

# Decolonising Gender

Literature and a poetics of the real

**Caroline Rooney**

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# Decolonising Gender

This innovative study challenges a possessive or colonising approach to questions of gender. Through an illuminating selection of cross-cultural readings from African and queer writing to a shamanistic Shakespeare, *Decolonising Gender* offers:

- a way out of some of the current deadlocks of feminist theory
- an anti-essentialist approach to gender in which both male and female readers may address a consciousness of the feminine
- a platform for postcolonial and postmodernist thinkers to engage in a dialogue around the status of the performative in regard to the other
- a new theory of poetic realism in both canonical and postcolonial literatures;
- a re-reading of the Enlightenment legacy in terms of postcolonial liberation theory
- a comparison of contemporary debates on the real across disciplines

Negotiating a path between feminist theory's common pitfalls of essentialism and constructivism, Caroline Rooney argues convincingly that by rethinking our understanding of gender we might also equip ourselves to resist racism and totalitarianism more effectively.

**Caroline Rooney** is Senior Lecturer in the School of English and Director of the Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Research at the University of Kent. She is the author of *African Literature, Animism and Politics* (Routledge, 2000) and, with Vera Dieterich, of *Book Unbinding: The Ontological Stain* (Artworlds Press, 2005).

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**Pramod K. Nayar** teaches at the University of Hyderabad, India. His recent publications in literary and cultural studies include *Reading Culture: Theory, Praxis, Politics* (2006) and *Virtual Worlds: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cybertechnology* (2004).

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The book traces the breakdown of the Nehruvian secular consensus between 1975 and 2005 through these narratives of postcolonial India. In particular, it examines how these writers use the novel form to re-write colonial and nationalist versions of Indian history, and how they radically reinvent English as a secular language for narrating India. Ultimately, it delineates a common conceptual framework for secularism and cosmopolitanism, by arguing that Indian secularism can be seen as a located, indigenous form of a cosmopolitan identity.

**Neelam Srivastava** is lecturer in postcolonial literature at Newcastle University, UK. She has published on Indian literature in English and anti-colonial cinema, and has co-edited a special issue of the journal *Interventions on colonial and postcolonial Italy*.

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# Introduction

Recent feminist theory has been much concerned with the Scylla of constructivism and the Charybdis of essentialism. In the former position, the reality of the feminine tends to be denied or disavowed, being considered as but the projection of cultural ideologies that are performatively acted out. In the latter position, the reality of femininity tends to be affirmed reactively or retrospectively, as the reified negation of its negation. This book aims to consider how both positions may be seen as perhaps compromised by too literalising a logic. In the case of constructivism, ideas, ideals and norms of the feminine are literalised in their performative enactment. And, in the case of essentialism, the signification of femininity is taken to equate literally or in a constative manner with what is signified. This work will offer both a critique of theories of the performative and detailed readings of literary texts, particularly in terms of a poetics of the real, in order to explore how we may move beyond the difficulties that have just been outlined.

In Western culture and beyond, the real has often been designated by the feminine. This pertains both to the materiality of nature, land, the body, and so on, and to the real in a more mystical sense as may be found in certain Lacanian accounts of femininity and strands of feminism concerned with the feminine divine.<sup>1</sup> This work maintains the view that it is because the real is ultimately an undivided totality that this material/spiritual dichotomy arises on a cultural level. What is explored in relation to literary texts is how figures of the feminine are repeatedly used to point to or show up the real but without this amounting to a determinable identity. In particular, what literary texts render uncertain is whether the feminine figures in question serve to refer to the real as something beyond them or whether the real is perceived as, in part, feminine. While it is a matter of interpretation without closure as to whether the feminine real is read literally, metaphorically or metonymically, this work will propose, reveal and explore an *ostensive* designation of the feminine real beyond the already widely considered *performative* modes of femininity.

In order to address what is at stake in this ostensive gesture, it is necessary to confront the resistance towards the positing of a reality of the feminine. Conventionally, when not a signifier of the real, 'woman' has often been the signifier of loss, lack, absence and death. However, it may be said that this formulation



serves to universalise and even make absolute what may be, more narrowly, specific instances of loss or lack. That is, it could be maintained that those who posit the non-being of the feminine are perhaps positing the non-being of the feminine *for themselves*. Here, the supposed non-being of the feminine could pertain to a masculinist structure of disavowal or entail forms of repression of the other so that, with such conditions, the emphasis then comes to fall on femininity as a fabrication, construction or fantasy of some kind. Ironically, it could be masculine lack that leads to the construction of femininity in terms of lack and groundlessness in accordance with an ideological inversion of the reality.

It does, for instance, seem obvious or evident that some femininity is lost at male puberty, whilst femininity may be also culturally repressed. What is more enigmatic is the question of knowing what this femininity may be. If men traditionally have accorded themselves a paradoxically privileged position in discourses that attempt to define the feminine, this would seem to be because they might be able to claim a certain retrospective, even if uncertain, knowledge of what may have been lost whereas those who do not undergo loss of the feminine could find it difficult to specify what of themselves, what of their overall state of being, is feminine as such. Lacanian psychoanalysis tends to define the feminine in terms of *jouissance* which is taken to mean feminine sexuality. From a study of literary texts, it seems more apt to speak of a less specific joy-in-being and a freedom of spirit that may or may not be eroticised. To an extent, for I will also qualify this, a position emerges in which the masculine know of the feminine what they cannot know in the *present* (a consideration implied by deconstruction) while the feminine 'know' femininity without knowing what they know, as Lacan asserts.<sup>2</sup> This would make femininity slip elusively between the cracks of sexual difference as it were: however, this position should be modified for it does not adequately account for what we may know of the feminine, as will be explained further on.

Given that femininity arguably entails a certain capacity for joy-in-being, it may also give rise to covert forms of envy and resentment. This possibility of envy is something that is also registered by Lacanian psychoanalysis, as discussed in the first chapter of this book. In my view, this particular envy of another's joy-in-being can help to explain the psychosomatic aetiology of misogyny, together with aspects of homophobia and racism (given the *perception* or stereotypes of gays as indeed gay, and other races as more feminine or childlike, irrespective of what may actually be the case).

Eric Gans in *Originary Thinking* proposes that appropriative envy or resentment is a primary definitive trait of humanity where he tacitly equates humanity with a certain masculinity. Gans's thesis strikes me as a highly reductive one, however, the reason that I draw attention to Gans's work is because he maintains that an ostensive use of language arises in relation to this envy. He writes the following of the appropriative will and its forestalling:

in violation of the dominance hierarchy, all hands reach out for the object; but at the same time each is deterred from appropriating it by the sight of