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POSTCOLONIAL WORLDS APART

Sandra Ponzanesi

Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora

Albany: SUNY Press, 2004, 264 pp., ISBN 0791462013

There is no doubt that the publishing world is dominated by Anglo-American researchers in every field of enquiry, including women's studies, cultural studies and sociology. A survey in 2002 of qualitative methodology textbooks published by Sage indicates that 'English-speaking countries held 91 per cent of the "market", and the United States and United Kingdom alone had an 80 per cent market share' (Alasuutari, 2004: 597). This unequal concentration impacts upon the type of research reported, the nationalities of writers published, and ultimately the culture, language and politics that count as 'international'. Writers who use the English language as a medium of communication enjoy many more publishing opportunities than do writers using 'minority' languages.

In *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture*, Ponzanesi compares female Anglo-Indian writers to Afro-Italian writers. The central argument is simple: colonialist legacies are ongoing and by examining the postcolonial publishing world, Ponzanesi demonstrates that inequalities are perpetuated by global linguistic hierarchies. Although the Afro-Italian and Anglo-Indian writers examined here all migrated to the first world from third world countries, their works are differentially positioned because of inequalities between the empowering language (English) and a minor one (Italian). Ponzanesi argues that novelists writing in English 'can rely on a broad network and on a vast readership, whereas Afro-Italian writers risk being doubly erased by colonial policy and by neocolonial powers that privilege English in the new global economic transactions' (p. 12). She elaborates, noting that:

. . . the literatures expressed in English grant themselves the privilege of attracting wider interest, a global readership, and the support of international publishing houses located in strategic cosmopolitan centers such as London, New York, New Delhi, and Toronto. These possibilities go hand in hand with the garnering of flashy international literary prizes (such as the Nobel Prize, Booker Prize, Commonwealth Prize, Pulitzer Prize, and Neustadt Prize for Literature) and the corresponding media coverage and critical reviews. (p. 14)

Though postcolonial literature has received much more feminist attention of late (Hussain, 2005; Silva, 2004), *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture* is unique because, as Ponzanesi correctly points out, global linguistic hierarchies have largely been absent from analyses of diasporic Anglo-American literature. The emphasis on fragmentation, varying historical legacies and unequal linguistic hierarchies serves to challenge the monolithic nature of the postcolonial debate.

Each chapter in the book focuses on a particular theoretical issue, but as a whole brings together themes of gender, ethnicity and migration. Each chapter can be read alone or as part of the larger monograph. There are two sections to the monograph. The first part analyses Indian novels; it consists of four chapters and analyses *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines*, *Meatless Days* by

Sara Suleri and finally Sunetra Gupta's *Moonlight into Marzipan*. The second part of the book centres on Afro-Italian literature, including works by Erminia dell'Oro and Maria Abbebu Viarengo, Ribka Sibhatu's *Aulo: Canto-Poesia dall'Eritrea*, and finally *Sette Gocce di Sangue* by Sirad S. Hassan.

The book is useful for a broad audience; the details of Italian colonialism are perhaps not so widely known (at least among Anglo-American theorists). In 'A Short Story about the Italian Empire' (Chapter 6), Ponzanesi discusses the history of Italian imperialism and the time after independence, paying attention to representations of female Italians and Africans. In order to understand current migration patterns and multiculturalism in contemporary European society, Ponzanesi argues that it is necessary to explore the varying colonial policies adopted by the British, French and Italians. In addition, this monograph contains some key references for those interested in reading more works by Afro-Italian and Anglo-Indian writers.

The central problem I have with this text is that in analysing postcolonial inequalities it seems to prioritize divisions of language and nationhood. Most people would agree that a host of advantages arise for novelists writing in English as a second language, and further, that native English speakers are privileged in a plethora of ways. However, the arguments posed in *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture* are based on the life chances of an incredibly small and elite group of writers who have opportunities to travel the world, publish best sellers and enjoy prominent international careers. The Afro-Italian writers as well as the Anglo-Indians are clearly middle and upper class. But how does the global linguistic hierarchy affect working-class people? There is virtually no attention paid to social class inequalities, both within and between countries in this analysis. For instance, what role do social networks play in the route towards international stardom? In part I would have been interested in reading more about the link between these novels and the everyday lives of migrant, minority and diasporic women in contemporary Europe. Though the monograph refers briefly to accent and dialect hierarchies within the English language, it is assumed that all British people, regardless of class and race/ethnicity, benefit from speaking English. Recent empirical research by feminist sociologists in the UK suggests this is not the case (Mahony and Zmroczek, 1997; McDermott, 2004).

Despite these small concerns, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture* is a lively, enjoyable and absorbing account of linguistic hierarchies operating in the global world. It offers a unique argument to the postcolonial debate and is especially interesting for those unfamiliar with Italian colonial history. I would recommend this as an essential piece of reading for students and researchers working on literary studies, migration, globalization and gender.

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