

## **Post-Colonialism in Theory and Practice**

Farzad Boobani

**Abstract:**

Volume seven in the series WVT Handbooks on Literary Studies, Post-Colonial Theory and Literatures combines a panoramic view of major theoretical trajectories with in-depth analyses of a considerable number of novels, poems and plays. The product of the joint labor of three authors, the book is remarkably rich in its handling of abstract concepts in Part I, and broadly thought-provoking in its treatment of works of literature in Part II. Despite very few inconsistencies in their explorations, the authors have produced a handbook that, in the last analysis, is instructive, informative and insightful.

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Peter Childs, Jean Jacques Weber and Patrick Williams: *Post-Colonial Theory and Literatures: African, Caribbean and South Asian*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2006 (WVT-Handbooks on Literary Studies – 7). x + 336 p., paperback, 28.50 EUR. ISBN 3-88476-750-x

Although post-colonial studies, as a well-established discipline, has already given rise to a good number of introductory books and reader guides, publication of yet another volume on this subject is a salutary event for the simple reason that the field is so vast that no one volume can claim to exhaust its diversity of theories and literatures. By the same token, however, each introduction to the field can, inevitably, do no more than illuminate some of its aspects, leaving the reader with unanswered questions to be dealt with elsewhere. Bearing these facts in mind can probably facilitate the assessment of Childs, Weber and Williams' *Post-Colonial Theory and Literatures*.

As the authors remark at the outset, "The WVT-Handbook of Post-Colonial Theory and Literatures presumes little or no knowledge of the subject; it introduces the reader to the major post-colonial theories and literary writers." (p. ix) With this opening statement they set the tone for the book and, indirectly, identify its primary target readership: (undergraduate) students. Whether the book fully adheres to this statement of purpose will be further explored below.

The book is divided into two distinct, but mostly interrelated, parts. Part I occupies almost half of the book and is, in fact, a reproduction of Childs and Williams' previous volume, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (Longman Pearson 1997). Part II, in contrast, acts as a theory-into-practice guide and discusses a considerable number of novels, poems and plays by a multitude of writers, from Chinua Achebe and Jean Rhys to Michelle Cliff, Eunice de Souza and Hanif Kureishi, to name but a few.

Chapter one aims to define the term 'post-colonial' by asking such homely questions as "When is the Post-Colonial?" or "Who is the Post-Colonial?" The variety of answers the authors provide illuminates the fact that one single, all-encompassing definition cannot be pinned down for the term. This discussion is complemented by a brief history – offered in chapter two – of the prolonged resistance to colonialism in India, Africa and the Caribbean.

Chapters three, four and five are devoted to the theories and concepts in the work of Said, Bhabha and Spivak, respectively. Here the authors systematically discuss the core concepts

around which these thinkers have built their theoretical constellations. Edward Said's intellectual career is, for instance, followed from his criticism of Orientalism and imperialism through to his lifelong concern with resistance and the role of intellectuals.

In chapter four on Bhabha's work, which is known for its highly complicated concepts, the authors offer a compellingly informative exegesis of terms like 'ambivalence', 'mimicry' and 'hybridity'. The discussion is further supplemented by numerous endnotes addressing the difficulties that may arise in the course of understanding Bhabha.

A different facet of post-colonialism is revealed in chapter five through an exploration of the ideas of Spivak and the question of the subaltern in her critique of the (existing) world order. The lines of argument in this chapter are outstandingly clear, and the reader is guided through a fluid discussion towards a general but undeniably useful understanding of what Spivak's world looks like.

Chapter six provides an interesting reflection on some key concepts in post-colonial studies like race, diaspora and globalization. As the authors note these terms are not unique to post-colonialism, and this occasions their insistence on the 'intersections' of different theoretical trajectories.

All in all, Part I is an essentially flawless account. Perhaps the only major fault which could be attributed to this part is that it largely ignores the statement of purpose made in the Preface, and instead addresses the issues in a language and style which, despite their merits, are not readily accessible to, say, a general or an undergraduate readership.

In contrast, Part II – which attempts to highlight literature's role in the resistance to colonialism and imperialism – has been written with beginners in mind and is a concise guide to the literary works in question. Paradoxically, this plays a part in one of the few shortcomings of the book: an overwhelming imbalance between its two parts. While Part I's presentation of 'high theory' demands an advanced, well-prepared reader, Part II indeed presupposes the reader to "have little or no knowledge of the subject," and contains readings which, while illuminating and thought-provoking in their own right, might disappoint some of the expectations built over the course of Part I. In what follows I will discuss two such cases, which I hope will only be taken as very minor drawbacks in a book that has far more constructive things to offer.

Analysing David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* in chapter 14, the authors endeavour to prove that the novel overcomes binary thinking – here the dichotomy of "order/chaos" associated, respectively, with some English masters and their slaves. The alternative the authors champion as Dabydeen's non-binary breakthrough is, however, but another dichotomy: "chaotic order/ordered chaos." (p. 222)

In the same way, the authors' argument in Chapter 19 as to why Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John* is to be read as a post-colonial work is not convincing enough. The novel, as it is summarised in the same chapter, tells the story of the widening rift between Annie and her mother.

Obviously, this theme is universal enough to be detected in any (fictional) family, and the strategies attributed to Annie – “lying and deceit”, “talking back” and “political awareness” (p. 272) – cannot simply be taken as signs of “Post-Colonial resistance”; these strategies can, indeed, be employed by any (fictional) boy or girl at odds with his/her parents (or any oppressing system) during the phase in which he/she undergoes the formative experiences of puberty (or gains intellectual awareness).

Small flaws notwithstanding, Part II offers many valuable insights into its subject, as the perceptive discussion on ‘civilization’ occasioned by Emecheta’s *The Rape of Shavi* in chapter 15 (pp. 230-31) can clearly bear witness. Still, Post-Colonial Theory and Literatures would probably have been a more fruitful enterprise had the authors managed to remain consistent throughout the book, putting practice on a par with theory, while imparting their theoretical formulations with the simple, accessible language of good practice.