Edited by
Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray

COMPARING POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURES

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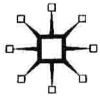

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Introduction

Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray

I

This collection of essays has its origins in a conference on postcolonial literatures entitled 'Border Crossings' which was held at the University of North London. The borders which we hoped the conference would traverse and transgress were disciplinary, linguistic and cultural ones. These borders – and the geographical ones which underpin some of them – exist for a variety of reasons; most obviously, of course, the historical, cultural and political legacies of colonialism, such as the identity and language of the colonizing power in a particular part of the world, or the political entities left behind as the empires receded into history. But they are reinforced by other pressures, including pedagogic and institutional demarcations, some of them related to the historical development of academic disciplines, which, as Edward Said and others have shown, are themselves in many cases shaped by the experience and ideologies of empire.[1]

Such contingencies have produced anomalies which postcolonial studies have only begun to address relatively recently. In organizing the conference, we were particularly conscious of two such anomalies, one concerning linguistic boundaries, the other relating to the problematic situation of the British Isles in postcolonial studies.

Postcolonial literatures in the various European languages – English, French, Spanish and others – are usually read, studied and discussed in isolation from each other. Yet the increasing pace of the internationalization of literatures as we approach the end of the millennium makes such isolation seem increasingly incongruous. Cross-currents between literatures are not exclusively twentieth-century phenomena; but, for obvious material and technological reasons, among others, the process

has been accelerating over the years. As Vinay Dharwadker points out in a helpful summary, internationalization is a product of a variety of intellectual, cultural and material forces, including the production, distribution and reception of books, migrations of readers and writers, and the flow of ideas and literary influences – all of which speed up with the advance of technology.[2]

Of course, internationalization is not confined to postcolonial literatures. One thinks, for instance, of the impact that Chinese and Japanese poetry have had in this century on the poetry of the USA, from Ezra Pound to Gary Snyder and beyond. More recently, British and US poets have learnt much from the example of East European and Latin American writers. But for nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers in colonized (or formerly colonized) countries, the process of international influence was and is more complicated. For such writers, one of the most powerful engines of internationalization has been the culture of the colonizing power. And although, as we suggest later, this particular influence can be overemphasized, it nevertheless enmeshes writers in difficult but also creative dilemmas of cultural identity. Much has been written on the difficulty and ambivalence of those dilemmas; it is only fairly recently that their potential for creativity has been debated more widely, as writers, critics and cultural theorists have become increasingly conscious of, and articulate about, issues of hybridity and transculturation. These perspectives help us move away from hegemonic, top-down models in which cultural influence flows from colonizer to colonized; they enable us to place more emphasis on the selective agency, the *bricolage*, the creative distortions carried out by colonized peoples as they negotiate the meetings of cultures.

Yet even the recent emphasis on such phenomena does not, we feel, always do justice to the complexity and multiplicity of the processes of internationalization. Cross-cultural influence precedes the advent of modern colonialism; cultural interaction is not just built into modern colonialism and neo-colonialism, it is also part of the development of cultures more generally – examples as diverse as Renaissance Europe and Islamic-Hindu India attest to this fact. Contemporary India, for instance, is not simply a product of the confluence of *two* cultures – British and Indian cultures since the European Renaissance. That apparently monolithic term 'Indian' opens up to reveal considerable diversity, some aspects of which are summed up in the hyphenated adjective 'Islamic-Hindu' used above. (The term 'British' also contains its own diversity, as we suggest below.) In other words, cross-cultural influence is a multiple rather than binary process. Discussions of hybridity and

transculturation need to recognize this, and avoid being trapped by a binary framework involving the colonizer and the colonized.

Another source of multiplicity is that postcolonial writers have often made attempts to circumvent the direct influence of the colonial culture by seeking out alternatives. Thus anglophone postcolonial poets searching for models different from those offered by the English poetic tradition have been known to look to US poetry and, more recently, to Latin American and non-anglophone European poetry.[3] In postcolonial fiction, 'lo real maravilloso' (somewhat inadequately translated into English as 'magical realism'), interacting in complex and varied ways with different native narrative traditions, has constituted one of the most prominent of these cross-cultural currents, linking writers from diverse parts of the world.[4] Linguistic isolationism tends to encourage the reading of postcolonial literatures in relation to the language and culture of the former colonial power and, in so doing, to undervalue multiple processes of influence, thus subtly reasserting the binary models of colonial thinking. A consciously comparative approach is one way of circumventing these dilemmas.

We recognize that there are difficulties in attempting to read postcolonial literatures along the lines being sketched out here. As we have suggested, internationalization is not a purely literary phenomenon, since the development of cross-cultural interaction is affected by economic and political elements, which in part determine, for instance, the availability of translations. Thus, who gets translated from what languages and into what languages is decided not only by questions of quality or representativeness but also by considerations which include the economics of publishing and the relative material and cultural power of readers in different parts of the world. This means that elements of neo-colonial relationships must inevitably enter into the process of translation, since the balance of material and cultural power tends to lie with the former colonizers. The selective availability of translations in turn produces selective notions of regional literatures; the title of Montserrat Ordoñes's 'One Hundred Years of Unread Writing', for instance, points to the narrow focus of publishing houses that continually try to reinvent the Colombia of García Márquez at the expense of female, local, regional and specialist perspectives.[5] The picture is further complicated by more random and contingent factors, such as the availability of translators, since literary translation, unlike commercial translation, is often a self-selecting activity. Such features of translation and the economics of translation clearly affect and even distort our perspectives on literatures in languages other than

our own. Nonetheless, despite these obstacles, we feel that an increasingly important aspect of postcolonial literary study in the future will be an emphasis on cross-cultural, transnational and comparative elements.

Located as the editors are in the United Kingdom, the second anomaly we were particularly conscious of was the awkward and ambivalent position which three constituent parts of the British Isles – Scotland, Ireland and Wales – occupy in the field of postcolonial studies. This ambivalence is partly a matter of historical record. Colonized nations themselves, they were also often intricately and ambiguously implicated in the colonial enterprise, many of their inhabitants going on to take part in the establishment and maintenance of the British Empire. But the ambiguous position of these nations is also related to disciplinary demarcations. Although the situation has been changing recently, Scottish, Welsh or Irish literatures, whether in English or indigenous languages, tend not to be considered within postcolonial frameworks; and, when written in the English language, they have often been subsumed in university syllabuses and texts under the category 'British'. Such occlusions and confusions were nicely illustrated in the early 1980s by the publication of Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, which included a number of Northern Irish poets and brought forth a well-known riposte from Seamus Heaney, in his poem, *An Open Letter*:

> This "British" word
> Sticks deep in native and *colon*
> Like Arthur's sword.
> .....
> British, no, the name's not right[6]

It is also true to say that it was previously in the interests of postcolonial writers and critics, at least in the anglophone field, to assume a homogeneous notion of Britishness to write back to, though such a monolith began to disintegrate in a developing stage of postcolonial studies, and the construction of 'Britishness' is itself now a part of the field of study. This includes a related issue, but one which we did not have space to address in any detail at the conference, concerning the pressure on definitions of Britishness created by the now-established presence in the British Isles of the communities who trace their origins to countries which were once part of the British Empire. And, as with the Irish case just mentioned, here, too, many writers – Salman Rushdie and

Timothy Mo, among others – have been engaged in the process of exploring their complicated relationship to the notion of Britishness. These pressures of cultural and national definition, sharpened by the phenomena of migration and diaspora, are, of course, replicated in other literatures and cultures as well, and, particularly in the USA, the setting of more than one of our contributors' investigations of hybridity in the metropolis.[7]

Our aims in organizing the conference included the highlighting of such anomalies, and an attempt to move towards a dislocation of the largely anglophone perspective on postcolonial literatures which tends to predominate in the British, if less so in the US, academy. Consequently, our initial call for papers emphasized the project of bringing together work on a variety of literatures in different languages; in particular, we wanted to encourage material on Ireland and on the francophone and hispanic literatures of Latin America and the Caribbean. Such aims perhaps explain the prominence of these areas in this volume. Although few of the individual essays themselves make cross-cultural comparisons in any detail, we hope to have assembled in this volume some materials which may be used for comparative purposes. Our comments in the second part of this introduction provisionally trace some interconnections between the essays and between the cultures, languages and literatures which they discuss.

Our intended title for this volume was *Border Crossings*. The change to the present title was partly brought about by our publisher's advice that a number of books with our preferred original title already existed; but, as we pondered a variety of alternatives, other, more significant considerations began to impose themselves on us. It became increasingly apparent to us that what was at issue was not just the crossing of already existing borders whose existence could unproblematically be taken for granted; rather, as much recent work in the postcolonial field has been emphasizing, the borders themselves mask problems; and the spaces which are supposed to be delineated by those borders are not as clear-cut or unambiguous as they were thought to be. The word *Dislocations* in our title, we feel, points more clearly towards some of the current boundary disputes and debates within the field: the preoccupations with inbetweenness, hybridity, migrancy, fragments, internal colonialisms and so forth which occupy prominent positions in postcolonial studies today. In the next section of the introduction, we suggest, in a preliminary way, how some of these debates might connect up with a comparative approach to postcolonial literatures.

II

One of the important figures in the debates mentioned at the end of the preceding section has been Homi Bhabha, and, although we did not deliberately intend to evoke the echo, *Dislocations* may remind readers of his title *The Location of Culture*.[8] This introduction is not the place for a detailed assessment of Bhabha's work; yet his essays are, of course, prominent among those writings which have helped to question the boundaries and borders which are part of the stock-in-trade of colonialism and colonialist discourses – in particular, the hierarchical binary division between self and other, colonizer and colonized. Part of the concern of Bhabha's work has been to indicate ways in which such terms are dislocated by the supposed *objects* of colonialist discourses – the colonized peoples themselves. Thus Bhabha takes issue with those elements in Edward Said's work on Orientalism which seem to accord total and totalizing power to the authority of colonial discourses. By opening up the spaces and contradictions within these discourses, Bhabha, to some degree, uncovers the powers of resistance possessed by the colonized. However, while we recognize the significance of Bhabha's work for postcolonial studies, we are also aware that it is not unproblematic, and the contributors to this collection who draw on his work often do so with reservations.[9] In particular, we did not want simply to reinforce what has been described as the 'Holy Trinity' of Said, Bhabha and Spivak as postcolonial critics,[10] but were also concerned to draw attention to important earlier, as well as contemporary, critical work that covers vital, and sometimes similar, ground, if not always in the academic language of post-structuralist theory.

This probing of borders has occurred not just in relation to complicating and blurring the binary divide *between* colonized and colonizer, but also *within* the spaces demarcated by these terms and a number of others. For instance, concepts such as national and cultural identity, which played an important role in the formation of anti-colonial discourses have also been subjected to a process of unravelling. In his well-known essay, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', Stuart Hall acknowledges that one version of cultural identity – identity defined as an essential 'oneness', as 'a sort of collective "one true self", hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves", which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common' – has played 'a critical role in all post-colonial struggles'. But he then goes on to stress the significance of a very different conception of identity which stresses 'critical points of deep and significant *difference*':

> In this perspective, cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. . . . Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'.[11]

In that essay, Hall's focus is on exploring the implications of this view for notions of Caribbean identity. But parallel debates have taken place in other contexts. Another example of this fissuring of notions of cultural identity can be found in the field of Indian historiography, where a number of scholars – mostly associated with the *Subaltern Studies* project – have been emphasizing the degree to which even nationalists and nationalist historians continued to operate within colonial paradigms – paradigms to do with the nation state in its relationship with modernity. Anti-colonial nationalist history, like imperialist history, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, was 'written within problematics posed by. . . [a] transition narrative, of which the overriding (if often implicit) themes are those of development, modernization, capitalism'.[12] Such nationalisms, and the histories they produce, are, in Partha Chatterjee's well-known formulation, 'derivative discourses'.[13] These narratives are, as *Subaltern Studies* essays repeatedly point out, homogenizing ones. Indeed, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that colonialism, third-world nationalism and the whole 'academic discourse of history' between them have made 'Europe' universal, and that:

> 'Europe' remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian', 'Chinese', 'Kenyan', and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'.

To counter such homogenizing tendencies, Chakrabarty calls for a project of 'provincializing "Europe"', of displacing a 'hyperreal Europe from the center toward which all historical imagination currently gravitates'. In historiography, he argues, this provincializing can be done through writing 'into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and the ironies that attend it'.[14] In questioning the homogenizing paradigms, these scholars have investigated internal fissures and borderlines within the nation.

Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey have both emphasized the significance of the 'fragment' and of fragmentary discourses in unravelling hegemonic definitions of the anti- and postcolonial nation as a unified entity. Pandey, for instance, writes of the need in the Indian context to:

> foreground [the] state-centered drive to homogenize and 'normalize', and to foreground also the deeply contested nature of the territory of nationalism. Part of the importance of the 'fragmentary' point of view lies in that it resists the drive for a shallow homogenization and struggles for other, potentially richer definitions of the 'nation' and the future political community.[15]

In their different ways and different contexts, then, the two examples just discussed – the Caribbean and South Asia – have contributed to the debate on what Hall terms 'unstable points of identification or suture' (a phrase which points clearly to the problematic nature of the border).

What relevance, however, do such formulations have in the present context? We would argue that they resonate with debates in postcolonial literary study, and indicate strategies of reading which can be brought to bear on the literatures with which we are concerned. One example of such resonance is with the famous argument for the 'abolition of the English Department' propounded by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and some of his colleagues at the University of Nairobi. This department, they suggested, should be replaced by a comparative studies model in which the aim should be:

> to orientate ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa, and then Africa in the centre. All other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation, and their contribution towards understanding ourselves.[16]

Ngugi's arguments in favour of reading African literatures beside American and Caribbean literatures indicate that Chakrabarty's phrase 'provincializing "Europe"' has suggestive possibilities in the field of literary study as well: it outlines an aim that can be applied to the task of promoting a comparative study of postcolonial literatures. For there is a sense in which Europe continues to remain the subject of these literatures, the centre towards which literary imagination and critical thought gravitate. The way that the study of postcolonial literatures is predominantly constituted today – that is to say, demarcated by reference to the (European metropolitan) languages in which they are