
It is tempting to approach this volume as a companion piece to earlier works that bear Bill Ashcroft’s name. The Empire Writes Back, for example, is mentioned in the opening line of Ashcroft’s Introduction. At 665 pages, Literature for Our Times has the heft of The Postcolonial Studies Reader. Yet the present volume seeks less to define a field or the innovations within it than to chronicle the various directions in which the terms ‘postcolonial’ and ‘Commonwealth’ are interpreted and deployed.

Perhaps the diversity of the selections can be attributed to their origins: all were essays given at the 2007 conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. The editors selected thirty-five revised and updated essays and loosely organised them based on themes of concern to postcolonial studies. Some sections of the book, such as ‘Gendered Bodies’, would be very familiar to those within the field. Others – like ‘Dalit Literature and Its Criticism’ – touch upon newly emerging disciplines.

The first section, ‘The Idea of (Postcolonial) Literature: Conceptual and Methodological Issues’, is the standout portion of the entire book. It is here that some of the more pressing issues of how the field itself has been theorised and re-theorised are put into conversation. Particularly important for the authors featured in this section are questions of national space and literary articulations of modernity that come from a postcolonial world. Frank Schulze-Engler and Debjani Ganguly both take issue with Pascale Casanova’s The World Republic of Letters for its insistence on the nation-state and European history as benchmarks for her model of internationalism. Both essays are notable for the ways that they use this criticism to ask questions about how literature functions outside of the global marketplace; both also move to put forth ideas of transnationalism that can account for and emphasise cultural complexity.

There are several such intriguing entries throughout Literature for Our Times. John Clement Ball’s reading of Jamaica Kincaid’s Mr Potter negotiates a Caribbean space that accommodates both national and international affiliations in ways that can help to rethink some of the critical boundaries in Caribbean literary studies. Cheryl Stobie’s gender-driven analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus reveals some of the complexities of a text that is often read simply as a Bildungsroman. Susan Spearey puts forth an informed and thought-provoking study of post-conflict memoirs by Antjie Krog and Philip Gourevitch, staking a claim for an ethical reading that can accurately understand the density of witnessing and testifying to atrocity.

The sheer amount of material in the collection is enough to ensure a variety of perspectives, texts, and issues at play here, but this volume almost insists upon including more of everything. Ashcroft’s excellent introduction to the volume gives an idea of how varied the field postcolonial studies is today by also providing a succinct history of the discipline itself. In terms of Literature for Our Times, then, Ashcroft notes that one of the reasons for its broad range of essays is that, in the twenty-first century, postcolonialism ‘represents a rhizomatic interplay of pursuits all directed in some way towards analysing the varied and continuing effects of imperial power. It is not a Grand Theory of everything but a range of interests and approaches living together in what Amartya Sen might call an argumentative democracy’ (xvii). As an approach to an entire field, Ashcroft’s contention...
certainly makes sense. As an organizing principle for a collection of essays, ‘a rhizomic interplay of pursuits’ at times comes across as simply too much.

In the quest for democratic representation, the editors include a number of essays, even entire sections, that lack the critical power of the volume’s more nuanced and innovative entries. The section on Dalit literature is a good example: although the experiences and writings of Dalits can potentially say a lot about postcoloniality and the state of the field today, these individual essays feel caught in earlier debates. The same could be said for some of the essays on ‘Translations and Transformations’ or ‘Indigenous Literatures, Literatures of the Land.’ Clearly, no individual essay can redefine an entire field of study. But for a book representing the current state of an academic field that is ‘at the centre of contemporary developments in knowledge-production,’ the selections often seem to miss this goal (xviii).

In short, Literature for Our Times is a great reference for current scholarship in the field, often on peoples and literatures that are underrepresented. Indeed, there are few other places to find critical analyses of Peter Bacho’s novel Cebu or the relationship between Ovid and Zadie Smith. Those interested in Dalit literature will surely want to read ‘riddles’ about Tamil Dalit Literature from P. Sivakami – a Dalit novelist herself. The book also includes innovative theoretical takes on the ways that postcolonial criticism overlaps and contradicts related interests, like world literature, cosmopolitanism, or multiculturalism. There is almost certainly something to satisfy anyone with an interest in postcolonial studies as a whole, and this is the volume’s most valuable contribution. When read in spots or used as a reference, Literature for Our Times can be enormously useful. When read in its entirety, as a collection of current postcolonial scholarship, it just seems, well, enormous.

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