

Guest Editorial: Postcolonial past, world present, global futures?

The Journal of Commonwealth Literature
2018, Vol. 53(3) 339–344

© The Author(s) 2018

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0021989418796723

journals.sagepub.com/home/jcl



Claire Chambers

University of York, UK

Shital Pravinchandra

Queen Mary University of London, UK

A good way to think about postcolonial literary studies today is by looking at how the field is described in job listings addressed to us, or which we feel “interpellated” by (Althusser, 2014/1971: 190–97). In some of its recent posts, the British website Jobs.ac.uk, for example, advertised positions in postcolonial studies, but also in global literatures, global Anglophone literatures, world literature, and in some cases transnational literatures. These different ways of naming the subdiscipline and its objects of study confirm a shift that has been happening over time, which is that the colonial experience is no longer the automatic lens through which we train our critical gaze on the literatures of Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean, and beyond. Accompanying this development, especially since the early twenty-first century, has been a sense of crisis in the field as its applicability to today’s world continues to be called into question.

In the 1990s, many of the accusations levelled at postcolonial studies targeted the elitism of its (mostly émigré or diasporic) practitioners, and questioned the field’s indebtedness to high theory. The twenty-first century saw an intellectual shift: critics of postcolonial studies now suggested that it was obsolete, incapable of dealing with the contemporary. In this century, the challenges to postcolonial theory have come from many fronts, but we want to discuss just a handful of them here: the ones that we think have helped shape the field’s present.

In *Empire*, published in 2000, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argued that analysing the contemporary moment was beyond the capability of postcolonial studies. The field was limited by its inability to explain and tackle the problems created by neocolonialism and the United States’ unchallenged superpower status. “Postcolonialist theory [*sic*] [might be] a very productive tool for rereading history”, they begrudgingly acknowledged, “but it is entirely insufficient for theorizing contemporary global power” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 146).

In 2007, a roundtable at the Modern Language Association (MLA) was given the ominous title, “The End of Postcolonial Theory?” (Yaeger et al., 2007). In it, Simon Gikandi drew attention to two “universally acknowledged facts” that were quite different from the issue of globalization identified by Hardt and Negri. Here, the problem was embarrassing: postcolonial theory held little relevance for the people it claimed to be about. (Gikandi was not the only one to make this point, of course. In the UK, Neil Lazarus (2004) also made a similar argument.) One of the so-called universally acknowledged facts that Gikandi highlighted was therefore “that postcolonial theory doesn’t make sense to literary and cultural scholars outside English”. He called for postcolonial studies to gain resonance with non-Anglophone speakers through reframing and transformation. The other failing, he alleged, related to postcolonial studies’ neglect of “literatures produced in indigenous languages” (Yaeger et al., 2007: 636). Accordingly, there is an increasingly widespread sense in academia that question marks hang over the term “postcoloniality”, not least for its over-emphasis on European languages and imported European cultural forms.

The next critique we want to mention was especially notable because it was delivered by a towering figure from subaltern studies and the broader postcolonial realm: Dipesh Chakrabarty. In 2009, he concluded that “what scientists have said about climate change challenges [...] the analytic strategies that postcolonial and postimperial historians have deployed in the last two decades”. For Chakrabarty, climate change demands a commitment to “species thinking” and to the shared planetary future that this new paradigm allows us to imagine:

“Species” may indeed be the name of a placeholder for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of the danger that is climate change. (2009: 221)

The Arab Spring/Winter brought further challenges. In Hamid Dabashi’s idealist and provocative *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, he wrote, “These uprisings have already moved beyond race and religion, sects and ideologies, pro- or anti-Western” (2012: xvii). Dabashi therefore deployed the term “post-ideological” to describe the Arab Spring (2012: xviii). This chimes with the idea of a “postnormal society”, a phrase coined by Ziauddin Sardar to signify a historical moment characterized by “accelerating change, a realignment of power, and an upheaval in which events move and multiply in geometric fashion” (2012: 9). Scholars have also used terms including “post-Orientalist” (Prakash, 1990), “post-post-colonial” (Jay, 2005), and “re-Orientalist” (Dwivedi and Lau, 2014).

It is by responding to some of these challenges, we think, that the field has become re-energized. A lot of the most exciting work in the field today turns to the present, and to the contemporary challenges of neocolonialism. In the wake of 9/11, a wealth of research in our field has unsettled the binaries between religion and secularism, and between terrorism and civilization, highlighting crucial continuities between colonialism and the new Empire. Increasingly, thinkers are dismantling Samuel Huntington’s (1993, 2002/1996) tendentious idea of a clash of civilizations and arguing that binaries — between the West and the rest; colonialism and postcolonial metanarratives (including socialism, nationalism, nativism, Islamism); secularity and religion — are breaking down.

From the angle of species thinking, postcolonial ecocriticism directly addresses globalization and its environmental and human consequences. This now burgeoning field was pioneered by such scholars as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010), Rob Nixon (2011), and Elizabeth Deloughrey and George Handley (2011), as well as by Victoria Barnsley, Jade Munslow Ong, and Matthew Whittle in their (2016) special issue for this journal. Postcolonial ecocriticism has paved the way for an important shift in the field by focusing on those who stay in place rather than those who move. This is mirrored elsewhere, such as in the increased interest in the refugee and the asylum seeker (see, for example, Gikandi, 2010; Farrier, 2011) rather than in the migrant or the second- or third-generation member of the diaspora.

The challenge that postcolonial studies has still not adequately tackled, however, is the one identified by Gikandi. Our field continues to be dominated by European languages, and is often regarded with justifiable scepticism in the former colonies. It is world literature scholarship that has produced critics recognizing and redressing the lacuna of non-European languages.

Interestingly, the resurgence of world literature also took place in the first decade of the twenty-first century. World literature rarely mentions postcolonial studies, and yet its re-emergence today stands as a testament to the success with which postcolonial studies has revealed the Eurocentrism of both English and comparative literary studies. Globalization and neocolonialism affect parts of the world that were never formally colonized, so another of world literature's benefits is that it is able to look at literature and languages from regions not shaped by colonialism.

Of all the challenges we have listed, the idea that world literature is a convincing replacement for postcolonial studies is the one that most worries us. The framing of world literature can lead to a loss of the focus on colonialism and its legacies that makes postcoloniality an important term. The postcolonial is political, and the field gained its impetus from that; despite its limitations, this radical commitment remains its strongest asset.

With the help of a literary text, we want to flag two further reservations. The text in question is a play by the renowned Indian dramatist Girish Karnad, *Broken Images* (2005). (Unusually for Karnad, a bilingual writer, this play was written in English first, and then translated into Kannada under the title *Odakalu Bimba*.) The play is essentially a monologue delivered by a female character, Manjula Nayak, who works as an author and university lecturer and has long been writing short stories in Kannada. She suddenly rises to international prominence, but only after publishing a novel in English.

We bring up Karnad's play first because his plot is predicated upon the fact that India, like so many other regions of the global south, is a multilingual space. What the play takes for granted, in other words, is the coexistence of Anglophone and *bhasha* (regional) literatures in South Asia. This is something which, in our opinion, we cannot afford to lose sight of, nor indeed stress to our students enough. More pertinently, however, the play poses a sharp question from which neither world literature nor postcolonial studies surface in a very good light, revealing the many ways in which world literature often (re) produces the same blind spots of postcolonial studies. Bluntly speaking, the play asks of us how we can be attentive to the totality of the fictional Nayak's output, in Kannada and in English. The institutional location and disciplinary history of postcolonial studies shows that its scholars are overwhelmingly likely to focus on her Anglophone novel.

And what of world literature? To answer this question, we have to think more carefully about genre. We have to pause, in other words, on the fact that Nayak's Kannada output just so happens to take the form of short stories, while her Anglophone text just so happens to be a novel, the genre that, as many scholars of the short story emphasize, possesses the greatest prestige in the world of letters. We should also dwell on the fact that this literary hierarchy is not necessarily valid in South Asia, where the short story form is not only widely practised by most bhasha writers of note, but is also the form that has been used to inaugurate literary innovations, such as the Nayi Kahani movement in 1950s and 1960s India.

The short story's relative lack of prestige might explain why this form is all but absent from discussions of world literature, but its popularity in swaths of the global south suggests that a greater attentiveness to genre is long overdue in both postcolonial studies and world literature. In each field, the novel, poetry, and to some extent drama remain the literary modes of choice, while genre fiction, nonfiction, and short fiction receive relatively little attention.

The plot of *Broken Images* also underscores the profuse importance that world literature and postcolonial studies both ascribe to mobility and circulation. The dependence on circulation is most obviously a feature of world literature, and much has been written about the limitations of this definition. If the measure of a text's worldliness is its ability to move beyond its national-cultural origins, this effectively obscures large bodies of work written in non-European languages and which remain untranslated or fail to circulate even when translated, typically because there is no overseas market for them. Where world literature implicitly construes these works as "parochial", postcolonial studies tends to eschew them either because they do not lend themselves to a reading through the rubrics of colonialism, diaspora, nationalism, or subalternity, or because they remain linguistically and contextually inaccessible. The ultimate effect, however, is that vast bodies of such literature are left to "area studies" specialists.

Scholars face the increasingly urgent need to understand longstanding debates about world literature from Goethe to the Warwick Research Collective (WReC), as well as to learn why certain bodies of literature are always neglected in these debates. This is why we (Claire Chambers and Shital Pravinchandra) are launching a new book series with Routledge entitled *Global Literature: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*. We find "global literature" the most appropriate term for describing this book series' scope and remit, because it hints at the continuing fallout of colonialism while also highlighting concerns about global warming as well as globalization and multinational capitalism. A term like "global" is also appealing to us because it has the ability to bridge conceptual gaps that neither postcolonial studies nor world literature currently seem able to address. This series on "global literature" will actively seek out monographs taking comparative approaches to consider works in European and indigenous languages and in a variety of genres. In doing so, we hope to make space for new modes of thinking beyond those of postcolonial studies and world literature.

In *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (2016), Debjani Ganguly persuasively argues that since 1989, a year significant for but not reducible to the collapse of communism, there has emerged "a new kind of novel as a global literary form" (2016: 1). Taking a cue from Ganguly, who is Director of the

University of Virginia's Institute of the Humanities and Global Cultures, this series similarly believes that contemporary writing is notable for its engagement with modern kinds of unending war and insurgency, the digital environment, and human rights discourse. Problems with *This Thing Called the World* include its lacunae of gender, sexuality, and genres beyond the novel, issues which this series will keep at front and centre. As such, global literature is here understood as writing coming out of a post-Cold War age that is shaped by the legacies of (neo-)colonialism, the stranglehold of global capital, the effects of climate change, and the attendant surge of populist nationalism typified by politicians such as Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, and Marine Le Pen.

The term "globalization" is often assumed to apply solely to the contemporary period, indicating the uncontested spread of capitalism across the world. Yet global interactions are not recent byproducts of globalization, but something that people have always undertaken for economic, religious, political, or personal reasons. As Doreen Massey and Pat Jess observe,

there has since the beginning of human existence always been movement, migration and settlement in new areas; for as long as is known and in most parts of the world, individual places have been open to, and partly constituted by, their contacts with "outside". Interconnection is not new, and diasporas are certainly not only a feature of the recent past. (1995: 2)

Authors such as Amitav Ghosh, Richard Flanagan, Salman Rushdie, and Kate Grenville are instrumental in broadening our knowledge of cultural interconnection at various moments in history, and in reminding us that national borders are a relatively recent construct. Other literary traditions — most notably Indigenous literatures — remind us of an aspect often lost sight of due to globalization's emphasis on mobility and circulation: the importance of rootedness, of staying in place, and of communal identities forged in relation to the land. Providing a base on which to build analyses of the global, *Global Literature: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* offers opportunities to find rich connections between literature and new ways of conceiving the contemporary global imaginary.

To conclude, we want to advocate a very different and promising body of work in our field today. Broadly speaking, it is work that broaches several fields — area studies, postcolonial studies, comparative literature, and world literature — in productive and exciting ways. We look forward to receiving proposals of this kind for our new series.

References

- Althusser L (2014/1971) "On Ideology". In: *On The Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (Trans. Goshgarian GM, Pref. Balibar E, Intro. Bidet J). London: Verso, 171–207.
- Barnsley V, Ong JM and Whittle M (eds) (2016) Postcolonial environments. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 51(2): 189–316.
- Chakrabarty D (2009) The climate of history: four theses. *Critical Inquiry* 35(2): 197–222.
- Dabashi H (2012) *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*. London: Zed.
- Deloughrey E and Handley G (2011) *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literature of the Environment*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dwivedi OP and Lau L (2014) *Re-Orientalism and Indian Writing in English*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Farrier D (2011) *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary Before the Law*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Ganguly D (2016) *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gikandi S (2010) Between roots and routes: Cosmopolitanism and the claims of locality. In Wilson J, Sandru C and Lawson Welsh S (eds) *Re-Routing the Postcolonial*. Abingdon: Routledge, 22–35.
- Hardt M and Negri A (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Huggan G and Tiffin H (2010) *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. London: Routledge.
- Huntington SP (1993) The clash of civilizations? *Foreign Affairs* 72(3): 22–49.
- Huntington SP (2002/1996) *The Clash of Civilizations: And the Remaking of World Order*. London: Free Press.
- Jay P (2005) The post-post colonial condition: Globalization and historical allegory in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*. *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 36(1–2): 51–71.
- Karnad G (2005) Broken Images. In: *Collected Plays Volume 2: Talé-Danda, The Fire and the Rain, The Dreams of Tipu Sultan, Two Monologues: Flowers and Broken Images*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Lazarus N (2004) The politics of postcolonial modernism. In: Loomba A et al. (eds) *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 423–439.
- Massey D and Jess P (eds) (1995) *A Place in the World: Places, Cultures and Globalization*. Milton Keynes: Open University.
- Nixon R (2011) *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Prakash G (1990) Writing post-Orientalist histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian historiography. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32(2): 383–408.
- Sardar Z (2012) Surprise, surprise! In: Sardar Z and Yassin-Kassab R (eds) *Critical Muslim 1: The Arabs Are Alive*. London: Hurst, 3–18.
- Yaeger P et al. (2007) Editor's column: The end of postcolonial theory? A roundtable with Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Susie Tharu, and Jennifer Wenzel. *PMLA* 122(3): 633–651.