

Fictionalising Myth and History: A Study of Four Postcolonial Novels

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It is encouraging to see a book from India that moves beyond the standard Indian writing in English literary framework to engage in comparative postcolonial work, particularly when it includes the rarely discussed Pacific. This set of four studies sensibly adopts a consideration of postcolonial engagements with history via the creative deployment of myth to hold together four textual commentaries: on Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Kenyan fable *Matigari*; Witi Ihimaera's reworking of New Zealand's land wars from a Maori perspective, *The Matriarch*; Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*; and (inevitably) Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. These studies are followed by a chapter pointing to the need for ongoing postcolonial critiques of global capital and an appendix that investigates the myth of the Aryan invasion of India.

The textual studies offer some useful insights. The mythic framework enables the author to set up a pattern analysis of binaries in *Matigari* from which we are led to see the battle between the hero (an old Rip Van Winkle revenant who embodies both the zeal of Kenyan freedom fighters and the promise of Christian prophecy) and the corrupt Minister of an independent nation under thrall to global capital as one between two kinds of tricksters. The emphasis on Kashmir and the explication of the Buddhist "three baskets" of knowledge in *Midnight's Children* are also suggestive lines of analysis. Perhaps these could be extended into more observations with a more rigorous application of a specific model of myth (the Frye-Hayden White four-part typology, for instance). As it stands, the book tends to skim across a number of ideas about history and myth to make the general and now familiar point that "postcolonial" texts operate to fill gaps in and undermine dominant colonial history. This limits attention to the particular differences of each text.

It would also be good to have a clearer sense of the intended audience for this book in order to determine its strengths more easily and to point to ways to develop them further. If, for example, it is meant for a general undergraduate readership within the context of conventional literary scholarship in India, then the long textual commentaries will be acceptably useful (those on the Indian novels are solid readings) but will also require clear contextualising of books and authors likely to be unfamiliar to readers. Attention to accurate detail becomes more important, too. This is especially the case in Chapter Three on Witi Ihimaera's *The Matriarch*—a book rarely discussed in Indian publications in the "New Literatures" field. There is a failure of proofreading here, and a narrowness of knowledge of the topic that

allows mis-spellings of key names (the “extended family” is the *whanau*, not *whanou*; the culture hero is Maui, not Mui; the protagonist is Tamatea, not Tamatae) and inaccurate information (Maori certainly do have “graven images” of their gods— not all of them perhaps, but definitely some, although the biblical term is itself a problem; they also do have a prophetic tradition predating colonial contacts). If this work is intended for scholars of postcolonial writing in the international arena, then the heavy reliance on close reading casts light on the need for a stronger theoretical framework, more breadth of scholarship, and a more critical inspection of sources.

At this level, we might expect careful use of key terms (“postcolonial” can have a number of meanings: here it seems to be taken for granted that we understand it to mean a broad anti-colonial project; “deconstruction” is a specific mode of critical practice, not just a novelist’s debunking of received history). We will also look for fine-tuned discriminations amongst differences. Seeing comparisons between two opposing trickster figures is fine, but jumping to discuss them (modern East African figures) in relation to Anansi (traditional West African) needs at least a short qualification. General reliance on mythic archetypes and postcolonial tropes such as hybridity also prevents the work from using more specific devices that might bring out the nature of each text more clearly. Allegory, for instance, clearly operates in three of the novels, but not in *The Matriarch*, which also— though it does show the formation of a syncretic religious movement— works disjunctively to point to incommensurable differences of epistemology between indigenous spirituality and western secular history.

The final two sections of the book are something of a change of gear, in that they move away from literary readings to considerations of the ongoing colonial effects of globalising capital and the colonialist imposition (via Max Muller) of a narrative of the Aryan invasion of north India. Clearly the postcolonial project supports both of these critiques. However, the first relies heavily on the work of one investigative journalist and begins to sound like popular American conspiracy theories if not also something akin to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The second relies on some Indian texts evidently produced by “interested” publishing houses and heads into what looks like a reverse colonial myth that all civilisation emanated from India, or even into a vision of India as pan-Hindu-Brahminical that could easily be put to use by Hindutva hypernationalists and anyone opposed to Dravidian or Dalit assertiveness. This does not seem to be the intention of the study. However, greater breadth of scholarly reading and critical awareness of the tricky nature of myth and its political uses would make these two important parts of the book a lot stronger.

Taking on a wide cross-cultural comparative study is always a brave enterprise, and the author is to be commended for her ambition and for finding the framework with which to tie together the various sections. More reading around Witi Ihimaera, such as Mark Williams’s *Leaving the Highway*, for example, and the debate over plagiarism, would consolidate Chapter Three, and careful referencing (the names

of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Linda Hutcheon, and Stanley Wolpert are misspelled in the bibliography; one of Robert Young's works is dealt with but his other works, which are more apposite in relation to history and myth, could have been brought in to good effect) would improve the impression left by this otherwise interesting book.

Works Cited

Williams, Mark. *Leaving the Highway: Six Contemporary New Zealand Novelists*. Auckland: Auckland UP, 1990. Print.