The Postcolonial Epic: From Melville to Walcott and Ghosh

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Novelistic prose has occasionally been defined as epic when its visionary breadth, length, and literary longevity demand such a label. Literary categorizations of the novel such as the *bildungsroman*, the *picaresque*, and the *roman à clef* are usually invoked with some caution and clarification when discussing non-Western literary works. In her discussion of Eurochronology and periodicity, Emily Apter mentions that "critical traditions and disciplines founded in the Western academy contain inbuilt typologies," such as the epic, "adduced from Western literary examples" making it "impossible to disintricate the genre of epic from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and from the idea of ancient Greece as the foundation of Western civilization" (57). Since Western literary history takes a different trajectory from literary histories of the non-West, some of these categorizations are an uneasy fit. One may then ask if it is possible to make the interpretive leap from the West to the non-West, from the creations of Homer, Virgil, Milton, Byron and Ezra Pound to those of Tulsidas, Ferdowsi, the Malian *griots* who composed *Sundiata*, and Derek Walcott, when discussing the epic. The epic is defined differently in each part of the world such that its variations attest to the fluidity of the category itself. A similar interpretive fluidity characterizes Sneharika Roy's recent monograph on the postcolonial epic, a category she uses to describe both prose and poetry. Roy's examples of the postcolonial epic are Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, and Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy.

Roy's approach in this monograph is at once comparative and closely textual. Rather than follow a predictable trajectory of analyzing each work as an instance of the epic in a separate chapter, Roy weaves the analysis of all works in the three body chapters of her book, cleverly titled "Rallying the tropes," "'History in the future tense,'" and "'The artifice of eternity.'" Setting up the terms of her analysis in the introductory chapter, Roy writes: "This book limits its focus to only one of the many manifestations of epic across cultures: written 'political epic" (3). Beginning with C.M. Bowra's 1945 definition of "national epic," Roy clarifies that her use of the term "political epic" designates "that kind of epic typified by enunciative tensions between its political genealogy, one that represents a 'self-generating nation, extrinsic to other nations' (Bhabha 2008: 208) and its poetics of emulative intertextuality, one that is intrinsically embedded in the cultures of other nations" (16). One way in which Roy demonstrates

such intertextuality in the first chapter is by reading epic similes to demonstrate the work they perform in placing the narratives firmly within a historical and geographical context characterized by the negative impacts of colonialism such as rampant mercantile capitalism, enforced labor, and sexual exploitation, as well as more its mixed effects of travel, tourism, linguistic, cultural, racial hybridity.

Through close readings of tropes, genealogy, and *ekphrasis* in the book, Roy arrives at the conclusion that, "postcolonial epic expresses utopia through elegy, nostalgically reconstituting transnational microhistories of subaltern solidarity and resistance (white and non-white sailors whaling together in *Moby Dick*; indigenous Arawaks and First Nations putting up armed struggle as well as the transethnic bardic coalition in *Omeros*; the siblinghood of lascars and indenture laborers in the *Ibis* trilogy) within global systems of speculative capitalism" (183). The three nautical texts Roy has chosen lend themselves very readily to such an analysis. Roy's reading emphasizes the influence of Virgil's *Aenied* and Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as direct and indirect influences on these three works such that filiation emerges as one of the key tropes in this critical study. Though burdened by the shameful histories of human and material extraction, modern modes of transportation such as ships, their goods, and the motley crew of characters described in these works enable Roy to describe the transformation of the national epic into the postcolonial epic through the trope of parricide. The author suggests that the postcolonial epic "kills" the national epic since the latter has often "expressed deeply conservative messages." "(185). Both filiation and parricide are, of course, especially loaded ways to describe the relationship between the various kinds of epics in the classical philological tradition, which is not usually known for stepping outside its masculinist perspective. Even as she invokes this tradition, Roy provides brief but astute analyses of the postcolonial epic's biological overdetermination of men, such as the South Seas native Queequeg in *Moby Dick*, women such as Helen and Maud in *Omeros*, and Deeti in the *Ibis* trilogy.

If there is a minor omission in this book, it is its lack of attention to the centrality of the epic in discussions of world literature. Among others, David Damrosch has directed attention to the circuits of rediscovery of the epic *Gilgamesh* in a definitive chapter in *What is World Literature* (2003), and then in *The Buried Book: The Loss and Discovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (2007). Alexander Beecroft's detailed ecologies of world literature specify distinctions between "epichoric," "panchoric," "cosmopolitan," "vernacular," "national," and "global" literatures (2015). The American, Caribbean, and Asian instances of the epic analyzed by Roy destabilize many of Beecroft's categories, and would allow for an inflection of such paradigms of world literature through a consideration of postcoloniality. The national and historical specificity demanded of postcolonial analysis contests the broader heuristic of world literature. The latter has sometimes been guilty of avoiding specificity in favor of

universal criterion of literary value and worth, and these are matters that need further exploration in connection with the epic. The tensions are well illustrated in the epic genre. Roy does some of this much-needed work within the monograph already, without directly invoking the category world literature. A future direction of research arising out of this important book could be whether the epic as a genre allows further interrogation of categorizations such as world literature.

Works Cited

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