

Postcolonial literature in the global marketplace: a few thoughts on political and aesthetic value in the field

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With the emergence of globalization studies, world literature, and the spread of postcolonial literature, postcolonial literary studies have come under increased scrutiny as a discipline. One of the key themes in this scrutiny is the relationship between aesthetic and political value. This paper examines two relatively recent critical assessments of this relationship in postcolonial literary studies, Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic* and Sarah Brouillette's *Postcolonial Writers in the Marketplace*, and suggests, drawing on Isobel Armstrong's notion of the "radical aesthetic," that literary aesthetics may be fruitfully conceived, not as immediately political but "anterior" to (cultural) politics.

From its inception, postcolonial literary studies has been a self-reflective and self-critical field of analysis and investigation – one needs only think about the debate around one of the foundational texts, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.¹ I think it is fair to say, however, that in the last decade or so the scrutiny of the discipline’s premises and *raison d’être* has increased. Postcolonial literary studies, it seems, have come under increasing pressure from the outside and the inside that prompt revaluations or at least assessments of its achievements. New powerful theories of globalization – or globalization theory – put pressure on postcolonial studies from neighbouring academic fields as they map the same kind of cultural and social terrain.² So does the emerging conceptualization of world literature, but from within the same academic environment.³ A third challenge – closely related to both of the above – is the success of postcolonial literary studies as a discipline and the bestselling of postcolonial literature seen in the international stardom of many postcolonial writers and critics, and university syllabi crammed with postcolonial novels.⁴

It is on this last aspect I would like to dwell throughout these pages. In particular, I will focus on the paradoxical fact that the success of postcolonial studies and postcolonial literature is to the discipline itself as much a problem as something to be celebrated. The questions I would like to pursue are: why are bestselling postcolonial novels a problem to postcolonial literary studies? And what kind of problem are they? I will draw on two relatively recent studies on the commodification of postcolonial literature and postcolonial literary studies, Graham Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) and Sarah Brouillette’s *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007). I should warn the reader at the outset that what follows are a few reflections, not a coherent system of ideas.

1.

The answers to the questions above might seem obvious. Bestselling postcolonial novels constitute a problem because, since we inhabit an increasingly globalized capitalist world, their success indicate that the cultural products critics explore for their radical minoritarian politics or their culturally resistant forms have become mainstream and unable to unsettle the “dominant system” as Graham Huggan calls it. They are a problem because they suggest that it might not even be possible to “resist” usefully within its sphere. They are a problem because it may suggest that the critics who have been busy charting the textual politics of literary works have been complicit in giving them values that just supported and extended the markets for these works as profitable goods.

1 It is hardly necessary to recapitulate the debate here. Said’s book was published in 1978 and received one of its severest evaluations in Aijaz Ahmad’s 1992 *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. For an overview of the debates around the book, see, for instance, Graham Huggan’s “(Not) Reading *Orientalism*”.

2 For a discussion of the relationship between the two discourses, see, for instance, Simon Gikandi, “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality,” and Timothy Brennan’s “From Development to Globalization: Postcolonial Studies and Globalization Theory.”

3 The term “world literature” is Goethe’s but, as Christopher Prendergast has noted, its more recent elaboration comes out of work done by Pascale Casanova – and, one must add, Franco Moretti. Casanova’s *La République Mondiale des Lettres* appeared in 1999; Moretti’s “Conjectures on World Literature” was first published in 2000. Significant contributions to this growing field are Prendergast’s edited volume *Debating World Literature* (2004), Emily Apter’s *The Translation Zone* (2005), Moretti’s *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005), his two-volume edited work on *The Novel* (2006), and the four-volume *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective* (2006), edited by Gunilla Lindberg-Wada.

4 A quick look at the last decades’ Nobel Prize laureates and Man Booker Prize winners is enough to confirm the prevalence of postcolonial literature among the highest-ranked authorships. An equally quick look at English and literature department profiles in Europe and the English-speaking academic world will show the solid presence of postcolonial literature on university reading lists.

It may seem strange that this would come as a surprise. Isn't capitalism's essential feature the capacity to turn everything into commodities? If it is able to make sellable objects of Che Guevara caps, Mao uniforms and Nazi helmets – why not of supposedly political postcolonial novels? The answer to this touches a tension at the heart of postcolonial literary studies; that is, its split vision and attribution of different, sometimes incompatible, kinds of value to its objects of study. Texts are in most forms of postcolonial literary studies treated as objects with both *aesthetic* and *political* value, and it is the insight that these two forms of value might not work towards similar ends that is generating the critical interrogations. This, in turn, means that the political edge of the postcolonial studies itself is threatening to being ground down.

My generalization here should be qualified. Postcolonial studies, of course, is not a consensual mode of thinking. It certainly has its divisions and dialogues. Scholars like Arif Dirlik and Aijaz Ahmad have long been critical to the notion of postcolonial studies, and others, like Neil Lazarus, Benita Parry, and Timothy Brennan, have argued for a constitutive problem in postcolonial studies on precisely the score of its political capacity. Parry has noted, for instance, that the institutionalization of postcolonial studies as a predominantly cultural and literary discipline marks the demise of its political potential. Where it began as colonial discourse analysis with the intention to expose the “making, operation, and effects of colonialist ideology” it has over the years become culturalist to the extent that it has given up finding “social explanation[s]” for cultural phenomena (Parry in Lazarus 68, 73). Brennan describes postcolonial studies as *originally* political – emerging first out of the work of “independence intellectuals” it denotes an “intellectual movement driven by a critique of Eurocentrism and patriarchy. In its general arc, the work involves collecting and disseminating information, formulating arguments, or explaining concepts with the end of achieving emancipation for minority, marginal, of formerly colonized people” (Brennan in Lazarus 121, 132) – but as having betrayed the political impulse for a more comfortable and profitable one; in its more recent forms, infused by poststructuralist theory, it has become a mode of thinking that privileges ambivalence, and valorizes migrancy, hybridity, etc as ontological modes of being rather than historical contingencies. The *politics* of the intellectual and analytical project that postcolonial studies once were has been replaced by a vaguely defined *ethics*. Both critics would argue that the work which has come to form the theoretical centre of most postcolonial studies is too easily compatible or even complicit with a liberalist ideology and capitalist production mode. At the very least, it is not critical enough of the premises of capitalism.

Against these criticisms, directed at those who are regularly seen to make up the core of postcolonial theory or thought – Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak – it should be recalled that they also saw, or see, their work as political. Edward Said's mainly historical work was intended to uncover the ideological work of literature and colonial discourse to prepare and legitimize conquest and domination, and Homi Bhabha began his seminal book *The Location of Culture* (1994) by suggesting that culture was the perhaps the most effective field of opposition and subversion (20). Spivak, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999) argued that it was fundamentally ignorant “to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored” (Spivak 113). Most scholars in postcolonial studies, then, agree that it is a political project, but the definition and the area of the political differ. It is at any rate the cultural politics of literary texts that, theorized in different ways by Bhabha, Spivak, and to some degree Said, are being challenged in the works I will consider here.

2.

Stuart Hall in the early 1990s observed the growing significance of writers from marginalized cultures and connected the tendency to globalized capitalism's tendency to turn marginality into a commodity by stating that "[m]arginality has become a powerful space. ... In the contemporary arts, I would go so far as to say that, increasingly, anybody who cares for what is creatively emergent in the modern arts will find that it has something to do with the languages of the margin" (qtd. in Kalliney 16). While this could be seen as a positive tendency, the proof of a democratization in the arena of cultural production, it also signalled a problem – the problem that "marginality" itself was valued as a sign, for what it seemed to represent, and that it could help sell objects of culture. Robert Young a few years later described the importance of marginality as part of a wider trend where opposition, subculture, and radicalism in potentially all its forms were being transformed into sellable sign-objects: "cultural politics has become the conventional norm of politics for many on the Left – an academic orthodoxy that can be safely contained within the system, despite the production of antithetical 'dominant' versus 'subversive' structures" (109).

More recently, Graham Huggan and Sarah Brouillette have made the same argument on at least slightly more empirical grounds. Huggan, perhaps the most powerful investigator of this problem, has argued that "cultural difference" now has become a commodity, that a globalized publishing industry sells this difference to a book-hungry audience, and that a cadre of academics gives these writers the mark of distinction by analyzing their work along a rhetoric of radical politics. In fact, with the waning of the barrier between writers and critics Huggan uses the phrase "writers/thinkers" as the professional group which gives the ideological alibi for the on-going commodification. He props his argument through a distinction between *post-colonialism* and *postcoloniality*.

Postcolonial studies, as part of the former, he describes as an "anticolonial intellectualism that reads and valorizes the signs of social struggle in the faultlines of literary and cultural texts"; the latter is a "value-regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange" which bestows value on "culturally 'othered' goods" (6). The two work in tandem; postcoloniality by valuing cultural difference, and postcolonialism by "certifying" the goods that are sold as culturally different, through a particular politically-inflected jargon and through the authority of its practitioners.

For Huggan, the commodification of cultural difference entails a reduction of real difference into an 'almost sameness' that is still different enough to be exciting. That is, it creates an "exotic" version of cultural difference. The "postcolonial exotic" – Huggan's key term – is "the perfect term to describe the domesticating process through which commodities are taken from the margins and reabsorbed into mainstream culture" (22). Exoticism, Huggan explains, means reduction and stereotyping because it entails a "decontextualization" of the cultural expression.

The commodification of culture which leads to demands for the "postcolonial exotic" forces writers and thinkers into becoming uncomfortable representatives of their "original" cultures – even "original" cultures that are hybrid. On the one hand they sell cultural difference to a metropolitan audience and are consequently seen as representative of that difference. On the other, since they are more often than not émigrés and since commodification allows only for simplified and reduced versions of cultural difference, they will be never-quite truthful in their depictions, while they must appear so. They are "native informants" in Spivak's phrase, unreliable informants pressed into serving an audience with the tales it demands, and they have repeatedly to "stage" their marginality in order to gain authority. The idea of "staged marginality" is a suggestive one, and it does seem useful – at first. Huggan's examples – Rushdie, Kureishi and Naipaul – are persuasive, and from my own research experience, I would immediately like to add writers like Abdulrazak Gurnah and David Dabydeen to the

list of marginal “actors”. But the notion of “staging” is in turn underpinned by an ideal of (an impossible) authenticity that I find wanting.

The reliance on an idea of authentic cultural life can be seen in his shift between “exotic” – which is the simplified cultural difference – and its “exoticist” uses – which is the conscious or strategic manipulation of the codes of exoticism. As Huggan *reads* the novels which exemplify the postcolonial exotic, he concludes that they are in fact engaged in a self-reflective employment of the codes and expectations of the postcolonial exotic – they are “exoticist” rather than exotic: “these writers/thinkers are not only subject to, but also actively manipulate, exoticist codes of cultural representation in their work” (20). The difference may not amount to much from the point of view of politics – there is an *ambivalence* to this manipulation because it is itself a “symptom” rather than a challenge to the code of exoticism (Huggan 33) – but it does separate the knowledgeable reader from the ignorant.

Sarah Brouillette both nuances and challenges Huggan’s foundational idea of authenticity. She demonstrates that the concentration of ownership in publishing and media conglomerates has led to both streamlining and diversification (Brouillette 27). The literary market has been divided up into niches, and the “cultured circuit” of intellectually trained readers now constitutes one – or even several – economically viable markets. This tendency parallels one in which ethnic or cultural communities are acknowledged for their buying power and seen, rightly, as profitable market segments (Brouillette 55–56). Postcolonial novels, in other words, are profitably marketed and sold to more or less academic audiences around the world. Rather than the ‘general’ cosmopolitan reader Huggan postulates, she states, there are a number of readerships, many of which are more or less specialized in literary areas.

The investigation into the readerships of postcolonial literature has consequences for the idea of the “exotic” as well as for the political significance of the field itself. Brouillette adopts Huggan’s controlling analogy between postcoloniality and tourism but argues that the idea of “staging” is untenable since no clear distinction exists between the true and the “staged” (26–31). The division between readers is more rhetorical than actual; it sets up a distinction between two types of readers: the naïve, general, metropolitan reader who demands the exotic, and the sophisticated reader – like Huggan – who sees through the exotic to the strategic usage of its codes. The usefulness of the tourism analogy, she argues, lies not in the division into tourists and non-tourists, but in the desire of people in both areas to separate themselves out from the crowd (25). Postcolonial critics and their slightly less specialized colleagues are not less touristy; instead they are engaged in a game of positioning within an academic field (174).

Brouillette’s dismantling of Huggan’s analogy shows how an argument made along his lines reaches its dead end. Postcolonial studies and postcolonial literature is fully compatible with, not to say promoting of, global capitalism. For Huggan, the “postcolonial exotic” turns cultural difference into marketable goods, but the only conceivable way out of this situation is closed: recourse to a *true* cultural difference, one untainted by market forces and commodification. What remains for the (sophisticated) reader is to chart the ways in which postcolonial literature registers the pressures of commodification through their staged marginalities. His critique, if taken as a theoretical model, shows the political value of literature to be always-already undermined by the market in which it circulates. Brouillette, for her more nuanced discussion and criticism of Huggan’s categories, offers no alternative way of thinking through the political value of postcolonial literature.

3.

Both Huggan and Brouillette are persuasive in their critiques of the commodification of (post-colonial) culture and its effects. But they are also – and intentionally so – one-sided in their analyses. Their surveys of the circulation of postcolonial literature and the anointment of post-

colonial writers derive their critical edge from striking at the *political* value of literature. The value is directly connected to the marginality of the writer, language and/or culture of origin (sometimes to the type of story) and so hinged upon an idea of representativity. But what are they supposed to be representative of? And why should they be representative? What seems to loom in the background of the argument of both critics is the idea that representativity is connected to politics. Simplified, the logic behind this thought could perhaps be summarised thus: truthful accounts of marginal cultures can be enlisted in cultural political struggles by way of being expressions of “the collective suffering of your own people, testifying to its travails, reassessing its enduring presence, reinforcing its memory,” as Edward Said has put it (qtd. in Lazarus 140). With the increasing stardom of the writers, it is ever more unclear what “your own people” are, and the literature thus loses its political potential.⁵

The focus on the political dimension of literature in both Huggan’s and Brouillette’s works also downplays – not to say ignores – the *aesthetic* dimension of literature. Despite intentions, perhaps, aesthetic and political value is brought together in a hierarchical relationship where the former is subjected to the latter. Brouillette, like many other scholars, observes that post-colonial literary studies employs *two kinds of value* in its discourse: alongside the political valuing of marginality, it attributes aesthetic value to texts according to criteria that are often described as essentially modernist. Examples are narrative and thematic complexity, and sophisticated style (Brouillette 59). Huggan discusses what he calls the “anthropological exotic” approach to especially African novels, where the *literary* dimension of fiction is suppressed and fiction is read as straightforward anthropological account. These remarks do not, however, lead them to find any self-justifying aesthetic value in the texts under discussion, nor do they prompt them to reconceive the relation between aesthetics and politics. The most salient feature of postcolonial literature, they conclude, is the self-reflective staging of its entrapment in a commodified culture – which amounts to a loss of any real political function.

Maybe, at this point, it is legitimate to ask if the problem of postcolonial literature and postcolonial literary studies, lies not so much in the commodification of culture as such – which should not surprise us – but in the belief that cultural objects like books (at least the books that most scholars in postcolonial literary studies work with and on) are social actors that act *out of* and *for* a national or a hybrid culture – either by being mouthpieces for marginalized experiences, or by challenging conceptions – and that this gives them political value.⁶ Maybe, the charting of the complicity of “marginality” with globalized consumer culture indicates another relationship between the two forms of value. The value of Huggan’s and Brouillette’s analyses, it seems to me, lies in their implicit calls to rearticulate the relation between aesthetic and political value within (some corners of) postcolonial literary studies. If something is to be learnt from their mapping of the commodification of postcolonial literature, it is that the political value of literature ultimately does not rely in its articulation of the experience of a clearly defined culture, or in its representation of a popular or national group (or for that matter, in the inclusion of other voices in a literary canon) and, further, that neither of these things in themselves counter the global capitalist system that turns objects and

5 The importance of “your people” can be seen, for instance, in Neil Lazarus critique of Homi Bhabha and others in disregarding the *national* dimension of postcolonial literature. The nation, he wrote in 1999, still remains the most important imaginary and imagined arena for politics, and he charged Bhabha with not acknowledging that he theorized what was largely the condition of elite colonial and postcolonial individuals (Lazarus 68–144).

6 Whatever purchase these books have in the countries of the authors “origin” is a highly complicated matter. A. O. Amoko has written eloquently about the use of Achebe and waThiong’o as means of instilling an “African” identity in young Nigerian school children. In Tanzanian bookshops too, these authors are the representatives of “African” literature. The country’s two most internationally renowned authors, M. G. Vassanji and Abdulrazak Gurnah, are not nearly as widely available.

experiences into sellable goods. In what remains of this paper, therefore, I will turn to an alternative mode of conceiving the relationship between aesthetics and politics: Isobel Armstrong's "radical aesthetic," in which aesthetics is not independent from, but "anterior" to politics.

In order to situate this, let me first give a few examples from postcolonial literature on how literature is represented as doing social if not directly political work. In V. S. Naipaul's novel, *A House for Mr Biswas*, reading is a prominent activity. Young Mohun Biswas reads stories in magazines he has turned to for inspiration in his work as a sign painter and then moves on to novels. He is drawn into "intoxicating worlds" as the narrator has it, and as he reads on, he is captured by descriptions of landscape, filled with desire to leave his village, and identifies with novelistic heroes – if only to a part since he, unlike the fictional characters, has no ambition and the colonial circumstances prevent him from doing much (Naipaul 78).

Dabydeen's *The Intended*, from the early 1990s, portrays different scenes and contexts for reading. In the novel, readings of *Heart of Darkness* – whose waiting fiancée the title refers to – is at the centre, and the story contains two very different readers of Conrad's novella. The unnamed protagonist is a Cambridge student-to-be and is willing, if anxiously so, to erase his Caribbean-Indian identity for an entry into English culture. He learns, accordingly, the tricks of the literary trade, reads Conrad's river as the Edenic snake and the story as symbolic of the eternal struggle between good and bad. Joseph, an uneducated Rastafarian and juvenile delinquent, reads the story his own way, as a story of colours and race, and tries to address its wrongs by making a film on its topic. The novel ends tragically with Joseph killing himself and the protagonist climbing into a taxi to go to Cambridge and be, in more senses than one, "gone" (Dabydeen 246).

My point on these two scenes is simple. They show reading to trigger desire. The literature at stake in the scenes – the very literature whose political import so many postcolonial literary studies have focused on – works on the readers in slightly unruly ways. Part or not of an institutionalized colonial education, the books affect the characters by seeping into their fantasies and dreams, and they do so with *different* effects – as at least the Dabydeen example shows.

It is this power of literature to stir and capture desire or affect that forms the centre of Isobel Armstrong's argument on the radical aesthetic. Enlisting a range of thinkers from Vygotsky to Klein to Deleuze, she posits a chain of affective and mental activity beginning with the aesthetic experience. Affect, she argues, triggers conceptual activity and, eventually, linguistic and category-making activities. Aesthetic experience in this way combines unqualified states of feeling with thought; it is a "feeling-thinking" that generates social or political activity but is not political on its own. The aesthetic, she argues, "is not the political, but it may make the political possible" (Armstrong 43).

The emphasis on aesthetic as "pre-political" is suggestive. And while it clearly separates the aesthetic from the political, it is not difficult to see how the spheres connect in the realm of culture. If Fredric Jameson is right – echoing Stuart Hall – that political struggle at the most basic level concerns the definition of concepts and the categories used to map the world, then aesthetic "feeling-thinking" may change the grounds we assemble concepts from (Jameson 263). Rather than having what Peter Kalliney has called the "double discourse" of value that combines yet keeps unrelated the political and aesthetic value, aesthetics and politics are related as domains separated by what could be figured as a threshold (Kalliney 17).

Stephen Chan and Ranka Primorac's reading of Yvonne Vera's novels as directly related to a Zimbabwean social reality prove a good example of how this threshold is crossed and the political potential of literature activated (or the "pre-political" is turned political). Chan, who is a political scientist, and Primorac, a literary critic, have used Vera's novel to argue for a new conception of "land" that would allow necessary political changes in the country. "Land"

– in Zimbabwean political language and wide-spread cultural belief – sums up ideas of historical origin and feelings of identity and social and cultural belonging and has contributed to making political conflicts even more painful. This “fetishization” of land they see countered by Vera’s novels and extrapolate a more viable view based on land as something to be “*traversed*” rather than held and controlled (75).

There are two related points to make on this reading. The first is that Vera’s novels could well be included in the “postcolonial exotic” that Huggan discusses (the covers of her novels in the American editions, with naked black women on the covers, is a clear example of the publisher’s intent). Vera, despite her decision to return to live and work in Zimbabwe, belonged to the same international crowd as Derek Walcott and the rest and certainly catered to the metropolitan audience Huggan imagines. She could thus not be said to be representative of either Zimbabwean or Ndebele culture in any uncomplicated manner. The second, a consequence of the first, is that it takes a particular form of reading to ‘translate’ the aesthetic literary work into political/social discourse language and thought. The political value of the literary work is not in the text by way of its representativity; rather, the aesthetic “thinking-feeling” that it generates (and Vera’s novels are exemplary also in their depiction of the impacts of aesthetic forms on the individual) can, through intellectual, critical work, be turned into something with political value.

The notion of a threshold separation between aesthetic and political, and the importance of noting the “translation” of a cultural product into social-political discourse applicable to a specific place reckons with the fact that, as Appadurai has argued, the world is becoming increasingly “deterritorialized” and representativity increasingly complicated. In Appadurai’s loose model of the globalized world, cultural products and imagination play an increasingly important role. Imagination, he writes, is an “organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labour and culturally organized practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” and mediated cultural forms – literary fiction as well as TV shows, music and other products – make up the “conceptual repertoire of a society” (Appadurai 31, 58). In this way, culture harbours a socio-political power in its potential to be annexed to locally produced ‘grand’ narratives (supported or not by state, media etc), and tied to notions of identity (Appadurai 58, 150–155). Appadurai’s theorization thus problematizes representativity without abandoning it. Cultural imagination pertains not – by default, that is – to specific geographical territories and to pre-established cultural frameworks: “[m]ore persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before” (Appadurai 53). Further, it implies that the use of culture – and by extension, the activity of reading – is a somewhat undisciplined affair. Various groups in different countries may seize upon (or be subjected to) ideas, images, cultural elements, and include them in their repertoire of how they imagine themselves, and how they imagine themselves otherwise, as it were. But how this happens is quite an unpredictable process.

The commodification of postcolonial literature, it has been my argument in these pages, is not really surprising. If, in the studies by critics like Huggan and Brouillette, this process seems to pose a critical problem to the discipline of postcolonial literary studies, it does so to the extent that the discipline has seen itself as engaged in a political enterprise by way of decoding the politics of cultural texts on the grounds of representativity. To these critics’ valuable observations of the effects of globalized capitalism on postcolonial literature, I have suggested that the relation between aesthetics and politics could be rethought in ways that reckon with the deterritorialization of cultural expression and acknowledges reading as an activity that brings aesthetic – “pre-political” – works of literature into the social and political sphere.

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