

Pacific Islands Writing

Michelle Keown

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Reviewed by Rognvald Leask, Université de Strasbourg

One of the books in the series *Oxford Studies in Postcolonial Literatures*, under the general editorship of Elleke Boehmer, this volume “takes the reader on a discursive journey through the post-colonial literatures and cultures of the Pacific,” in the words of its author Michelle Keown (1). The metaphor of a voyage, appropriately evoked to render the most widespread single region of the world, is sustained throughout the work and is commensurate with the nature of the study. Indeed the reader voyages through time, discovering key works of the colonial period as well as exploring the progressive phases of postcolonial writing by mainly indigenous writers. He or she also voyages across the unifying Pacific Ocean to study the major preoccupations of writers from widely dispersed islands, writing not only in English, but also in French and in Spanish.

To accompany this most appropriate voyage metaphor, I propose another, that of weaving, a handcraft which is widespread throughout the region, to characterise the fabrication of this impeccably produced study of the works of a considerable number of novelists, short-story writers, poets and theorists from the region. As we shall see, various threads of literary analysis have been worked skilfully together to produce the tightly-woven sail, necessary to drive the Pacific voyaging canoe on which the reader is invited to embark. These multiple analyses are richly contextualised. The focus on contextualisation of the works studied will be welcome, on the one hand, to readers not too familiar with the Pacific region, and on the other, to those who consider that the appreciation of a work of art is many times enriched by an understanding of the historical, political, spiritual, artistic and social contexts in which it was produced.

Dr Keown, a lecturer in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, succeeds in crafting an efficient sail through an intelligent organisation of her material. Woven into this structure at appropriate points are ten maps and figures, including an impressive historical map of nuclear test sites in the region (91), a detailed timeline placing key works in their historical, political and social context, a useful glossary of words taken from a number of languages of the Pacific, a very complete list of references of both theoretical and literary works, and finally a complete index. Furthermore, the author provides a steering oar in the form of metatextual information to guide the reader on this voyage around the islands of Pacific writing. New information is carefully prefigured and consistently associated with what has gone before.

In her introductory chapter, Michelle Keown cites Tongan writer and critic Epeli Hau‘ofa, who points out differences in the perception

of the region between Western and indigenous writers. Western writers conceptualize Oceania as disparate “islands in a far sea,” whereas the indigenous vision is of a unified region, “a sea of islands” seen “in the totality of their relationships” (3-4). Questions concerning the definition of the region are discussed, as is the usefulness of the terms ‘Polynesia’, ‘Melanesia’ and ‘Micronesia’ in referring to ‘culture areas’ of the Pacific. Keown then moves on to an identification of key concepts which she sees as relevant to a study of the literature of the region: race and representation, imperialism and colonialism, and postcolonialism in the Pacific context. She raises the interesting question of whether Aotearoa-New Zealand and Australia can be considered ‘postcolonial’, as Maori and Aborigines continue to suffer the political and cultural hegemony of the settler populations.

Chapter two traces the history of the arrival of Westerners in the Pacific, their impact and their changing discourse in relation to the new environment and to the peoples whom they discover living in it. Brief analyses are given of European and American writers and artists such as Herman Melville, Paul Gauguin, Pierre Loti, Robert (R.M.) Ballantyne, Robert Louis Stevenson and Jack London, as well as anthropologists and Christian missionary writers. Keown weaves in modern indigenous critical reaction to such representations, such as ni-Vanuatu poet Albert Leomala’s accusation, in his poem ‘Kros’, that the Christian missions killed Pacific Islanders and their traditions; or Samoan writer Sia Figiel’s satire on the writings of Western anthropologists Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman. Turning to New Zealand, Keown looks at the evolution in Pakeha (white) representations of the Treaty of Waitangi, the nation’s putative founding document, before presenting an analysis of Maori writer Witi Ihimaera’s novel *The Matriarch* (1987), which includes a Maori viewpoint on the Treaty and other significant historical events. The chapter ends with a rapid survey of Pakeha writing in the twentieth century.

Keown’s pattern is set: presentation of historical, political or social realities, followed by the ‘weaving in’ of the work of indigenous writers dealing with such themes. Her method appears efficient in that it permits her to introduce the reader to a large number of important Pacific Island writers in a coherent and cohesive manner. The context provided is sufficient to permit the reader to grasp the motivations and intentions of the writer. Instead of imposing a universalising postcolonial theory, Keown analyses the diverse reactions of authors to different aspects of the colonial experience in the region. The reader can gradually construct his or her own theory of postcolonial literature as it applies to this region, a theory formed after a close reading of the works of the authors under discussion.

Chapter three introduces the themes of conflict and social change, including resistance to colonisation, the impact of the Second World War (1939-45) and of nuclear testing. It concludes with an exploration of Maori warrior culture. Important writers discussed in this chapter include Albert Wendt (Samoa), John Kneubuhl (American Samoa), Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, Hone Tuwhare and Alan Duff (all

Aotearoa-New Zealand), Papua New Guineans Vincent Eri, Kama Kerpi and Earnest Mararunga, as well as French language writers Chantal Spitz (Tahiti) and Déwé Gorodé (New Caledonia).

Chapter four addresses the emergence of new Pacific literatures after the 1970s by highlighting the importance of a number of centres which served as breeding grounds for indigenous writing. The earliest of these was the University of Papua New Guinea, where the study of African literature provided a new source of inspiration. The University of the South Pacific, founded in Fiji in 1968, has also been extremely important in fostering new Pacific writers and critics such as Albert Wendt, Subramani and Epeli Hau'ofa, to name just three (Albert Wendt has edited important collections of Pacific writing). Keown also discusses the relevance of the University of Hawaii, before turning briefly to the Francophone Pacific, (which is essentially Tahiti and New Caledonia/Kanaky, but also includes Vanuatu and Wallis and Futuna), and to the Hispanophone Pacific (Easter Island /Rapa Nui). The final section deals with the Maori Renaissance and the flourishing of Maori literature in English, led by poet Hone Tuwhare and novelists Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace.

Chapter five is dedicated to the language of Pacific literatures, Pacific oral and textual cultures, and mythology and cultural memory. Examples are also given of works written in Pacific languages, such as Hawaii Creole English (HCE) and Fiji Hindi. The techniques of code switching and orality in text are described through readings of the work of Sia Figiel (Samoa) and Patricia Grace, while the Polynesian 'Tall Tales' tradition is illustrated by reference to the novels of Albert Wendt and the short stories of Epeli Hau'ofa.

In the concluding chapter, Keown focuses on the impact of globalisation on Oceanic territories, and concurrently examines Pacific diaspora culture in two major diasporic centres, Aotearoa-New Zealand and the United States. She also considers Pacific literary culture since 1990 through the lens of anticolonialism and post-independence corruption, the balance between realism and postmodernism in Pacific literature, and the politics of gender and sexuality.

Although this book does not propose any new post-colonial theories, it enriches the Boehmer model of post-colonial literature with illustrations from the Pacific region. And this is almost certainly the intention of the author, who demonstrates clearly the regional specificities of Pacific literature while at the same time pointing out its resonances with post-colonial writing throughout the world. Keown has succeeded in producing an aesthetically pleasing, tightly-woven guide which will provide an invaluable chart for any adventurer wishing to undertake a voyage through the literature of Aotearoa-New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.