Review of John Thieme, *Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place*

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John Thieme, *Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ix + 237 pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-45686-1.

Interrelating a range of interpretative frameworks from ecocriticism and spatial theory to, of course, postcolonial theory to read a wide variety of texts including Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy, Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *Midnight's Children* (the only novel so far to be awarded the Booker of Bookers), and Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, to name just a small selection, John Thieme's *Postcolonial Literary Geographies* is a welcomed study that takes the unusual approach of interrogating postcolonial writing from the perspective of the environment. Divided into eight chapters, each one (save the first and last, which are the introduction and conclusion respectively) corresponds with a specific aspect related, either directly or otherwise, to the concept of place, which according to Yi-Fu Tuan, is "undifferentiated space" that we have come to know better and have endowed with value (5). The book's aim, broadly, is to demonstrate how postcolonial fiction, poetry, and to a lesser extent, autobiographical writings (like Jamaica Kincaid's oddly-titled *My Garden (Book):*), attempt to redirect, contest, and/or enhance the way we comprehend some of the challenges facing a world whose borders are becoming increasingly porous, and what they potentially signify for the immediate present and the not-too-distant future.

Following the introductory chapter, which provides the reader with the objectives and scope of the study, including a chapter-by-chapter outline, the second chapter considers the problematics of atlases and map-making. It begins by demonstrating how a tacit Eurocentric ideology in early cartographic models, like Gerardus Mercator's influential 1569 world map, had played an indirect role in instigating and justifying colonization by, for example, deliberately accentuating the size of the European continent to imply greatness and power, and replacing the names of certain places with Western designations to establish ownership. Such an ideology continues to inform contemporary cartography despite the availability of updated and corrected atlases in recent times. To show how such problematics are treated and complicated in fiction revolving around colonialism and postcolonialism, the chapter turns to, among other texts, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines,* and Michael Ondaatje's semi-autobiographical work, *Running in the Family*.

The focus of Chapter Three is botany. Several areas of inquiry are pursued here, such as the appropriation of non-Western flora by European botanists for resignification that, as a result, obfuscates the history and/or corrupts the significance of certain plants. Famous examples include the association of tea (a plant whose origin is in South Asia) with the English and the Caribbean breadfruit as "cheap food for feeding slaves", a view expressed in Kincaid's essay, "What Joseph Banks Wrought", that Thieme, however, finding it absent in the

works of other Caribbean writers, argues is specific to Kincaid and largely perpetuated by Hollywood myth-making. Contra Kincaid's piece is Derek Walcott's poetry, for instance, whereby the breadfruit is profoundly infused with Caribbean significances and how its consumption augurs a reification of Caribbean identity and history, and a symbolic return to one's Caribbean place of origin. Of interest in the chapter also is the trope of the garden, especially its appearance in postcolonial writings that contest Western literature's exoticization of non-Western flora as a metaphor for the wild, untamable, and uncivilized world beyond the European borders. Through works like Patrick Chamoiseau's *Chronicles of the Seven Sorrows* and Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy, Thieme is able to show that, in the final analysis, just as gardens are created to represent the needs of their cultivators, the colonial garden is shaped according to colonialism's imperative as a reflection of its will-to-power and domination, and how such an imperative, as a result, has destroyed the natural world once enjoyed by the subsequently colonized.

Chapter Four somewhat continues from the previous chapter with an emphasis on spice this time. Here, references to Eastern spices in English writings like the traditional popular song, "The Roast Beef of Old England", and John Keats's poem, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, are juxtaposed with those in postcolonial fiction such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, to demonstrate the longstanding literary practice of deploying spices for figurative purposes that imply, variously, otherness, nationalism, and sensuality. The chapter that follows considers the issue of environmentalism and how Western-based policies and Western-led projects can sometimes indirectly perpetuate a neo-colonizing intent that, on a long term, is detrimental to the success of any green movement. Using Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide*, as a case study, Thieme argues how the novel potentially provides an alternative blueprint to environmentalist pursuits that involve native expertise as equals and take into account local concerns so as to be more effective in securing the present natural world for future generations.

Relating to the fifth chapter is the next, which is perhaps my favorite due to its focus on fauna. Texts considered in Chapter Six include R.K. Narayan's classic, *The Tiger of Malgudi*, *The White Bone* by Canadian novelist, Barbara Gowdy, and Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (recently made into a film by director Ang Lee). Attention is given to the question of animal endangerment and protection, and more notably, the representation of animals as allegorical vehicles for expressing criticism against the human. Unsurprisingly, the tiger is featured prominently in Thieme's discussion, since it is a main character in both Narayan and Martel's novels. Chapter Seven moves from zoology to urban space, particularly London and Bombay (Mumbai), as a focus for investigation. Discussing the depiction of the former in Selvon's text and Brian Chikwava's rather bleak novel, *Harare North*, and of the latter in a couple of Rushdie's works and Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in the Tower*, the turn to urban space in this chapter demonstrates the extent to which the postcolonial subject arrives (or fails to arrive) at a sense of belonging

and identity in a place whose amorphous and perpetually shifting nature can either motivate him or her toward self-reinvention and transcendence, or cause self-erasure by overwhelming the subject with a sense of inconsequential anonymity and perpetual stasis.

The only two issues I have with Thieme's study are minor ones that reflect a personal preference rather than any shortcoming with his analysis. The first concerns his criticism of Narayan's novel for something the narrative arguably never intended to explore in the first place. As such, Thieme seems to me to be setting up Narayan's text as a straw man to drive his point about the lack of concern for animal conservationism in early postcolonial literature when compared to more recent works like Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. The second has to do with the often large selection of texts in each chapter that results in a cursory treatment of literature, with the argument being based mostly on a few, and sometimes rather short, excerpts per narrative (in one case, just the introductory and closing passages). While I understand the need to be representative in scope, I feel that the study would have gained in depth if fewer works were included for a more sustained discussion.

On the whole, however, *Postcolonial Literary Geographies* reads effortlessly and is packed full of stimulating ideas. Thieme's choice of literary (and a few autobiographical) works relevantly supports the array of points he raises, and his interpretation of them is both persuasive and insightful. His focus on space/place, cartography, and the environment opens up a fascinating new window into postcolonial literary scholarship that has hitherto been defined mostly by issues of race, migration, and gender. It is hoped that Thieme's valuable contribution will encourage the development of more scholarly projects on postcolonial writings along ecocritical lines.