

Postcolonial Poetry in English

(Oxford Studies in Postcolonial Literatures in English)

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267 pages, 2006, \$99 USD (hardcover)

Oxford University Press, New York

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This book is a must read title for those who are interested in the fields of postcolonial studies and contemporary poetry. Rajeev Patke displays exceptional control over his material and is able to do full justice to the diversity of the poetry that he has chosen to study. In fact, one of the positive aspects of this book is Patke's acute awareness of the intrinsic relationship between the poetry and the context from which it emerges. His aim is to understand what is common to postcolonial poetry from different locations, while keeping their uniqueness in perspective.

The book is divided into three parts: Introduction, Survey and Analysis. Part I introduces the assumptions and methodology adopted. At the outset Patke spells out his definition of "postcolonial" as a transitional category, a term that "covers the gap between political self-rule and cultural autonomy" (5). Accordingly, "postcolonial poetry in English" is marked by a "combination of assimilation and resistance to English as a language and a culture" (vii). He looks upon the United States of America as having overcome the postcolonial stage and as having emerged as an autonomous English-speaking nation; therefore, its poetry remains outside the purview of the book. The other unstated choice which Patke has made is to discuss the hybridity of postcolonial poetry without having recourse to hyphenated labels—for example, English poetry written in Canada is Canadian poetry and not Anglo-Canadian poetry. This is a significant advance in the path to cultural autonomy. The first chapter, "Poetry and Postcoloniality" explores the various perspectives from which the relationship between poetry and the postcolonial condition may be approached, whereby experimentation with language becomes a form of resistance and a mode for reshaping cultural selfhood. Radicalism is embedded in the themes of postcolonial poetry as well as in its attempts to imaginatively deal with the history of loss under colonial rule and the reality of exile and diaspora that has inevitably accompanied all postcolonial predicaments. The second chapter, "Back to the Future", undertakes an analysis of three collections of poetry which present the different attitudes with which women confront the circumstances thrown before them by colonial reality. *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989/1993) by Marlene Nourbese Philip captures the disempowerment caused by an alien language through the relationship between a slave mother and her daughter. The

implications of living in a society based on racial prejudice are brought out by Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* (1991) through the differing viewpoints of a black woman, her unwanted daughter, and the black girl's Scottish adoptive parents. Through Ingrid de Kok's *Terrestrial Things* (2002), Patke shows the poetic challenge posed by the realities of events such as the Truth and Reconciliation process in post-apartheid South Africa.

Part II, which is organised into four chapters—"South Asia and Southeast Asia", "The Caribbean", "Black Africa" and "The Settler Countries"—is a comprehensive survey of the various locales from which Anglophone poetry in English has been inscribed in the former colonies of Britain. It is here that Patke's grasp of the socio-historical contexts within which Anglophone poetry developed in each of these locales is demonstrated. The narrative of this development takes the reader into the many nuances through which the journey from assimilation to resistance and finally autonomy is undertaken by the poets. Patke displays a keen awareness of the politics of English as a forced tongue mediated by the history of slavery, indentured labour, racism and brute oppression. With amazing deftness, Patke manages to keep his discussion concise and yet cover all that is necessary for the reader to understand his viewpoint. It needs to be stressed that this effect is achieved even as the narrative moves across many cultures and continents, without succumbing to the perils of universalisation. Particularly fascinating is the discussion of the many varieties of Creole poetry in the Caribbean. Patke reconstructs the history of oral poetry from the reality of slavery and indentured labour. Elements of poetic representation were passed on orally from generation to generation in the form of songs, proverbs, riddles and folk tales. When poets attempted to recreate the oral patterns of these forms, it resulted in the rhythms of Calypso, Reggae, and Dub Poetry. Patke's discussion of English poetry from South Africa is an example of how he regards poetry as a form of protest against the silencing of opinion and democracy. Given the fact that much of protest poetry is composed and performed in secrecy, we are grateful to Patke for retrieving these valuable sources.

Part III analyses some of the themes identified in the previous sections. In each chapter—"Minoritarian Sensibilities", "Techniques of Self-Representation" and "Recurrent Motifs: Voyage and Translation"—Patke takes up case studies to demonstrate the response of postcolonial poets to marginalization, ethnicity, politics of gender, the occurrence of migration and self-exile. This section also doubles as a handy introduction to the works of notable poets like Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Ee Tiang Hong and A.K. Ramanujan.

Postcolonial Poetry in English holds the promise of reframing the canon of postcolonial poetry. It also serves as a springboard for further study in the field and is amply aided by a resourceful bibliography. Exiles real and imaginary, willing and unwilling, have played a visible role in the shaping of postcolonial poetry. Patke elucidates, with ample illustration, the conditions in which English became the chosen media for postcolonial poets and their struggles to wrench the language free

from the politics of colonialism. Patke also draws attention to the presence of agencies like the BBC and the European publishing industry in promoting English poetry in the former colonies. He, however, does not elaborate on the effects that interventions by agencies like the Commonwealth, the BBC or the publishing conglomerates have had on postcolonial poetry. Furthermore, there is scope for studying the politics of dissemination of postcolonial poetry in English. Given that literacy in English is a prerequisite for the reading of such poetry, it would be interesting to note the extent to which the readership of postcolonial poetry in English remains restricted to an English speaking elite in otherwise non-English speaking countries. These are some areas that Patke has opened up in his book which call for future research. Each chapter of the book begins with a concise overview, allowing the reader to ascertain the principal concern of the chapter before reading it. Patke's style, free of the jargon that marks much of postcolonial criticism, encourages the casual reader. Patke has an ear for good poetry. His carefully chosen illustrations allow the poets to speak to the reader, thereby quietly achieving the book's literary purpose.