

“Re-setting Boundaries in Postcolonial Theories”

Postcolonial Theories

Jenni Ramone

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Postcolonial Theories by Jenni Ramone is one of the latest attempts to shed light on Postcolonial studies. As part of the *Transitions* series whose declared aim is to explore “passages and movements in critical thought” (x), the book targets “the student reader” (x) in an attempt to make postcolonial theory accessible to a wider range of readers.

The title of the book is rather misleading for it does not do justice to the wide scope of material that the book tackles. In addition to a review of the most outstanding theoretical contributions to the field, the book includes an examination of a vast array of colonial, anti-colonial, and diasporic literary texts that have always been one step ahead of theory in their delineation of what came to be defined later as postcolonial studies. The latter include issues as diverse as slavery and resistance, the problematics of representation, exile and diaspora, globalization and neocolonialism, and feminist and queer concerns in a postcolonial milieu, among others. In so doing, the book acknowledges that all these interests have been initially raised and addressed by literature, while theorization came at a later stage. In addition, the book takes into account the historical dimension that gives the reader the necessary background for a thorough understanding of both postcolonial literature and theory. Therefore, the use in the title of the plural noun “theories” rather than just theory magnifies the non-uniformity of the field and its versatility.

A little over 220 pages, the book is divided into four sections in addition to a timeline, an introduction, and an annotated bibliography. The timeline includes a listing of main historical and literary events linked to the colonial and postcolonial legacy. It is noteworthy that most chronicles of colonialism begin with the 1490s, which marks the beginning of European exploration of the New World and the breaking of the Muslim monopoly of trade in spices. However, this timeline begins with the year 1271, which witnessed the real beginning of international trade with Marco Polo’s travels. The real weight of these travels can be measured by the cultural influence of Polo’s *Description of the World*, a four-volume work considered to contain some of the oldest and most important representations of the Orient. This seminal work does establish a very important link between commerce, colonization, and cultural representation, a link that is specially tackled in the introduction - then frequently touched upon throughout the book.

The first part is divided into two chapters that cover the development from texts and contexts of resistance under colonialism as well as newer forms of textual and contextual resistance in a

post(-)colonial milieu. In addition to essential figures and texts that can never be overlooked in any book of the same interests, this section delves into issues not discussed in similar books. In a clear challenge to the usual boundaries of postcolonial theory, chapter one includes a discussion of settler societies such as the USA, Canada, Australia, and South Africa. Despite some similarities those societies might share with other postcolonial ones, there is no doubt that “the objective problems [facing each] were fundamentally heterogeneous” (Fanon 216). This heterogeneity is clear even in academia, where African American Studies and Aboriginal or Indigenous studies, for example, have always been quite independent of postcolonial studies, with their own theorists, concerns, and even terminology.

The writer’s decision to include settler societies in her range of material both in chapter one then later on in chapter five can be seen as part of the book’s attempt to be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible. As a way to avoid criticism, chapter two includes a very important discussion on defining the post (-)colonial field and its temporal and spatial areas of interest. This section is necessary for the student-reader, who does not have the kind of expertise that would enable him/her to be aware of the differences or to draw boundaries on his/her own. The rest of the chapter uses the historical cases of Hong-Kong’s movement from British to Chinese control and the partition of India to raise crucial postcolonial issues such as the role of memory, historiography, and giving voice to the subaltern. However, in addition to these recurrent issues, the chapter contains unusual choices of material, especially in the discussion of the cultural and legal contest over the decriminalization of homosexuality in Hong Kong and its relevance as the bodily manifestation of colonial and postcolonial relations between Britain and its former colony.

Part Two pays more attention to theory. Chapters three, four and five cover the main theoretical concerns of postcolonialism such as otherness, hybridity, language, nation and narration, as well as the role of the intellectual in a postcolonial context. These chapters cover the works of the “leading figures” of postcolonial theory: Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, but also the contributions of the following generations of theorists such as Trinh T Minh-ha, Rey Chow, Paul Gilroy, and Mudrooroo, among others. In order to avoid repetition of material already covered by other books and articles devoted to the explication of the main theoretical input of these theorists, the writer chooses to concentrate on more controversial areas in their works. While not failing to acknowledge the seminal nature of their work, she simultaneously sheds light on limitations and points of weakness, especially in areas that intersect with feminist, queer and subaltern topics.

Part Three brings the reader back to literature, providing a comparative study of some colonial and postcolonial novels. Chapter six brings together Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (as a typical colonial text), Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (as an example of writing back from a rather male-centred perspective) and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (as representing the female

perspective in counteracting colonial texts). Chapter seven deals with another strategy of writing back through the adaptation of Western canonical texts and their representation, from a native point of view. The chapter tackles three pairs of texts: William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and its adaptation by Aimé Césaire in *A Tempest*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as well as Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*. Finally, chapter eight focuses upon novels of migration. The chapter examines three diasporic texts that work as an embodiment of Homi Bhabha's "third space" and the ensuing paradox of nostalgia and disavowal that governs the migrant's relation to both his home and host cultures.

Part Four is one of the main merits of the book. Postcolonial Studies has lately faced many challenges. On a theoretical level and since the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the so-called "war on terror," it has become more and more difficult to see the world as postcolonial. On a more practical level, postcolonial criticism seemed to some readers to be entrapped within a closed circle of themes and techniques. The book addresses all these challenges by showing how the field manages to rejuvenate itself by widening its scope of interests through adopting interdisciplinary approaches that defy its presumed limitations. Through the juxtaposition between postcolonial studies, on the one hand, and ecocriticism, globalisation, gender studies, publishing and digital technology, on the other, this chapter demonstrates the new venues opened for both readers and students of the field.

Works Cited

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. C. Farrington. New York: Grove, 1966. Print.