Review

Akhter, M. (Ed.) Musings Post Colonies. Rajshahi, Bangladesh: Chinno

I read this book on a two-day journey from Rajshahi to Hyderabad. It shortened the long hours on trains and in airports, and took me on (at least) two other journeys: first, into the recent history of Bangladesh, as part of Bengal in the India of the British Empire, as part of Pakistan in the first postcolonial phase, and as the independent nation it is now. Second, into my own identity as an Irish emigrant, and an ELT academic, an identity that may be viewed very differently by others from how it appears to me, from the inside. Since that intense first read, I have dipped into the book on a regular basis, reading a paragraph or two, and musing on the ways transnational displacement, social alienation, and economic deprivation so easily find a place in the human condition, and despite intellectual analyses and social advancements, are still so difficult to overcome.

There are many gems in this volume. It starts with pre-musings, a statement of the kind of post-colonialism we are doing now and the kind of post-colonialism we want to do. In different formats this agenda takes shape and becomes a mission of substance. There are seven articles, studies of post-colonial literature which are lucid explorations of the post-colonial condition. The texts – fiction and non-fiction – are analysed as studies of how people live with inequality: slave and master in *An Antique Land* and *The White Castle* (Mominul Islam); natives, settlers, colonisers and returnees in *The God of Small Things* (Sakawat Hossein); black people and the white people in Australian texts (Najnin Islam); rulers, heroes and rebels in Kenyan oral narratives (Murimi Gaita);and elites and little folk in tales from Indian mythology (Namrat Jain). One feature that makes these studies post-colonial is the language of the literature – English – which contrasts with the identity of the authors who are not English. In the postcolonial period, the ex-colonised seem to be making the choice to use the language of the colonisers.

This use of English is a major theme of the musings, and as if to address the issue head on, the final section is an interview with Professor Aali Areefur Rehman, a senior figure in both Rajshahi University and Bangladesh English Studies over four decades, until his untimely passing in March this year. His take is reflective and reflexive. He posits English as a cultural code in Bangladesh which has shifted from being a symbol of learning and intellectual sophistication, to something more functional and material. Aali Rehman describes himself as part of a generation that are ‘the last of the colonials rather than the first of the post-colonials’ (p.335). In this assessment, he is articulating a widely assumed view: that just as political events and designations change our collective label, they also change our identity, our individual ways of thinking and seeing the world. His reflections on the leaders of the post-colonial sub continent, such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who were ‘*deshi* nationalists and English gentlemen at one and the same time’ is illuminating here. He notes that that that generation, including his own relatives, were ‘insecure in their beliefs […] usually threw off their acquired habits and returned in the end to the culture in which they were born, quite often with a sense of guilt and repentance, and wishing to atone for their earlier indulgence in foreign ways’ (p.337). What Professor Aali is referencing here is the complexity of identity, the ways in which we can be part of two communities, perhaps central in both, or more often, marginalised in both. A life is not so much a smooth progression from one to the other, but rather a constant hovering between the two which requires a lot of energy, and ultimately settling on the one which offers the more stable anchor.

This theme of negotiating such identities is picked up in the book in the discussion of diasporas. Abdullah Al Mamun’s think piece explores how the metaphor of ‘diaspora’ is constructed. In addition to the fact of displacement, there is also a major criterion of voice: only those who are displaced from the post-colonial periphery to the ‘centre’, and who can articulate their account of this displacement, merit the identity of diaspora. And their privileged, celebrated status is a problem for those displaced to other parts of the periphery and without voice.

The issue of privilege takes us to the cornerstone contributions to this book by the editor Maswood Akhter. In the Introduction – On Doing Postcolonialism – he demonstrates how the relationships of colonialism endure within what we consider postcolonial spaces. ‘Economic imperialism’ and the dominance of a ‘Macaulayan class – indigenous in blood and colour, but Western in education, training and taste’ (p.26) together account for the limited changes in identity, in culture and in sense of independent trajectories of development. The critique of this post-colonial colonialism is sharp, cogent and sustained. The roles of the English language, diasporic literature in English and the hegemony of the Western academy are carefully explicated, and with one small exception, the analysis is coherent and satisfying. The title of the piece is ‘On Doing Postcolonialism’ and my enduring query is about the ‘doing’: is the action just the intellectual work of understanding the cultural, social and economic processes, or some more direct action envisaged? Is it enough for a peripheral group in Rajshahi to challenge the discourse? Or should they, could they take other measures to challenge and change the status quo?

Maswood Akhter’s second major piece in the book is his study of Adib Khan’s fiction. There are four major theses in this monograph. First, the claim of Khan like other members of the Bangladeshi diaspora to be able to observe and understand from abroad is disputed, specifically his right to represent Bangladesh as if it were his home. ‘Fragmentation’ is the key characteristic of his life and identity, and for Maswood Akhter, also of the quality of his understanding of contemporary Bangladesh. Second, Khan’s self-positioning on the war of Independence in 1971, analysed through the characters in his fiction places him outside the orthodox Bangladeshi identity: his view that all war destroys, places him at odds with the notion that that war *created* Bangladesh. Third, there is a problem with the voice of the expatriate which seeks to combine an external perspective with insider credibility. The analysis focusses on the ways Khan’s protagonists, like other returnees in diasporic literature, are caught between finding no change or too much change during the period of their exile. Neither is satisfactory for those who have stayed, who only see change in the emigrant, and that is change for the worse. Fourth, the profiling of religion in Bangladeshi life reflects an external discourse of the seamless connections between Islam, terrorism and intolerance, rather than the complex ways in which Islam locates itself as one strand in the Bangladeshi social fabric.

I read this book with some measure of reflexivity. I am Irish, but have lived outside Ireland all my working life. I first thought of myself as an emigrant, but the label, member of the diaspora, has become familiar in the last decade or two. As a child in the 1950s and 1960s in Ireland, I was familiar with emigrants returning for an annual visit to see parents and ponder the nature and direction of change. Ireland was a poor country in those days, and much of the discussion was about who had it hardest: those who went or those who stayed. Those who emigrated were seen to do so for the ‘lure of the lucre’, and spoke with the voice of material achievement, even superiority. Those who stayed claimed to keep the home fires burning, tolerating deprivation to look after parents and family graves. The role of the Catholic Church, controlling the social order with a mandate from Heaven, and the terrorist campaign of the Irish Republican Army, their mandate from History, became part of the dialogue, with positions always determined by the fact of emigration.

I know now, and probably knew then, that they were all actors on the stage of economic and cultural imperialism. They were all negotiating the consequences of life decisions which were not choices, but were constructed as choices for which they must be held accountable. They were searching for integrity when all the options were unsatisfactory. They wanted their lives to have meaning, their identities to be connected, but were failing to find a stable anchor.

Khan’s protagonists, hovering between Bangladesh and Australia, seem denied a place they can call home. Their voices represent neither Bangladesh nor Australia, but rather particular outcomes of the fusion of the two. They represent displacement, characterised as relocation, loss characterised as gain, and in identity terms, marginalisation rather than centring. Maswood Akhter has in this monograph teases out these themes, both in terms of erudite literary critique, and also in terms of an equally reflexive voice of a Bangladeshi scholar who has stayed in Bangladesh.

This short review has barely scratched the surface of this impressive volume. The ‘musings’ in the title hint at the breadth of the coverage: there is so much in terms of studies of diasporic literature, explorations of history, politics and culture, and biographical accounts which funnel these grand themes into studies of voice and identity. The notion of Post Colonies is developed to represent the state of the nation, the task of the intellectual, and most importantly perhaps, the personal and reflective journey we all negotiate as we ‘do’ postcolonialism.

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