

*Postcolonial Poetics: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Critical Readings*

Elleke Boehmer

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Elleke Boehmer's *Postcolonial Poetics: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Critical Readings* has one primary aim: to fill a series of lacunae endemic, it argues, to postcolonial literary studies. Operating from the premise that the field of "postcolonial literary studies has tended to overlook or side-step questions of poetics as the 'real world' issues it has sought to confront have appeared by contrast so urgent" (1), *Postcolonial Poetics* instead asks its reader to return to the text as a key site upon which the relevance and urgency of postcolonial literature might be most aptly felt. To do so, it develops a pragmatic poetics as an analytic framework through which to understand "how we read postcolonial literature today" (1).

In recent years, a number of critics have noted the importance of reading in the development of colonial and postcolonial cultures, the shaping of affect and the ethical force of literary engagement. From Stephanie Newell's pioneering research on literary cultures in colonial Ghana to Bethan Benwell, James Procter and Gemma Robinson's edited collection *Postcolonial Audiences* or more recent work by Hayley Toth that analyses reader response and non-expert reviews, this line of scholarship has centered on the ways in which any mode of literary analysis remains incomplete without a consideration of the ways in which literature comes to be received by its publics. Unlike these works, which broadly center on the empirical examination of actual readers and reading practices, *Postcolonial Poetics* retains a singular focus on the text, arguing that "literary writing itself lays down structures and protocols to shape and guide our reading" (1). Defining reading as "an inventive, border-traversing activity" (1), *Postcolonial Poetics* forcefully demonstrates the ways in which the textual structures which guide reading "sharpen rather than obscure" (2) our attention to the "real world" themes with which postcolonial literary analysis is so often preoccupied. In this sense, *Postcolonial Poetics* is an ambitious and wide-ranging study, covering literature from West and southern Africa, Britain, South Asia and elsewhere in a broad range of close readings and analyses organised along thematic lines. Throughout, it maintains a stubborn insistence on what Attridge once termed the "singularity of literature," viewing the

literary text as *literary* and as *writing* as the basis of its impact on readers.

Chapter one opens with an overview of the various disciplines and discourses into which *Postcolonial Poetics* intervenes. Covering a range of topics in postcolonial studies, theories of reading, poetics and stylistics, it sets the stage in its own terms, for what is to come. The second chapter, "Questions of Postcolonial Poetics," narrows in on an extended discussion of the pragmatic poetics that informs subsequent readings. Of particular interest in this chapter is the attempt to identify a set of structures, forms and poetic features which might differentiate postcolonial writing from other forms of literature, what Boehmer terms "certain recognizable structural, linguistic, and rhetorical procedures" (28) which drive its readerly reception as postcolonial. Chapters three through eight extend upon the theoretical foundations laid out in the first two chapters to explore a set of interconnected and progressing themes: resistance literature in the twenty-first century, including an update on Harlow's text that explores the use of juxtaposition as a textual strategy for invoking new ways of thinking and being; terror writing as a practice of revision and projection into an as yet unrealised futurity; repetition compulsions and return as an expression of national trauma in South African writing; poetics as a mode of tracing creative lineages and influence in the deep structure of contemporary Nigerian texts; transverse and lateral South-South exchange as a means of reformulating the cartographies of world literary studies; and the readerly push-pull of short form and poetic writing as an act of kinesic transportation towards a utopian horizon. Across its eight chapters, *Postcolonial Poetics* melds sustained and considered theoretical elaborations with succinct readings of texts across all literary genres, including poetry, spoken word, short stories and novels. Through its richness of scope, the study offers a number of largescale meditations on the nature of postcolonial literature, as a mode of literary writing, and the formal features which underlie its reception as such.

In a 2018 essay revisiting her earlier essay on the extroverted African novel, literary theorist Eileen Julien notes that the question of extroversion is one which both requires a consideration of reception, particularly the positioning of certain texts as "extroverted," as well as a study of form, which might allow us to determine which textual structures and effects position that reception. *Postcolonial Poetics* appears to heed this call, going even further to enable a thinking through not merely of what makes a literary work "postcolonial," that is "cross-border, trans-planetary" (146) and by default extroverted, but also what might frustrate such readings. Beyond the particular emphasis in each chapter, *Postcolonial Poetics* offers an exhaustive consideration of some of the most pressing major debates shaping the

field today, touching on competing notions of postcolonialism, world literary theory, world-systems approaches, poststructuralism, materialist critique and more. If there are weaknesses here, they stem from what could be interpreted as too rigid a distinction between what are presented as the oppositional poles of political and aesthetic analysis. This perspective has the potential to downplay *Postcolonial Poetics*' own contribution that the aesthetic may inform the political and vice versa. Equally, the vision of the postcolonial deployed across the monograph is one based on border crossings, transnational movements and entanglements, implying a kind of global purview which makes one wonder what a poetics based upon a vernacular or localised vision of the postcolonial might be. It also must be noted that the majority of texts under analysis in *Postcolonial Poetics* come from the Anglophone world, perhaps a reflection of the larger biases of postcolonial studies more broadly, and suggestive of the potential of future research building on this foundation in other linguistic spheres.

At its heart, *Postcolonial Poetics* is a book about communication. It emphasizes across its pages the simple – yet too often simply forgotten – fact that reading is itself a form of communication and literature its medium, something Raymond Williams noted in the 1960s, but which has often fallen out of critical focus. Here, instead, we are reminded that “any reading sets off a cascading of inferences” (8) operating on multiple levels; that “it is the reader who responds to and activates” the formal properties of the text and its impacts (40-1); that “reading centres the reader in the on-running moment of the text’s unfolding” (74) enabling its radical energies to emerge. Far from passive, reading is an act of creation and creativity which could not happen without the text, and it is here, perhaps, that the most transformative potential of a postcolonial reading might lie.

### Works Cited

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