

POST-COLONIALISM SURVEYED*

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All reviews of contemporary writing in English (Malcolm Bradbury's and D. J. Taylor's are recent examples) bear witness to the importance of the literary production from the former colonies. This new literary corpus has come to be considered as a separate discipline which (possibly with the exception of the work of some writers long established in Britain as Naipaul, Caryl Phillips or Buchi Emecheta) cannot be studied in any way as "British" or "English."

Hence the need for labels as New Literatures in English, Commonwealth or Post-Colonial Literature, each having its own connotations and nuances. Routledge has recently published the two-volume *The Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, a critical piece which will soon be enshrined as a classical work of reference in this field. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* is the latest contribution of the same publisher to the recognition of the discipline as a major literary phenomenon of the century. Its aim and extension also confer on it an encyclopedic character, although the editors disclaim such attempt, given the complexity and variety of the subject matter.

In fact, there exists little consensus on the scope and character of a post-colonial critical theory. Some prefer to attach the post-colonial label to the critical activity focused on the analysis of texts of the post-independence historical period, others extend the scope of the discipline to pre-colonial times and favour the use of the term postcolonial (no hyphen). There are also critics who reject both terms because they create a ghetto, treating as a single academic discipline distinctive and different national or regional literatures, as the Australian, Canadian, Indian, West Indian or African.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, the three Australian scholars whose reputation has steadily been growing since the publication of *The Empire Writes Back* point to the difficulty of providing absolute coverage of post-colonialism ("in a field as diverse and contentious such a claim would be particularly extravagant and foolish," xv). Their avowed intention is "the provision of an effective text to assist in the revision of teaching practice within literary studies in English and so have sought to represent the impact of post-colonial literatures and criticism on the current shape of English studies" (4).

They have made a compilation of extracts from works previously published which is balanced and representative. The only mention of contributors gives an idea of the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the corpus. Some belong to the group of canonical writers who have also become major voices in the field of post-colonial

criticism: Lamming, Achebe, Ngugi, Brathwaite, Wilson Harris, Walcott, Raja Rao. The choice is unquestionable and the texts appropriate and relevant for the issues concerned: no one can portray better than the West Indian Jamaica Kincaid the perception of colonialism and the feeling of rejection or resistance it engenders. Founding fathers of post-colonialism as Frantz Fanon or Edward Said are obviously present, so are the new figures in the field as Simon Daring, Diana Brydon, Homi Bhabha, Linda Hutcheon or Gayatri Spivak.

The headings of the fourteen chapters, each with a brief introduction, point to the main preoccupations and issues of post-colonialism. Thus "Universality and Difference" addresses the problem of ethnocentrism and the imposition on colonials of metropolitan views and values. The expected reaction is described in "Representation and Resistance," the most emblematic piece in this section being the extract from "Orientalism" by Edward Said. The most obvious colonial inheritance is the English language so it deserves the great attention accorded by writers and critics in this field. Resistance in this case may take the form of a mild questioning of the unity of the linguistic code, as that of the editors themselves (who refer to their use of the spelling *english* to signal the linguistic code which comprises several varieties of the language throughout the world, as opposed to *English*, the language of the former metropolis). More radical attitudes, which amount to a rejection of the code itself, are represented by authors as Ngugi wa Thiong'o who in his "The Language of African Literature" clearly rejects the possibility that such language may be English.

The volume deals with other issues as the widely discussed relationship between post-colonialism and postmodernism or feminism, the question of nationalism and national liberation, racial coexistence and the attitude to indigenous peoples or the role of education in newly independent societies.

Most of these topics had already been dealt with in recent works as *A Shaping of Connections* (with a large section devoted to the discussion of the process of consolidation of the new literatures in the academy) or *Decolonising Fiction* (with its comparative approach to study the literature of Canada, Australia and the West Indies). Anyone familiar with *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* will soon be aware of its resemblance with the Routledge critical work we are now discussing; some chapter titles as "Theorising Colonised Cultures and Anti-Colonial Resistance" or "Theorising Gender" point to the similarity of editorial outlines. Even some pieces, as Ngugi's on language, are reproduced in both volumes. However, the choice of shorter passages in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* has made it possible to include a greater number of contributions and to cover a wider selection of issues. This is one of the reasons why we believe that this compilation can already be considered an essential textbook and work of reference and, as post-colonialism continues to gain momentum, it might also serve the needs of the novice student or scholar in their attempt to get acquainted with this discipline.

* Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

References

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