Pak’s Britannica: Articles by and Interviews with David Dabydeen, edited by Lynne Macedo (University of the West Indies Press, 2011)


Pak’s Britannica: Articles by and Interviews with David Dabydeen and Talking Words: New Essays on the Work of David Dabydeen, both edited by Lynne Macedo, represent two important contributions to the less than plentiful sum of scholarly sources on David Dabydeen’s oeuvre. The fact that David Dabydeen is not just a Caribbean-born author whose fictional output consists of six novels and three collections of poetry, but also an established academic and a Professor of Literary Studies, is thus duly and suitably reflected in these two collections.

Pak’s Britannica, which takes its ingenious title after ‘a two-part series written and presented by Dabydeen in 1993 for BBC Radio 4’ (199) and is the first book ‘devoted solely to Dabydeen’s academic works’ (xiii), is divided into two parts. The first part comprises nine of Dabydeen’s scholarly articles, several of which have originally been written as lectures, spanning the period from 1985 to 2010. In the chosen articles from this twenty-five-year period, Dabydeen writes not only about his Caribbean heritage as the prism through which he, as the ex-centric author and scholar, came to view the very white centre of both literary scene and academia, but also about more general and less origin-conditioned subject matter, such as his views on eighteenth century English literature or artists such as Shakespeare and Hogarth. Regardless of the topic, Dabydeen’s tone is ‘measured and authoritative’ (xviii), yet deeply personal.

The second part of Pak’s Britannica offers the transcripts of seven interviews with Dabydeen, two of which have not been published previously, covering the period from 1995 to 2010. As Macedo states, the common thread that runs through these interviews is ‘an overwhelming sense of Dabydeen’s abiding and undiminished passion for the very act of writing’ (xix). Moreover, they provide an additional, intimate insight into Dabydeen’s body of work, both artistic and academic, underlining what they have in common: the author’s ease at unmasking and transcending all sorts of given boundaries, including those of a cultural, ethnic, linguistic or purely racial nature. For Dabydeen, the parameters of ancestry are not to be found only in the notions of blood, origins, or colour. Instead, what should come into account is ‘the cultural situation in which you find yourself’ (146), as he states in the interview with Clarisse Zimra. It is no wonder, then, that his insistence on hybridity, plurality, flexibility, and interconnectedness, which he sees as prevalent in both Caribbean history and Caribbean society, so tellingly translates into the hybrid, multifaceted qualities of his writing.

Regarded in relation to Pak’s Britannica, Talking Words comes as a complementary collection of ten essays focused exclusively on Dabydeen’s fictional and poetic output. The first part of the collection, titled ‘Poetic Reappraisals’, consists of three essays tackling Dabydeen’s poetry from different perspectives; what connects them are the ways in which ‘they identify the many contradictions inherent in Dabydeen’s writing’ (ix). In addition to his ambivalence towards the issues of national identity and historical representation, which was one of the main issues in the interviews, these texts question the application of theory, thus reinforcing Dabydeen’s opposition to the use of Western and Eurocentric theory as a means of understanding Caribbean writing, as explained in his ‘Teaching West Indian Literature in Britain’ from Pak’s Britannica.
The second part of *Talking Words*, titled ‘(Re)reading the Novels’, follows Dabydeen’s development as a novelist by analyzing intertextuality in his novels (chapters 4 and 5), representation of the slave narrative genre (Chapter 6) and the idea of ‘postcolonial exotic’ (Chapter 7). Jenny de Salvo’s ‘Translating *The Intended*’, however, differs from the remaining essays in the fact that it focuses on the problems inherent in the process of translating and thus promotes a unique approach to the novel in question. Although centering on some of the features that other authors tackle as well, the translator views the text from a specific vantage point and with a clearly defined goal. In this respect, de Salvo methodically outlines the central issues and challenges she faced when translating the novel into Italian: intertextuality, the variety of languages and registers used by the characters, and the question of translating the title.

The book’s last three chapters focus on Dabydeen’s most recent novels, *Our Lady of Demerara* and *Molly and the Muslim Stick*, where Dabydeen returns to the qualms of identity and belonging, but simultaneously introduces a vision of Guyana as a redemptive force. Both readers and scholars notice the change that undoubtedly marks this stage of Dabydeen’s novel writing, which can possibly be best summarized as a poignant bringing together of brutally realistic and fantastic or magical elements. This apparent clash, as well as literalization of shifting forms and identities in Dabydeen’s latest novels, thus should be adequately considered within the tradition of magical realism, which is precisely what Michael Mitchell focuses on in the ultimate chapter of this insightful collection.

What transpires through the interviews, Dabydeen’s scholarly texts and new essays on his fiction, is the notion that Dabydeen unashamedly questions and re-evaluates the established categories of identity, heritage and culture, but also literary, social and cultural theories and their application within diverse domains. Together with his refusal to be tied to any specific notion of ‘blackness’ or ethnicity, Dabydeen’s fondness for controversial issues and his cosmopolitan interests underline the subversive and redemptive powers of his writing. Illuminating the complex and diverse work of David Dabydeen from varied perspectives, these two collections ultimately manage to paint a rounded picture – one in which the author’s academic work is as multifaceted as his fictional writings.

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