

*Review of Matthew's Shum's
Improvisations of Empire
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One of the major ways in which identity, individual or collective, is forged, is through memory and the way in which documented memory expresses itself is history. For literary artists, the historian has to award spaces to the figure, both as an artist and as an individual. So the biographer and the traditional Historian of Literature,

both attempt to deal with the artist in related but separate ways. In his book *Improvisations of Empire*, Matthew Shum tries to do just that as he attempts to critically analyse the life and works of Thomas Pringle. Pringle, we are told, occupies a place of eminence and privilege in the South African literary canon and his work concerns various aspects of South Africa. His reputation rests primarily on how he represented the African space and went on to voice concerns about racial tolerance and freedom of the press. But how far his writings succeed in lending a voice to the people and the country is what the book tries to look into. Is the space that Pringle occupies in the history of South African Writing, one that he is justified in holding? Is there a need for re-assessment of his position? These are some of the questions that this book will lead the readers to ask.

The sub-title of the book reads *Thomas Pringle in Scotland, the Cape Colony and London, 1789-1834*. Shum, in this extensively researched study looks at Pringle from the point of view of the historian as well as that of a literary critic. His poems, prose writings are perceptively read and analysed in order to give him a space in the history of the colonial world as well as that of South Africa. The sub-title highlights how Pringle engaged with three regional spaces and how they helped to create some of his most interesting pieces of work. The time frame is also very interesting. The year 1789 marked the beginning of the French Revolution and the Romantic Age

is literature is accepted to have continued till the 1830's. Pringle thus lived and worked in the Romantic Era but the nineteenth century was simultaneously the period of Colonial engagements and his writings show the highly nuanced and sometimes complicated negotiations with both these literary and historical currents.

The book *Improvisations of Empire* is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 deals with Thomas Pringle's engagements with and in 'Scotland'. Chapter 2 locates him in 'The Eastern Cape Frontier'. Chapter 3 looks at his life and times in 'Cape Town and Beyond'. Chapter 4 finds him in 'London'. In each of these studies we find Pringle as an individual who is, in the words of Shum, 'a person in transit between different national spaces and also between different sets of formative influences' (Shum 2020, 1). The dialogue between Scottish and English Romanticism is found to yield some very interesting results. So also, the position and negotiation between being a settler in South Africa and lending voice to the rights of the natives, the relations between the European and the indigenous people become fertile areas which are analysed beautifully by Shum. What is interesting is that literary theory often tries to level out specificities in an attempt to establish the operation of its premises. In depth archival research and meticulous analysis of texts show how these larger binaries of the Colonizer / Colonized, the Self and the Other, the West and the Rest need to be thoroughly re-assessed in the context of spe-

cific historical moments. Matthew Shum tries to do just that. He engages with theory but does so critically and hints at conclusions which cannot be very simplistically expressed. Shum clarifies that though his study is on the whole chronological it should not be construed that he suggests a linear development in the writings of Pringle. On the other hand there are movements back and forth and the presence of a considerable degree of intertwining lends richness if not interesting complications to the works of Pringle.

Shum tries to use Romantic theory in his analysis of the texts of Pringle to a large extent. Conceptual intricacies such as the differences between the 'sublime' the 'beautiful' and the 'picturesque' are used to read Pringle's poems. In Chapter 1, in the study of poems written in and on Scotland, Shum notes a mismatch between the Scottish landscape that is portrayed and the tools, mainly derived from English Romantic poetry, which are used in those descriptions. The problems he faced in representing the 'gipsy' in the Scottish poems is resolved by making them part of the picturesque and this was later to become one of the basic ways of engagement with indigenous people of South Africa.

In his analysis of the period in the Eastern Frontier of Cape Colony, in Chapter 2 of the book, Pringle is represented as a figure troubled by insecurities inherent in the Colonial enterprise. His concerns about social hier-

archies and the need for reform and conversion of the indigenous population need to be placed in the context of potential material threats that the colonial personages faced from the tribal groups. Shum argues that there were contingencies in the ground situations which led to adjustments and sweeping generalisations regarding the idealistic bent of Pringle's thoughts need to be qualified and put in proper perspective.

The third chapter of the book looks at Pringle as a journalist and point to how 'Pringle's Scottish and imperial heritages played into his perception of how a nascent colonial civil society should evolve' (Shum 2020, 4). It was in this period of his life that he wrote poems where the indigenous characters are found to highlight the negative effects of colonial rule. We also learn that this was a troublesome period of his life when he fell out of favour with the persons in power and he also started thinking about humanitarian causes. How far his poems and other writings are products of the colonial gaze and how far they are sincere in their attempt to give space to the subaltern is open to interpretation. His actions in real life and the treatment of characters in art do not always go hand in hand. But this is not to label him as a hypocrite. Shum tries to put in intensive and detailed analysis to represent the enormous complexity of the life and times, complexities that are not always addressed in sweeping theoretical generalizations.

The fourth and final chapter of the book deals with

Pringle's time in London when his position regarding the colonial enterprise underwent significant changes. His writings reveal in the words of Shum, 'an inherent instability and a tendency toward repeated contrariety or contradiction' (Shum 2020, 7).

The entire study contains detailed and minute analysis of many poems of Pringle. Some of the texts analysed include : 'Evening Rambles', 'Afar in the Desert' 'The Song of the Wild Bushman', 'Makanna's Gathering', 'The Bechuana Boy', 'The Honeybird and the Woodpecker'. 'The Caffer Commando' and 'The Desolate Valley'. Along with these his prose work, *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* is also used for in depth analysis. His editorial enterprise in *The History of Mary Prince* is also used by Shum to describe the complex nature of Pringle's engagements with contemporary colonial politics and how the abolitionist agenda came within all of this.

Another aspect worth noting in this study is the way in which Shum has expressed his views on possible revisions that Pringle had made to lines and passages in his earlier work in order to suit them to the new and altered perspectives that he had on the situations later in life.

These in depth studies do not suggest that Shum is not willing to use theoretical premises in his writings. His work is replete with reference to theorists such as Je-

rome McGann, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak not to speak of earlier thinkers like Adam Smith and others. But he tries to use these terms and concepts only as starting points and in most of the cases, these theoretical premises tend to be qualified by the specific research that Shum undertakes.

Every serious act of literary criticism is also an act of reading the contemporary times of the critic into the texts that he is reading. This is not to suggest that critics are unable to look into the past and the ethos that made the artist write the way he did. However, the relevance of an artist of the past in present times is one of the main reasons why revisionist studies are undertaken. Shum feels that the figure of Thomas Pringle needs re-assessment in the contemporary times. This leads him on to complete his intensive and extensive research on Pringle. Shum clarifies his position in the concluding paragraph of his Introduction to the book. He says that an element of uncertainty dominates South African experience when excesses of European colonization and its continued, although disguised, existence are being put up on trial. In this context, Shum says, Pringle's work can be looked upon, 'as a complex resource for the embattled present rather than as a relic of the colonial past' (Shum 2020, 7). He ends the book with a very interesting turn of phrase as he adds that 'our obligation is to find a way of remembering him that is also a way of letting him go' (Shum 2020, 212).

