

Reader's Review of the Doctoral Dissertation

Markéta Olehlová: Identity and Displacement in Contemporary Postcolonial Fiction

The author of the dissertation states her objective to be to debate the concepts of identity, place and displacement in the contemporary postcolonial discourse and the reflection of these concepts in fiction. She starts from outlining the field of postcolonial studies in the introductory chapter and in two following core chapters focuses first on identity in postcolonial theory and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and second on the issues of place and displacement in postcolonial theory and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*, with numerous asides to other novels of the postcolonial context.

While the chosen topics are weighty and worthy of continual discussion, as a doctoral dissertation theme they have not been formulated ambitiously enough to move the debate forward. The author does not raise any questions or present a thesis or aim other than wanting "by means of selected literary works [...] support (or disclaim, if necessary) conclusions reached by the most notable theories" (13). This cannot be viewed as an adequate research aim, because the theories are certainly not in need of such support and the novels, possibly with the exception of Kiran Desai's work, have been abundantly analyzed in all these respects. Here I cannot accept Olehlova's claim that the Rushdie Affair "totally overshadowed the true character of the book" (96). In fact the opposite is true: the novel received more attention in literary criticism than any other of Rushdie's books to prove its literary merits and establish its important place in the postcolonial and multicultural debate. Considering the chosen novels, one can likewise hardly agree with the assertion that Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* is exceptional in the postcolonial canon, primarily because it is about "false perceptions" (25), or rather assumptions, by migrants from the Caribbean about England and the English. In fact, the topic has been treated by many other writers, specifically with reference to the Caribbean by Caryl Phillips (acknowledged) and particularly in several novels by Andrea Levy, who would have been a good choice of a writer of the younger generation to offer new insights and move the research in the field forward. Moreover, to limit the choice of novelists to their Indian origin makes little sense with regard to the very disparate backgrounds and settings of the writers concerned as well as with regard to the role their origin plays in the discussion and analysis of their works in the dissertation.

The theoretical background to postcolonial studies and the concepts of identity and displacement have been widely researched and treated in detail in both the introductory chapter and in introductions to the individual concepts. The chapter on identity is, fittingly for the postcolonial context, augmented with the notions of hybridity and mimicry, and similarly the chapter on place and displacement is linked to postcolonial reality by including the issue of diaspora. The seamy side of too extensive theorizing is its repetitiveness of which the author appears to be aware as she starts most of her subchapters with the inevitable "As it had been shown in previous chapters..." Repetition on Epistemic Violence (163) goes so far as to repeat, word for word, a paragraph of some ten lines from pages 88-89 (3.1.1.2 Epistemic Violence in Practice). The structure of Chapter 5 underscores this déjà vu feeling by its complicated subchapter numbering and under the headings of Desai and Naipaul first commenting on other writers' works. What is more, to class Desai's novels as diasporic appears problematic despite its important focus on the "journey". As the novel is situated in India,

the undeniable shift in the context should at least be taken into consideration, most relevantly with the different perceptions of hybridity on p. 183. The assertion that “multicultural and economic travelling to the West [...] requires a 100 percent assimilation” (184) seems to me a contradiction in terms.

The use of English in the dissertation is not always flawless, from careless use of articles (“As the Empire attempted to sustain an illusion of continuity by means of Commonwealth, similar strategy was applied as for the literature”, 15), to not quite intelligible constructions and clauses (“As mentioned above the key merit of this novel is a combination of all topics that had been previously to be found only by themselves in the postcolonial fiction, namely English as the cultural and literary language, a colonial life as such and subsequent postcolonial reality, migrancy to Great Britain and the USA et al.”, 175). In the opening pages, referring to “Black writing” or “multicultural” literature as potentially derogatory labels (11) and contrasting the terms with “home” authors (12) sounds surprisingly ill informed.

The Conclusion, extensive as it is, remains rather unconvincing. The dissertation would have been better served by a more concise summary of its strong arguments rather than straying to unfounded speculations, away from its objectives and findings.

In spite of my numerous reservations, there is no doubt that this dissertation is the result of painstaking, wide-ranging research in the area of postcolonial theory and fiction, confirming the author as a capable scholar and researcher. I therefore recommend Markéta Olehlová’ doctoral dissertation for the defense and the award of the PhD degree.

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Prof. Mgr. Milada Franková, CSc., M.A.