

Book Reviews

Postcolonial Poetics: 21st-Century Critical Readings

By ELLEKE BOEHMER

Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, xiv, 220 pp.

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Postcolonial Poetics is an insightful study of the relevance of postcolonial readings of literature and culture in today's age of "post-critique." Without demanding a sacrifice of the potent political analysis of racism, colonialism, nationalism, and neo-colonialism that has been the bread and butter of postcolonial studies for the last five decades or so, it underlines that "considerations of the creative shape, formal structures and patterns of postcolonial writing" can only add to our thinking about these issues (2). Drawing from the work of Ato Quayson, it argues that instead of being understood as antithetical to each other, the aesthetic and the sociopolitical need to be conceived as mutually constitutive.

Focused as she is on interpretation rather than representation, Boehmer chooses a reception-based or readerly pragmatics approach to her analysis of postcolonial texts in the book. She conceives of reading as a conversation between the reader and the text in which the former comes to understand the cognitive processes involved therein and appreciates how "perceptions are directed and enlivened through them" (2). Alluding to the writings of Dan Sperber, Deirdre Wilson, and Terence Cave, she suggests that the reader considers and carefully balances multiple possible inferences while reading and, in the process, their thinking and imagination get intensified (9).

The eight chapters constituting *Postcolonial Poetics* are good illustrations of Boehmer's carefully chosen method of reading. Chapter 3 "Revisiting Resistance Literature," for instance, considers the usage of "juxtaposition" in *Things Fall Apart* and Nelson Mandela's autobiographical works as creating new possibilities for their readers. These possibilities are demands on the readers to imaginatively crisscross variegated temporalities and spaces. In a comparable vein, "Repetitive Poetics—When Crisis Defines a Nation's Writing" (Chapter 5) studies post-2000 South African writings as examples of reiterative poetics of trauma. According to Boehmer, prose works by Damon Galgut, Imraan Coovadia, and Sifiso Mzobe force their readers to not only relive the traumatic circumstance but also appreciate the struggle of articulating and understanding it. Similarly, "Poetics and Persistence," the following chapter, confronts the reader with an undeniable genealogical pattern as it analyzes the influence of Chinua Achebe on the poetics of Ben Okri, Diana Evans, Helen Oyeyemi, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The impact can be gauzed easily, argues Boehmer, as fiction by these contemporary writers utilizes motifs and characteristics such as the returning baby and the cursed twins from the former's *Things Fall Apart*.

It is indeed difficult to not be convinced of the central argument presented in *Postcolonial Poetics* as well as the means adopted to establish the same. Yet, critically discerning readers might be disappointed to discover the half-hearted way in which Boehmer appears to follow its implications. With the exception of Chapter 5, she (unconsciously) maintains an uncompromised belief in the cognitive, conceptual, and processual capacities of the readers of (postcolonial) literary texts throughout the work. Even as she conceives of readers as opening themselves to various possibilities and scenarios while reading, she never even considers the event when their cognitive capabilities might prove to be insufficient in processing the singularity of what or who they encounter in the narrative. The reader for Boehmer, in other words, always remains in complete control while perusing a literary text. Unfortunately, such a conception casts a shadow over their openness as the latter thus seems to be an insufficient gesture at its best and a contrivance at its worst. The italicized parts in the following statements extracted from *Postcolonial Poetics* should serve as adequate illustrations of the problematique:

Its [The book's] critical focus is on action and reception, on how we relate to texts *by drawing their poetic features into our frameworks of perception and allowing them to mold, shape, and reshape our understanding* (3).

. . . any reading sets off a cascading of inferences, *which the reader processes* at different simultaneously unfolding cognitive (semantic, sensory, kinaesthetic) levels, *their responses modifying and adjusting* as the communication develops. And comprehension entails the *continual weighing or calibration* of these different levels in relation to each other (8).

The apparent inconsistency in Boehmer's otherwise fine work, however, can be read as a challenge for critics to undertake (postcolonial) analysis of literary texts without inappropriately consolidating the author's, the protagonist's, or even the reader's agency. Put differently, *Postcolonial Poetics* (unconsciously) underlines the necessity of acknowledging the limits of the "postcolonial" itself—limits beyond which the postcolonial might need to be unceasingly reimagined in radically new ways. Ongoing studies of the Anthropocene, which, proceeding in a similar vein, perforce confront the non- or the inhuman are indicative of the same.

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Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism: Anglophone Literature, 1950 to the Present

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Staring directly at you on the front cover page of *Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism* (2019) is the unmistakable modernist artistic impression of the African fertility doll mounted on a well-shaped cuboid, which, in my view, symbolizes a sort