

A Cure for Melancholia?: *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel*

Eli Park Sorensen

224 pages, 2010, \$84.00 USD (hardcover)

Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, UK

Reviewed by Helga Ramsey-Kurz, University of Innsbruck, Austria

If, in 2000, Seshadri-Crooks pronounced postcolonial studies steeped in melancholia and “political disarray” (“Margins” 11), then the continued reiteration of this diagnosis by other theoreticians hardly suggests that a cure for the perceived malady has as yet been found. The enduring scholarly preoccupation with the discipline (rather than with its object of inquiry) could even be seen as symptomatic of a worsening of the situation and of the discipline’s descent from a state of melancholia to one of “paranoia” or “schizophrenia.” At any rate, these are the terms Eli Park Sorensen employs in *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel*, which takes Seshadri-Crooks’s appraisal of the state of the art of postcolonial studies as a starting point to advance a complex etiology of the discipline’s purported malaise and to prescribe a therapy capable of curing postcolonial studies of its current affliction.

For Sorensen, the root cause of this affliction lies in the dogged insistence of postcolonial critics on a direct correspondence between their own political agenda and modernist aesthetic techniques. He submits that this insistence has bred an unwarranted preference for writing marked by formal experimentation and an exaggerated distaste for formal conventionality. To justify this imbalance, postcolonial critics have increasingly been engaging in methodological self-reflection, or what Sorensen calls “methodological narcissism” (17), eventually losing sight of their “object proper” (20)—literature—and its “utopian or sublime impulse” (53), to which postcolonial studies used to pledge commitment.

Recommendations by theoreticians such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Derek Attridge, or Neil Lazarus to recuperate this impulse do not go far enough for Sorensen because of their continued reliance on the notion of “postcolonial aesthetic resistance” (36). In order to develop a less restricted understanding of the aesthetic, Sorensen contends, postcolonial studies must depart from the idea that literary form is merely auxiliary to the construction of political meaning and never in itself constitutive of it. Quite unmistakably, Sorensen’s source of inspiration is Georg Lukács and, in particular, Lukács’s understanding of the form of the realist novel as serving not a mimetic representation of *actual* coherence and completeness, but rather, the simulation of a semblance of totality precisely where there is none for the purpose of contesting the promise of causality and wholeness that the *content* of the realist novel typically holds. It is in recognizing the tension between content and form so characteristic of the realist novel and in realizing its “utopian-interpretive dynamic” (95) that Sorensen

sees a chance for postcolonial criticism to fundamentally change its “canonized expectations of what constitutes a proper, and properly representative, postcolonial literary text” (138).

Although Sorensen claims his plea to be for a *general* extension of the “aesthetic and political codifications” (75) of postcolonial criticism, the exemplary readings of individual texts which he undertakes in the second half of his book remain strictly limited to the genre of the novel. Poetry and drama, he argues, occupy only a “relatively peripheral role” (144) in postcolonial criticism and therefore are negligible also for his project. For an approach intended to transform postcolonial studies, such readiness to follow the example set by the discipline is puzzling and adds to the reader’s uncertainty as to *precisely* what the author of *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary* actually means by “the literary.” The interpretations Sorensen subsequently submits of the novels *Xala* by Ousmane Sembène, *Foe* by J.M. Coetzee, and *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry do not provide greater clarity on this either as they strictly abstain from differentiating between such categories as form, *sujet*, discourse or plot. We learn that all of these, as much as a general notion of aesthetics and style, constitute Sorensen’s idea of “the literary,” “the literary dimension” (x, 33), or “literature’s *differentia specifica*” (144).

Because he is critical of postcolonial critics’ tendency to prioritize content over form, Sorensen endeavors a balanced discussion of both in his analyses of Sembène, Coetzee, and Mistry, setting out to show how thematic and formal components of their novels interact and collaborate to complement and transform each other’s scope. In the case of *Xala*, this means that “the incommensurability between appearance and reality” (79) which Sembène captures in narrating the emergence of a native middle class in post-independence Senegal is reproduced and expanded by the novel’s multiple structural inconsistencies. Rather than propelling the narrative towards a definitive closure, these inconsistencies urge the progression towards a future in which the Fanonian projection of African natives as doomed to mimic their (former) oppressors will finally prove obsolete. In *Foe*, the assertion of the colonized subject’s real self seems to constitute a more tangible objective, at least according to Sorensen’s understanding of Coetzee’s novel as a text, which, through canonization, has “*become* postcolonial studies in disguise” (119). Sorensen postulates that, apart from Coetzee’s indebtedness to Defoe the spectacular success of his novel needs to be seen as reflecting and refracting “the radicalism and necessity of postcolonial studies as an affiliative, critical perspective” (119). If, for Sorensen, *Foe* is in dialogue with postcolonial criticism at large, *A Fine Balance* is concerned with a particular aspect of postcolonial discourse, namely its conception of postcolonial historicity, the inherent contradictions of which Sorensen finds formally and thematically explored in Mistry’s novel. *A Fine Balance* is contemporary postcolonial realism at its best for Sorensen because of the way in which the novel’s form, through its own reliance on the principle of selectivity, keeps referring to the existence of a larger framework within which the narrated, and indeed the already-written past, is contained and thus overcome.

In following Sorensen's ambitiously theoretical analyses one cannot help but suspect that his primary goal is not so much to rescue postcolonial criticism as to rehabilitate the realist novel within a discourse which, despite all prophecies of doom, is not as ailing as he makes it out to be. As *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary* shows, such rehabilitation, while constituting a worthwhile project in itself, will still need further methodological refinement to effect the desired expansion of current visions of what constitutes postcolonial literature. Whether a more open approach to realist novels will suffice to resolve *all* of the difficulties which the field of postcolonial studies is facing at present remains, however, doubtful. After all, there are acutely concrete challenges to the discipline that Sorensen overlooks, such as its growing temporal remove from the historic moment of decolonization and, correlatively, the loss of a shared sense of implication in this moment, one which used to foster collaboration between postcolonial writers and critics. Other concrete challenges postcolonial studies faces include new forms of "postcolonial authorship" that a globalized book market has produced (Brouillette, 7, 147) and an increasing detachment of key agents of this market from scholarly inquiry. Sorensen's poststructuralist account of postcolonial melancholia neglects all of these phenomena. With its focus on discourse, it effectively normalizes developments such as the retreat of the postcolonial author from the discipline. This inevitably raises doubts about the effectiveness of Sorensen's cure. While more than a placebo, this cure is certainly not a magic bullet and might best be seen as a palliative, offering a temporary respite from the overall sense of crisis but not a definitive solution.

Works Cited

- Seshadri-Crooks, Kalpana. "At the Margins of Postcolonial Studies: Part 1." *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks. Durham: Duke UP, 2000. 3-23. Print.
- Brouillette, Sarah. *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.