaul, there was Chaudhuri, thirty-five years his senior, though both men began their formal writing careers in the 1950s.

The story of Indian literature in English has for decades been told through literary fiction’s progression from the social realisms and early linguistic experiments of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, to the magical realism and “cosmopolitan style”⁶ of

³ A.K. Ramanujan, “Annayya’s Anthropology,” trans. Narayan Hegde, in *From Cauvery to Godavari: Modern Kannada Short Stories*, ed. Ramachandra Sharma (Penguin Books: New Delhi, 1992), 44.

⁴ Saikat Majumdar, “The Provincial Polymath: The Curious Cosmopolitanism of Nirad C. Chaudhuri,” *PMLA*, Vol. 130, No. 2 (March 2015), 281.

⁵ Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Gautam Premnath, “Lonely Londoner: V.S. Naipaul and ‘The God of the City,’” in *Imagined Londons*, ed. Pamela K. Gilbert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 179.

⁶ Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

Salman Rushdie and heirs, to, more recently, the genre fictions, “new social realisms,” and “dystopic” narratives of the “New” global India.⁷ Thus, the most likely explanation for Chaudhuri’s relative obscurity vis-à-vis Naipaul is that he, unlike the Trinidadian, wrote nonfiction exclusively. But the scholarly tides have now turned toward nonfiction, in part because of the dominance of hybrid genres of travel writing, memoir, and journalistic reportage in the contemporary Indian Anglophone field.⁸ In this light, Chaudhuri emerges as a crucial forerunner of today’s fiction writers and nonfictionists. He served “as an interface between a colonizing culture and a colonized one” (162) long before writers like Naipaul, Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy were “marketed at the margins”⁹ of the West as native informants, cultural ambassadors, and mimic men.

The Thought of Nirad C. Chaudhuri is an ambitious book that anticipates the field’s return to Chaudhuri, while striving to think with and about him as a Bengali, an Indian, a South Asian, and an internationally-relevant public intellectual. It is also a useful teaching text that benefits from Almond’s scholarly breadth (he works on comparative literatures of Bengal, India, Mexico, and Turkey) and willingness to offer literature reviews (in Chapter 2, he usefully condenses about a dozen critical approaches to the archive, in one paragraph). What makes Almond’s task so difficult, however, is that by choosing to pursue Chaudhuri in parts, through discrete facets of his persona and identity, and through voiced fragments of his congenital ambivalence, Almond is himself unable to offer a compelling, coherent final argument. The Conclusion offers in a speculative vein “the possibility that there are no native informants, only moments of native informancy” (170), but this reads more like a retrospective rationale for the project than earned closure.

Which brings us back to one of the book’s most promising subjects: Chaudhuri’s Islam, both what Almond makes of it and what he might have. In Chapter 1, Almond offers the somewhat defeatist claim that, “The most we can do is chart the modality of Chaudhuri’s differing responses to Islam and, by linking them to certain identities, try to have an idea of where they came from” (59). Is that, in fact, the most we readers can do? I would argue that Chaudhuri’s different responses to Islam work together, justify and legitimize each other, and even serve as compensatory mechanisms for one or the other. Had Almond’s entire book been routed through the *joint* provocation of its subtitled terms, “Islam, Empire, and Loss,” a further series of questions might have emerged: Do Chaudhuri’s various engagements with Islam themselves constitute an archive, and if so, what does that tell us about the apprehension and utility of the Other? We know that Chaudhuri lamented “the loss of [Delhi’s] Muslim inhabitants” (48), but is Chaudhuri’s relationship to Islam finally one of melancholic incorporation? How might a comparative study of empires, Mughal and British, complicate our present understandings of colonial subject formation in the South Asian context?

Although Chaudhuri grew up among Muslims, he had to regain Islam through the archive, textually, in a library, decades later, and hundreds of miles from home. When he did, and when he had begun to appreciate the Islamic roots of what was trafficked in his lifetime

⁷ E Dawson Varughese, *Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Ulka Anjaria, “Realist Hieroglyphics: Aravind Adiga and the New Social Novel,” *Modern Fiction Studies* Vol. 61, Issue 1 (2015), 114-137; and Mrinalini Chakravorty, “Of Dystopias and Deliriums: The Millennial Novel in India,” *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, ed. Ulka Anjaria (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 267-281.

⁸ This turn is one I examine at length in my doctoral dissertation, *After New India: Diasporas, Anglophonisms, Returns* (University of California, Berkeley, 2016).

⁹ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

as “Indianness,” Islam became for Chaudhuri “the secret joke of Indian nationalism, the unspoken *bon mot* of Indian historiography, the clandestine formula which, once grasped, would dissolve the *maya* of Indian nationhood and render it absurd to its very foundations” (55).

Almond quotes Chaudhuri at length here, and in closing I want to reproduce the passage that Almond views as his subject’s most significant perspective on Islam, from *Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India: 1921-1952*. Chaudhuri writes:

My study of Islamic architecture had as its natural complement a study of Islamic history and civilization...I then realized what a mistake it had been for me not to have tried to know more about Islam...when I was in Bengal. It was certainly unnatural, because in east Bengal the majority of the population was Muslim, and we of the Hindu gentry had to deal with them every day...In Calcutta I had, of course, studied Islamic painting. I had also realized that the Muslims had a perfect right to their way of life, but that opinion was based on my observation of the actual social and political situation, and not on a proper appreciation of the greatness and significance of Islamic culture...I began to regret the ignorance of all Bengali Hindus. If they had known more about Islam and Islamic civilization...[t]here would have been some approach to each other based on respect. (57)

We know from Almond that this is the voice of a very particular (secular humanist, “scholar gypsy”¹⁰) Chaudhuri. We know that this is not a perspective consistently voiced in his work. Nevertheless, in 2016, in the context of an aggressively Hinduizing India and of virulent nationalisms stoked by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party, it is a story worth repeating, even in parts.

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¹⁰ Majumdar, 272.

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