

Postcolonial Literary Studies: The First Thirty Years

Ed. Robert P. Marzec

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Postcolonial studies has a great deal to offer in a world still imperiled by war, cultural and military colonialism, and a persistent demonizing of other cultures and religions. Precisely in virtue of its potential importance, both theoretical and practical, its insights should not be marred—as are those of so much literary theory—by being couched in language that is needlessly convoluted and replete with jargon. Postcolonial studies has a fraught connection with this problematic legacy of literary theory. As the editor of this anthology, Robert Marzec, points out, the essays gathered here—representing some of the important work published in *Modern Fiction Studies* over the last thirty years—both address this fraught connection and aim to illuminate the often obscured relation between fiction, interpretation, and the “arena of world politics” (2).

In his introduction, Marzec plausibly defines postcolonialism as theoretically confronting the expansionist activities of empire, widening cultural awareness, and challenging the identity politics that lead to separatism and exclusivism (2). The colonial legacy continues in multinational and transnational “entities” that generate uneven development in global capitalism. It extends to military investment and corporate privatizations of “third world spaces” (3). Resistance to colonialism, we are informed, originated outside the academy, and in the “pre-postcolonialist” scholarship of seminal figures such as Césaire and Fanon. As an academic field, postcolonialism originated in departments of literature. The discipline owes much to the varieties of poststructuralism that developed in the wake of the “linguistic turn,” which all viewed Western notions of identity and power as “social, cultural, and ontological constructions that had no real basis in any essential or indisputable reality” (whether any thinker ever believed in such a reality is another question). Postcolonialism broadened the endeavors of poststructuralism to speak to the “unequal distribution of power” (4). The most difficult battle faced by postcolonial scholars, urges Marzec, is general neglect of the role that fictions play in the construction of reality, as evident especially in “the lack of serious attention paid to literary scholarship in the academy today by policy makers and the general public” (11). Hence all of the essays in this volume foreground the importance of studying fiction (12). While Marzec’s introduction has value, some of its assumptions are questionable: surely the distinguishing feature of postcolonial studies is

not a focus on power (which was already treated by many branches of theory); and it is surely commonplace by now, even in all forms of media, that “reality” is a construction—an insight pioneered not by modern literary theory but by major thinkers such as Locke, Hume, Hegel, and Marx. And the “lack of serious attention” to literary scholarship rests, among other things, on its jargonizing language, a deficiency which this book, for all its other virtues, does not entirely escape.

Many essays explore valuably the connection between social struggles and the rise of new forms of literature, such as the “testimonio,” a genre distinctive to postcolonial literature. Other essays examine the kinship between colonial politics, nationalism, and aesthetics. Theresa Tensuan shows how the Iranian feminist Marjane Satrapi offers a novelistic critique of both Western imperialism and Iranian dictatorship and patriarchy. Barbara Harlow’s richly detailed essay “Narrative in Prison: Stories of the Palestinian *Intifada*” shows how the *intifada* or Palestinian uprising, which began in 1988 after twenty years of Israeli occupation, generated a variety of literary responses, which problematized conventional genres. The *intifada* forged a “biography of resistance” as exemplified by Raymonda Tawil’s *Women Prisoners*, which recounts the personal and political histories of Palestinian detainees in Israeli prisons. Indeed, the documentary—which might include personal stories, anecdotes, and the reports of human rights groups—became important as a literary genre, and contributed to a social narrative centered around prison rather than person or family.

In general, the Arab poetic tradition rallied around the *intifada*, and the role of the intellectual in political resistance became a widely discussed issue, together with the “inherited ideal” of literary autonomy (it is not clear how this ideal, formulated in Western traditions since Kant, was “inherited” in Arabic literature, which, as Harlow acknowledges, has a tradition of political engagement). Poems by Nizar Qabbani and Mahmoud Darwish became part of the transgressive narrative of the *intifada*, engaging not only literary critics but politicians and the media. Harlow also recounts the narratives emerging from Israel’s suppression of the newspaper *Derech-Hanitzotz* in February 1988 and even of the very notion of “childhood” (396). Such was the power of this alternative narrative that the Israeli government, in the words of Walid al-Fahum, “fears that literary production of any sort might escape the cell” (397).

A further set of essays examines the connections between modernity and the process of colonization, as well as the impact of Western education and the globalization of English. In his essay entitled “Worldly English” (which was originally the introduction to an issue of *MFS*), Michael Bérubé points out that English World Literature was too readily associated with postcolonial theory and its affiliations with cultural studies and postmodernism were unduly neglected. He cites various responses to Appiah’s raising the question of the analogies between postcolonialism and post-modernism (such as their critical attitude toward narratives of legitimation, itself ironically imbued with ethical universalism), and cites

Andrew Hoberek's view that postcolonial literatures have challenged the centrality and usefulness of the distinction between modern and postmodern. Bérubé suggests that postmodernism and postcolonialism may both be epiphenomena of globalization itself (370). Bérubé's essay deftly avoids commitment to any clearly articulated position or to the coherent exposition of any defined problem, as it identifies "critical tensions" in the rationale for a globalized English curriculum. These tensions center on nationalist tendencies, which persist even as they are eroded by "global flows," whereby Western discourse is already shaped by external discourses, as explored in essays on novels by Rushdie and others, which deal with themes of postcolonial migrancy, hybridity, and various "spaces."

A key issue faced by postcolonial studies is the articulation of a viable feminist program amid revolutions premised implicitly on patriarchal principles. The essays of Grant Farred and Ketu H. Katrak address this vexed question. In her essay "Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory for Postcolonial Women's Texts," Katrak rightfully indicts the obscurity ("often mistaken for profundity") endemic to much literary theory, which infects certain postcolonial writers' fashionable attempts to engage with it. She suggests that "social responsibility" must be the basis for any theory of postcolonial literature, which must respond to "urgent" social issues. Katrak proposes to advance "lucid" theoretical models for the study of women writers (85). She questions the uninformed statements of Western intellectuals such as Fredric Jameson, to the effect that "third world" [sic] literature is "necessarily allegorical." Instead, Katrak draws on Fanon and Gandhi for paradigms to interpret postcolonial writers. These paradigms include assessing the psychological aspects of colonialism, alienation, levels of racism, and violent revolution, as well as Gandhi's advocacy of *satyagraha*, or non-violence. While she sees the values of Fanon's paradigms in combating, for example, linguistic and cultural violence, and of Gandhi's doctrines in empowering women through their participation in social protest, she points to the limitations of both sets of paradigms in their application to women's struggle for liberation. The regressive aspects of culture, which were detrimental to women, persist through decolonization strategies. And Gandhi's ahistorical notions of truth and tradition—especially regarding women's capacity for "silent suffering"—effectively reinforced women's subordination (94). Katrak explains that women have been active in decolonizing culture and achieving a new self-definition through a number of strategies, including performing linguistic violence on the imperial language, using oral tradition, ritual, and folk forms. All of these, suggests Katrak, are effective tools of resistance against neocolonialism.

Other essays offer re-readings of seminal figures such as Thiong'o, accounts of the psychological and geographical legacies of colonial violence, and the re-reading of colonial texts from postcolonial perspectives, as in Clement Haws' comparison of *Midnight's Children* to *Tristram Shandy*. Pius Adesanmi reexamines the notions of diaspora in

“Francophone African Migritude” writers who attempt to subvert the “Orientalizing gaze” and to affirm their own status as “diasporic subjects” rather than outsiders. While the volume contains comprehensive sections on postcolonial Africa and India, the Middle East and South East Asia are generally missing, as is any substantial discussion of the notion of “world literature” or the globalization of English. But overall, this is a useful and well-organized collection of essays, almost all of which remain politically pertinent.