

Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation, and Memory

Dennis Walder

204 pages, 2012, \$44.95 USD (hardcover)

New York and London, Routledge

Reviewed by Ashok K Mohapatra, Sambalpur University, India

In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into a private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.

— Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

Originating in the late 17th century as a medical condition of despondency and exaggerated longing for home, nostalgia came to signify a whole range of cultural and aesthetic attitudes to self, home and the past throughout the 19th century until it was grounded in the psychologization of memory initiated by modernists like Proust, Joyce and Woolf. Until the mid-twentieth century, colonialism continued to bring about physical and cultural displacements as well as relocations of not only the natives but also the colonial settlers in many parts of the world. As such, displacement remained the underlying cause of nostalgia. However, in the wake of the large-scale dislocations caused by global postcolonial modernity, this phenomenon became ubiquitous and more accentuated in the dispersed spatialities, in terms of the intersection and conflict of the temporalities of memory and history.

Given the above genealogy of postcolonial nostalgia, one can unpack the concept to reveal a plethora of critical issues that highlight new ethical perspectives. This is understandable in light of the prevalence of contemporary intellectual temper to engage philosophically the issues of justice regarding “the other”—be it of one’s self or one’s present time and history. This is what Dennis Walder seeks to do in *Postcolonial Nostalgias*. The issues his book engages with concern the politicizing of the aesthetics of postcolonial memory-chronotopes and a special positioning of the nostalgic self in the no-man’s land or the “twilight zone” between history and memory (à la Eric Hobsbawm), where individual memory extends through family traditions into the relatively dispassionate, public sphere of recorded history. It is this zone that nostalgia represents, where memory and history refract each other. Hence, postcolonial nostalgia negotiates the two and assumes great heuristic value as it admits the past into the present in a fragmentary, nuanced and elusive way. This allows a potential for self-reflexivity and irony as appropriate factors in postcolonial narratives that enable former colonial/ diasporic subjects to explore the network of power relations within which they have been caught in the modern world, and beyond which it often seems impossible to move.

Postcoloniality admits of the tension between personal memory and collective memory more conspicuously than any other epistemic

and ontological condition. For this reason, Walder finds useful the theoretical insights of Svetlana Boym, regarding the categorization of personal and collective memory, the modes of their relationship, and the dynamics of reflective and restorative nostalgias in history, together with their temporal and spatial orientations. Although formulated within history, nostalgia is—as Boym suggests in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001)—a project to counter positivist, linear history and reconstitute a more critically nuanced historical sense that ranges freely across the temporalities of the past and present, and even at times extending to the future. Boym says famously in the Introduction to her book that “nostalgia speaks in riddles and puzzles, so one must face them in order not to become its next victim—or its next victimizer” (xvii). The implication is the possibility of a critical comprehension of the ways in which interpretations and self-projections of the nostalgic self are inflected by national memories and fantasies, how received knowledge of history is undermined by memories of lived truths, and also how, as Walder finds in Doris Lessing’s *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*, a “creatively reflective” nostalgia shows us not what the past was but what it could have been. One can very well see how Walder’s reading of Lessing endorses Andreas Huyssen’s view in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (1995) that a temporal split between memory and representation, the mutually complementary components of postcolonial aesthetics, offers the creativity and vitality of memory rather than authenticity, which is more illusory than real.

Walder’s emphasis on the ethicality of nostalgia is also evident from the inspiration he draws from Avishai Margalit’s *The Ethics of Memory* (2002) or from Jon J. Su’s *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novels* (2005) in order to formulate alternative communal archives of memories from postcolonial fiction that respond to the moral claims of the past, militating against arid and often dubious postmodernist otherness on the one hand and the positivist arrogance of histories on the other. The narratives deployed in fiction generally labelled as postcolonial are still useful, claims Walder, in that their non-linear and multi-perspectival nature and proclivities for fragmentariness can prove immensely pertinent in pointing out the uncertainties and aporias erased from the triumphalist postcolonial histories and nostalgic mythologies of the ex-colonials about the colonies of the past or the homes they had left behind there.

In the six chapters that follow the introductory one, Walder looks at a wide variety of postcolonial texts from Caribbean, South African, Nigerian or Chinese sites, and focuses on the fiction of authors as varied as V.S. Naipaul, Doris Lessing, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Antjie Krog, W.G. Sebald and J.G. Ballard. The differences of narrative modes and experiences in their novels notwithstanding, they all entail the interweaving of personal memory and history as well as the refracting of one through the other. This kind of novelistic craft achieves a complex aesthetic of unpacking the archives of memory and mapping the past not just onto the present but also onto the future.

A critically informed understanding of nostalgia, a key postcolonial theme, is obtained in this way. What also comes to the fore is a problematic aspect of the search for home and homecoming that constitutes an important trope of postcolonial narrative. Nostalgia is no longer naively understood as a sentimental longing for and recreation of an irretrievable past by the individual subject, but one overlaid with an imperial nostalgia and fantasy, implicated in a politics of amnesia on the part of the ex-colonial subject. It elides many segments of history that cannot be easily reconstructed by a postcolonial migrant, as Sebald shows in his novel *Austerlitz*, in which the eponymous protagonist in his search for self-identity, origins and home confronts the abyss of nothingness. Since the pastness of colonization is immanent in the postcolonial present, and the search on the part of the postcolonial migrant for “home” entails infinite regressions, locating the site of an uncontaminated pre-colonial past becomes an impossible proposition. This is the experience of the narrator in Sebald’s *Vertigo*. What postcolonial fiction offers is a mode of self-reflexive representation of the very process of the construction of the past and exploration of a new trajectory toward the future, some sort of *futur antérieur*. Here the temporal and spatial fixities are unsettled, histories overlap biography and fantasy, as they do, for instance, in J.G. Ballard’s *Empire of the Sun*. In spite of himself, Ballard revisited the almost forgotten past of the Japanese invasion of Shanghai during World War II. Harboring distrust of the kitsch of collective nostalgia and direct representation in the mode of social realism, he deploys a non-linear, cyclic narrative, interweaving the temporalities of the past and the future, in order to represent non-western perspectives on the past.

Since an element of amnesia inheres in nostalgia in general and imperialist nostalgia in particular, it places a kind of intellectual pressure on scholars to theorize not just nostalgia, but also amnesia. Thus what emerges is a contentious theoretical terrain of memory and amnesia with conflicting imperatives. To take three clearly defined positions, Arif Dirlik ruefully believes that the postcolonial project itself is predicated upon a historical amnesia on the part of postcolonial intellectuals who crowd First-World metropolises and enjoy their own psychic and cultural liberation. Against this forgetting, he underscores the epistemic acknowledgement of the authenticity of colonial struggle. For his part, Renato Rosaldo argues for a resistant memory that critically invokes imperialist nostalgia in order to understand the patterns of complicity in the very act, so that one can move beyond it. Anti-imperialist nostalgia is the third position theorized by Huyssen and many others as regards nostalgia of the empires in order to trace the possible paths that a certain imperial past could have opened up.

It is in the above context that we can locate *Postcolonial Nostalgias* and appreciate how richly resourceful and insightful this book is. Through its incisive analysis of texts we get to understand not only the ethical importance of the representations of uncertainties and aporias that the fixed chronotopes of nostalgia tend to elide, but also begin to feel that the new dynamics of the past and the future operating

in the present help us to think beyond the hyphenated bind of postcolonial migrants stuck in the liminal space between intangible homes.

Works Cited

- Boym, Svetlana. "Taboo on Nostalgia?" Introduction. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001. xiii-xix. Print.
- Dirlik, Arif. "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Era of Global Capitalism". *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Winter 1994): 328-56. Print.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Margalit, Avishai. *The Ethics of Memory*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002. Print.
- Rosaldo, Renato. "Imperialist Nostalgia". *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 107-22. Print.
- Su, John J. *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.