

The Global Novel and Capitalism in Crisis: Contemporary Literary Narratives

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In *The Global Novel and Capitalism in Crisis: Contemporary Literary Narratives*, Treasa De Loughry analyzes a variety of aesthetic strategies used by contemporary writers to represent and comprehend the operation of the capitalist world-system and its attendant financial, ecological, and geopolitical crises. De Loughry situates these issues in relation to ongoing debates about the nature of world literature typified by the work of Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, for whom the development of literary aesthetics needs to be understood in relation to the uneven power structures at work within the “world republic of letters.” However, the book takes as its primary focus the horizon of global capitalism itself, which the Warwick Research Collective has argued “exists unforgoably as the matrix within which all modern literature takes shape” (qtd in De Loughry 7). For De Loughry, literature plays a central role in “navigating and making understandable vast and often unimaginably global processes” (7).

In looking at contemporary fiction through this lens, the book departs from the “postcolonial ground from whence global literature emerged” (3). De Loughry argues that postcolonial studies have a “conceptual incapacity” to “grapple with a situation that exceeds anti-colonial temporalities” (4), and have been incapable of identifying “the structural nature of previous and ongoing (neo)colonialisms” (6). The “institutionalisation” of postcolonial theory, and its consequent tendency to “privilege migration, cosmopolitanism, and mobility as virtuous traits” (5), have rendered it susceptible to co-optation into the transnational ideals of capitalist globalisation, while it has struggled to provide an analytical framework for understanding “the new financial mechanisms by which formerly colonised nation-states experienced shock integrations into the world-system” (3-4). There is an interesting parallel between this critical evolution and De Loughry’s analysis of the development of one of postcolonial literature’s figureheads, Salman Rushdie. In her analysis of *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, De Loughry notes that the novel’s cynical “post-dirigisme realism” rejects “the suitability of an earlier magic realism to narrate the travails of the post-IMF-World Bank nation-state” (55). This parallel between theoretical and aesthetic responses to the world-system neatly illustrates the book’s working assumption, which is that the profound complexity of world-systemic capitalism impels but does not determine intellectual

and literary engagement with the urgency of addressing and representing its calamitous effects.

The primary challenge in doing this consists in giving representation to the “unimaginable totality of capitalism” (2). De Loughry’s book is concerned with how a “crisis of capitalism is registered in disciplinary and representational terms as an incapacity to narrate totality” (2). The “vast networks that now constitute lived experience,” she says, “can only be observed through their epiphenomenal affects” (8), in particular the various crises that emerge as a result of the operation of the world-system of capital. Literary form can enable a coherent understanding of the nature of these crises, but that understanding can vary: De Loughry notes that while crises are “mediated through inherited literary modes,” that mediation can “maintain, limit, challenge, and/or expand our apprehension of the nature of these events” (9). The novels De Loughry analyzes here are all “global” fictions in the sense that they “take the world as their horizon of understanding and seek the causal forces by which agency is eroded and history shaped” (11), but the explanations that they provide, or that their formal structures enable, vary widely.

For instance, in her analysis of three of Rushdie’s novels of globalization, De Loughry maps a trajectory of changing representations of the world-system, from the postcolonial aesthetics of *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, to a kind of mythologization of deterritorialized globalization in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, to narrating the decline of American hegemony through the depiction of the global city in *Fury*. Analyzing the works of English author David Mitchell, De Loughry recognizes his ambition to “imagine totality through networked and transhistorical narratives,” but argues that his works tend to render capitalist consumption and extraction as inevitable elements of human nature, and to “stabilise an idea of human civilisation as universally hubristic” (88). For all its narrative ambition and its capacity to imagine the historical processes of the world-system on a global scale, *Cloud Atlas*, she argues, “strips individuals of historical agency,” while the “historical structure” of the novel is predicated on “a crushing social determinism” (108).

De Loughry contrasts Mitchell’s approach with those of novelists like Rana Dasgupta and Rachel Kushner, whose novels “register the violent penetration of global capitalism in peripheral zones and take capitalist modernity as their overt political horizon” (91). These novelists, she says, practice an “estranging” realism that depicts “relations of power and capitalist expropriation through experimental forms” (29). Dasgupta’s work deploys aesthetic forms that “elicit the magical, estranging, and global qualities of capitalism” (132), using “fragmented and folkloric narrative form” to “imbue vast systems with meaning” and to articulate the gap between those systems and lived experience. Kushner’s novels, by contrast, adopt a historical realist

form, but offer “*global* rather than strictly *national* narratives of world-systemic unevenness” (170). The “disparate global fragments” in her works enable the reader to comprehend the inter-connectedness of the world-system even as they acknowledge “the impossibility of the average spectator/narrator accessing totalising viewpoints” (172).

For all the new interpretive possibilities opened up by world-systemic approaches to literature in the last couple of decades, such approaches have at times lacked sophistication in connecting theory to questions of literary form and writing practice. In this respect, De Loughry’s highly perceptive close readings of the texts are refreshing and provide a compelling methodological approach to understanding how contemporary global novels give representational form to global processes and crises. Moreover, *The Global Novel and Capitalism in Crisis* explicates not only how these narratives represent the world-system, but also what they make possible. For De Loughry, by juxtaposing experiences across the world-system, global novels can create formal connections and expressions of collectivity among those who oppose and resist the predations of contemporary capitalism (194). In doing so, such novels not only give expression and coherence to the overwhelming complexity of global capital, but also imagine the kind of networks and interconnections necessary to fight against it. In its unpacking of the representational challenges posed by the contemporary world-system of capital, and in the methodological sophistication and elegance of its reading of novels that respond to that challenge, De Loughry’s book constitutes a major contribution to ongoing debates about the role of literature in engaging with the intersecting crises of contemporary capitalism.