

book review

A Primer for Post-Colonialism

by Fakrul Alam

IN 1997, the Department of English of the University of Dhaka incorporated a course called 'Commonwealth Literature' into its M. A. syllabus. In it students were to be given the option to study texts by writers such as Chinua Achebe, V. S. Naipaul, R. K. Narayan, and Derek Walcott. It was felt that this course would be a way of acknowledging the quality and the importance of the writing being done in English outside England and America. For various reasons, though, such a course was not actually offered to students till 1992. Then, however, the course was titled 'Third World Literature' because the word 'commonwealth' was seen as inadequate and even misleading when applied to these writers. In a few years time, the course was retitled once again since it was felt now that the phrase 'third world' had become increasingly meaningless in a unipolar world. This time the Academic Committee of the Department of English had to brainstorm for a while to decide on a new title. Should the course be called 'New Literatures in English'? Or should it be called 'Post-Colonial Literature'? Eventually, in a move which is not untypical of the compromises that have to be made to avoid controversies in the academic world, the course was renamed 'South Asian, Caribbean and African Literature in English.' Everybody agreed that this was an ungainly title, and undoubtedly some faculty members privately sniggered at 'politically correct' hypersensitive hypertheorists, but at least no one could take exception to it!

Did all these changes amount to much ado about nothing? Why did rubrics such as 'Commonwealth', 'Third World' have such short lifespans? And what was wrong about 'Post-Colonial' and 'New Literatures in English'? Were these changes confirmation of the adage, 'the more things change the more they remain the same'? Or were they proof that we are condemned to inhabit a polyglot world, a Tower of Babel where people talk continually at cross-purposes? Or were they the result of a genuine concern for accuracy about meaning and nuances and the inevitable outcome of an evolution in the world of ideas?

It is one of the many merits of the book *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*

(Routledge: London, 1998) by the Australian academics Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin that it demonstrates clearly that there has been a genuine evolution in our approach to writers such as Achebe, Naipaul, Narayan, and Walcott. Reading the book also enables us to realize that we can be and should be very careful and precise in categorizing writers since there are negative connotations we can avoid and positive resonance's we can exploit in choosing to label writers.

Take the entry in *Key Concepts* on 'Commonwealth Literature' for example. Reading it, we realize that while in theory the phrase refers to all writing produced in 'commonwealth' countries, in practice it refers only to works coming out of countries formerly colonized by England. In other words, writing from England, the 'center' of the Commonwealth, is English Literature, but writing produced outside England, even if they are in English, is supposed to be Commonwealth Literature!

It is one of the many merits of the book *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (Routledge: London, 1998) by the Australian academics Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin that it demonstrates clearly that there has been a genuine evolution in our approach to writers such as Achebe, Naipaul, Narayan, and Walcott. Reading the book also enables us to realize that we can be and should be very careful and precise in categorizing writers since there are negative connotations we can avoid and positive resonance's we can exploit in choosing to label writers.

A look at the entry in *Key Concepts* confirms that the English Department of the University of Dhaka had good reasons too for dropping 'Third World Literature' as the title for its course on literature in English being produced by Achebe et al. Not only was there no 'second'; and therefore, no 'third world' after the fall of communism, but also the label 'third world' had become pejorative by the nineties since it had by then become 'a general metaphor for any underdeveloped society'. Also, the concepts 'first', 'second' and 'third' were becoming more and more problematic. 'First', for example, suggests primacy while 'second' is nowadays often prefixed to 'world' to denote 'settler colonies' such as Australia and Canada. What is more, we discover from the entry, there is a 'fourth world' as the term is now 'commonly employed to designate those groups such as pre-settler indigenous peoples whose economic status and oppressed condition, it is argued, place them in an even more marginalized position in the social and political hierarchy than other post-colonial peoples.'

The problem with 'New Literatures', we discover by glancing at the *Key Concepts* definition of the term, is that the writing being produced in English outside the United Kingdom is by no means new. After all, writers such as Raja Ramohan Roy, Michael Modhusudhan Dutt, and Toru Dutt had been working in English in the nineteenth century. Moreover, such writers belonged to literary traditions far older than British Literature itself.

And what about 'post-colonialism' itself? Although the word has gained wide currency in the world of ideas since the eighties, the gloss on the word in *Key Concepts* makes it abundantly clear that this too is a concept fraught with problems. To indicate the term as 'a potential site of disciplinary and interpretative contestation' it is entered in the book under the heading 'post-colonialism/postcolonialism'. This suggests that we can either see the word as a period concept ('designating the post-independence period' in once colonized countries) or as a convenient way of connoting 'the effect of colonization on cultures.' Clearly, as a period-concept the word will not do as a title for a course that includes writers such as Narayan or Nirad Chaudhuri whose careers straddle the pre- as well as post-independence periods. On the other hand, the work of a new generation of writers such as Anita Desai or Amitav Ghosh indicates that a lot of the writing being done in English outside England no longer stress 'the cultural effects of colonization.'

Another merit of the book *Key Concepts* in Post-Colonial Studies is that it allows us to see that we are dealing here with a burgeoning academic discipline. As the authors point out:

"Post-colonialism/postcolonialism" is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of Euro-

pean territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the differing response to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre-and post-independence nations and communities.

Key Concepts also enables us to understand how we can take advantage of the exciting work being done in this discipline. Reading post-colonially, we discover, will lead us to appreciating and evaluating "the profound and inescapable effects of colonization on literary production: anthropological accounts; historical records; administrative and scientific writing." Equipped with insights accruing from post-colonial theory, one can demonstrate "the extent to which [a] text contradicts its underlying assumptions (civilization, justice, aesthetics, sensibility, race) and reveals its (often unwitting) colonialist ideologies and processes."

Key Concepts is useful to consult too because of the way it demarcates the boundaries of the nascent discipline of post-colonialism. We realize through a reading of the book that post-colonialism can be an oppositional form of reading practice, and a foil to neo-colonialism and its persistence in the contemporary world. We recognize too that while 'post-colonialism' may mark a site of resistance, 'neocolonialism' refers to covert colonial practices and the continuing efforts by ex-colonial powers and imperialist forces to control their ex-colonies. But the true opposition to 'neocolonialism' comes not from post-colonialism but 'anti-colonialism' which *Key Concepts* glosses as 'the political struggle of colonized peoples against the specific ideology and practice of colonialism'. (This assertion, no doubt, will come as a bit of a surprise to those post-colonial critics who often see themselves as practicing a radical hermeneutics through their writings!)

Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies is useful reading also for the thoroughness with which it explores the theoretical underpinnings of post-colonialism. The entry on 'binarism' is a good instance of the care with which words are glossed in this book, revealing the origins of the discipline in contemporary theory. The entry starts with the OED definition of the word as 'a combination of two things, a pair, 'two, duality'. It then moves on to Ferdinand de Saussure's discussion of binary systems as 'the most extreme form of difference possible'. *Key Concepts* then demonstrates that such systems get to be insidious because of the way they construct 'violent hierarchies' as well as 'suppress ambiguous or interstitial spaces between opposed categories.' Typical binaries such as 'center/margin; colonizer/colonized;

metropolis/empire; civilized/primitive' exemplify the construction of 'violent hierarchies' but the really fascinating thing is how the one depends on the other in a much more complex manner than the binary structure would seem to allow. In fact, argues the author of *Key Concepts* 'it may be argued that the very domain of post-colonial theory is the region of 'taboo' — the domain of overlap between these imperial binary oppositions, the area in which ambivalence, hybridity and complexity continually disrupt the certainties of imperial logic.'

Although the authors of *Key Concepts* in Post-Colonial Studies probably did not intend their book to be an introduction to the most important figures of post-colonialism, the work does manage to highlight its leading figures. Thus the book discusses the contributions made by theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak to the construction of the field. Fanon's centrality to the field is emphasized in two entries: 'critical Fanonism' and 'Fanonism.' The first of these stress the uncritical use of the writings of the Martiniquan psychiatrist in post-colonial writing, the ambivalence of his position, and the way his ideas have been appropriated in developing an ideology of 'anti-colonial resistance.' The second entry discusses Fanon's thesis about the role played by a 'comprador' or local elite class in upholding imperialism. This entry goes on to explain his view that it may be the case that someone from the elite will switch roles and change from being a collaborator to a leader of national liberation. Another of Fanon's thesis outlined in the entry is the danger of the formation of a new elite group in a recently decolonized state.

Said, of course, is the key figure in post-colonial theory since he was the first to scrutinize colonial discourse 'as an instrument of power' in his now classic *Orientalism* and make it 'a field of study.' He thus merits a few entries in *Key Concepts*. One such entry throws light on his theory of 'contrapuntal reading', that is to say, his idea that the canonical English texts should be interpreted to reveal their deep implications in imperialism and the colonial process.' Another entry explains how Said adapted Foucault's concept of discourse to analyze colonial texts and reveal the way knowledge and power are complicit in them. One other concept introduced by Said that is glossed is that of 'affiliation'. This, we find out, is the 'network of history, culture, and society' that links a literary work to imperialism.

But while Fanon and Said are treated respectfully by the authors of *Key Concepts*,

their guru seems to be the expatriate Indian literary theorist Homi Bhabha. Readers like me who have struggled with Bhabha's obscure, even turgid prose, will be especially thankful to this book for its glosses on such Bhabhian

concepts as 'Ambivalence', 'Hybridity', 'Mimicry' and 'Authenticity'. 'Ambivalence', we learn, is Bhabha's word for 'the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized.' Colonization produces, Bhabha would argue, unwittingly but inevitably, subjects who set out to 'mimic' the 'assumptions, habits, and values' of the colonizer but ends up by mocking, and in some cases, even subverting them. Another unforeseen result of colonization is the creation of a class of people who become hybrid linguistically, culturally, and politically. The logic of Bhabha's arguments about the ambivalent, mimic, and hybrid outcomes of colonization also explains why his ideas have led post-colonial theory to question the possibility of 'authenticity' in the 'contact zone' created by the colonial encounter. One other especially obscure Bhabhian concept that becomes clear because of the way it is glossed in *Key Concepts* is 'liminality'. This, evidently, is Bhabha's word for the 'in-between space' of 'contestation and change' where the colonized 'appropriates' the ideas and cultural practices of the colonized and destabilizes them in a deconstructive gesture. Reading the glosses of the terms incorporated into colonial discourse by Bhabha, one learns to appreciate Bhabha's originality, but one cannot help wondering why he could not himself present his ideas as clearly as do the authors of *Key Concepts*!

Gayatri Spivak's contribution to post-colonial theory, like that of Said and Bhabha, has come through incorporating post-structuralist ideas into the analysis of post-colonialism. For instance, she has talked about 'alterity', a concept that underscores the centrality of the 'other' in the colonial situation and seems to be crucial in identifying formation. Another obscure term utilized by Spivak, 'catachresis' is helpfully glossed in *Key Concepts* as 'the process by which the colonized take and reinscribe something that exists traditionally as a feature of imperial culture, such as parliamentary democracy.' We learn from the book also of Spivak's controversial assertion about the subaltern — that is to say, lower or working classes who are 'denied access to 'hegemonic' power — they should 'never be isolated in some absolute, essentialist way from the play of discourses and institutional practices that give it its voice.'

Spivak has a special place in post-colonialist thought as someone who has theorized about the position of women in colonial situations. The entry under 'feminism and post-colonialism' includes her and writers such as Sara Suleri and discusses the question of representation of women and the construction of their 'subjectivity'. The entry is important also because it notes the concept of 'double colonization' in imperialist and colonial practices. This, of course, is the term used widely in femi-

nist and post-colonial circles to emphasize the manner in which women are discriminated against or exploited because they and their bodies have been colonized by men as well as by colonization.

In short, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* will make an indispensable primer for anyone interested in post-colonialism. The book makes a good introduction to the field, indicates its rapid growth, and helps us in understanding the evolution of post-colonialist thought. In addition, the book is useful in marking the parameters of the field, in sensitizing us to the nuances of terms used by post-colonialist theorists, and in explaining the origins of their theories. The work is also good in the way it gives examples of post-colonialist practice. Moreover, the book is useful for identifying the major post-colonial theorists and in making their ideas more accessible to students of post-colonialism.

However, as a glossary of post-colonialism, the book has its lacunas and biases. Thus while there are lots of entries about the post-colonial issues involved in 'settler colonies' (the authors, we remember are all Australians!) and about the West Indies, South Asian — and I suspect — African — issues are inadequately discussed. For instance, there are entries on 'Caribbean/West Indian' 'Creolization' and 'Rastafarianism' — concepts relating to the West Indies — but no entry for 'Anglo-Indian' or 'Indo-Anglian' — concepts crucial in the South Asian Post-Colonial Context. It is significant to me that the extensive Bibliography does not list Salman Rushdie's "Commonwealth Literature" Does not Exist" — surely a landmark essay in the development of post-colonial thought. The entry on 'diasporas' strangely says nothing about the Palestinian diaspora, an omission that leads me to observe that Edward Said's extensive discussions about the colonization of Palestine seems to have totally escaped the authors.

It can also be said that some of the entries in *Key Concepts* could have been more informative. For example, the entry on 'cannibal' is a good one in the way it discusses the way the word was used as part of the 'rhetorical strategy of imperialism' — calling someone a 'cannibal' was an excuse to kill him or 'civilize' him — but the discussion would have been even more illuminating if the authors could have shown how Caliban in Shakespeare's *Tempest* is an anagram for 'Cannibal'. In general, it can be said that more examples could have been brought in from literary text and from history. Occasionally, it must also be said, an entry, such as the one on 'catalysis' fails to enlighten the reader.

Nevertheless, *Key Concepts* in Post-Colonial Studies will be a valuable resource/reference book for anyone studying colonialism and its after-effects. The book will be useful not only for students of English Departments trying to cope with a course on the literature being produced in English outside England and America; it will be helpful also for anyone interested in contemporary history, the social sciences, and theory. And it is just possible that students in our universities will soon be needing a book such as this one for a course/courses on Post-Colonial Studies!

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literary news

A Second Life Abroad for French Authors

by Inès Somarriva

HERE is an ever-growing public for French works of literature abroad. This has indeed been noted by French publishers on a revival of activity over the last couple of years in Europe but also in South-East Asia, which is quite a new phenomenon. Fiction, which had been ignored in the last few years, is now regaining popularity. Everybody is speaking about the case of Marie Darrieussecq. Her novel, *Truismes* ("Pigtails"), which earned a record number of contracts abroad (34 countries) reveals a curiosity for "first novels", outside France. "Foreign readers thirst for novelty and are seeking new writers and authors with a provocative style", comments Jacqueline Favero, the chairperson of the commission for foreign royalties at the National Publishing Syndicate. This explains the popularity of authors such as Virginie Despentes and Amélie Nothomb and her black humour, or for the figure of Michel Houellebecq with his unusual themes sometimes described in France as being caustic.

In contemporary literature, it seems that foreign readers seek a certain image of France which evolves and no longer a somewhat backward-looking self-centered view of a country reduced to the Paris scene. This cliché is amplified by an accusation of "formalism" in the vein of criticism formulated against the *nouveau roman*. Today, readers prefer authors teeming with imagination such as Bernard Werber whose *Fourmis* ("Empire of the Ants") have swarmed in 27 countries and sold a million copies in Korea, or Christian Jacq, chosen by the gods, with historical works on Egypt such as *Ramses* or *Le Fils de La Lumière* (Son of the Light) jumping on the bandwagon of Egyptomania which is in vogue all over the world.

Although foreign publishers have an undeniable flair for talent-spotting and detecting originality in these authors, they are, nevertheless, firstly guided by the reliable league tables of sales in France. Indeed, there is a disquieting correlation between the success of a book in France and abroad as illus-

trated by *Le Scaphandre et le Papillon* ("Diving-Bell and Butterfly") by Dominique Bauby or *The Black Book of Communism*. Another decisive element is the literary awards. The ideal is, of course, a best-seller which also wins over the literary juries such as Chasseur Zéro by Pascale Roze and *Les Champs d'Honneur* ("Fields of Glory") by Jean Rouaud. In fact, the mechanism of the work can be summed up as follows. "Good reading reports and detailed press files prepare favourable ground for a book", a spokesman for Albin Michel points out. "The literary awards, in particular the Goncourt, then act as a trigger which will encourage a foreign publisher to bet on a book as for François Cheng, the winner of the Prix Femina in 1998".

Foreign publishers also have a preference for short texts which are quicker to translate such as *Une petite gorgée de bière* ("Small Pleasures of Life") by Philippe Delerm and his "impressions" drawn from a newspaper. The boost given by the Book and Reading Department of the Ministry of Culture (mainly

in the form of one-off grants towards translation) also helps to open up doors to distribute the work of an author in a country which is difficult to get into. Sustained French production includes writers such as Camus and Le Clézio as well as sociologists and philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Ricoeur and Baudrillard (whose thoughts and concepts are largely studied and interpreted abroad. Certain authors, such as Sartre, Beauvior, Ionesco, Duras, Yourcenar, Gracq, Tournier, Green, Sagan, Sollers and Kundera, who do not need any support and have been consistently esteemed, appear as the ambassadors of the backbone of French literature.

In addition to worldwide success, special affinities are established between certain countries and a given author. In *La Salle de Bains* ("Bathroom"), Jean-Philippe Toussaint, whose works are exported to 16 countries including China and Japan, achieves a kind of alchemy with the Japanese soul through his deadpan minimalist writing. Daniel Pennac (*La*

Fée Carabine) ("Fairy Gunmother"), for his part, is highly popular in Italy. According to Jacqueline Favero, "Amélie Nothomb (Hygiène de l'Assassin "Stanger next door"), who is literally adored, produces a real effect of identification in Americans. She could act in the *Addams Family*", that American television series which is both fantastic and sardonic at the same time.

In contrast to individual writers, there is an unofficial trend for "French-language writers". According to Tahar Ben Jelloun, they owe their reputation to the tales that they are still able to tell. Amin Maalouf, Edouard Glissant, Assia Djebar and Andreï Makine also appear, for certain foreign readers, as a link between French culture and their own. For Americans, questions of identity dealt with by Caribbean writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau, the author of *Texaco*, a world success, or writers of African origin, are anchored in the problem of minorities, an echo answered by Chimo's *Lila dit ça* (Lila says), a social novel tinted with eroticism and revealing the *beur* (French

people coming from the Maghreb) phenomenon, which is now translated into 15 languages.

Although certain countries only appreciate a certain kind of book, Italy and Spain, which are close to France through their language and culture, and the countries of Eastern Europe or, more recently South Korea and Germany, are very present in snapping up French titles. This is borne out by the dozen or so "head-hunters" which scan the French literary scene for the big German publishing houses. This French-German partnership, which is the result of a healthy attitude on the part of French publishing houses, seems, according to Jacqueline Favero, to go against the overproduction of French titles (without any guarantee of future sales), practised by certain publishers in America.

Nourished on humanities, with 1,604 titles exported in 1996, and on fiction with 1,468 titles, French literature has some fine days ahead for it. This presence outside France gives French writers a name and a second life abroad.