

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

**Suvir Kaul, *Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009)**

*Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* is an admirable addition to the field of postcolonialism. It concentrates on an intimate and in-depth study of the issues of the British political, philosophical and economic paradigms in a particular period of time, unlike many others' general and overall treatment of the colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial thoughts and debates, such as Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Leela Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory: An Introduction*, or Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Consistently and coherently Suvir Kaul starts it with the historical, economic, social and political events of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the eighteenth-century British world with its burden of Empires. In a formal, scholarly and engaging way he places critical and theoretical arguments having focused on a timeline at the very beginning and plan of the book in the 'Introduction.' That timeline refreshes my memory of the political and literary history of the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth century and helps me to understand the materials in a very clear-cut way. Kaul's bold attempt to focus on a specific area reinforces previous scholarship and successfully adds new ideas about postcolonial debates.

The central attempt of the writer in this book is to prove that texts are not context-free and de-historicism and de-contextualisation cannot take a reader to the core meaning of the texts. Consequently he hits upon the veiled colonial layer of British literature in the eighteenth century and confirms that the whole corpus of contemporary literary texts are totally informed by the promotion and expansion of commerce, trade and plantation in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and America. The book thus establishes the historical and ideological standpoint of the English society in that period when empire-building was considered a venerable and glorious enterprise for a nation. And for this the English not only concentrated on the establishment of the 'external colony,' that is to say, the expansion of territories in overseas areas, but promoted 'internal colonization' in the formation of the Britishness incorporating Ireland, Scotland and Wales together as well. Kaul shows how travelogues, journals, newspapers, and other literary forms contributed in this task of paradigmatic preparation and cultural representation. They provided useful knowledge about the social, cultural, religious, topographical, economic and political norms and practices of the faraway places. In this way the book reveals 'the world-creating ambition' (26) of the writers of those days and shows how postcolonial literary criticism traces these historical marks in the body of literature.

To develop this central thesis, Kaul includes text analyses – dramas, essays and novels – very interestingly, although most of the books are not included in the general syllabi in the existing Departments of English in Bangladesh. In these analyses in each chapter he situates rudimentary discussions on the relationship between colonial ideas-practices and origination-development-contribution of a particular genre. In Chapter 1 the writer draws the readers' attention to a basic trait of English drama in these centuries; that is, the plots, characters and events found in the

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classical and British dramas are 'far removed from Athens or Rome' and from London (35-36). Analysing some dramas by Davenant, Dryden and Aphra Benn, he then shows that absolute celebration of Englishness and its commercial and cultural superiority was constructed gradually and cumulatively in the dramatic world from a less obvious and fluid notion of national consciousness. In the discussion of essays and fiction, in Chapter 2, also surprisingly enough the writer identifies the novel as 'a foreign import,' developed from myriad places in all over the world (61). Hence come the ruthless love story of Inkle and the American slave Yariko, the model colonial settlement of Crusoe, and through these the cues to produce an overbearing nationalist ethical culture. The writer's detail treatment of the role of the *Spectator* in the celebration of commerce and consumerism and formation of the public and female sphere offers a valuable insight. He shows its advocacy for dominion by arts, not arms, overseas was nothing but a daydream at that time. Immediately after this, Kaul places the struggles of the Scots, through Roderic Random, not to be treated as the 'Other.' The book thus highlights the paradox of Scottish-British identity that can only be resolved through Roderick's fortune-making overseas. Such analytical findings obviously make the book worth reading not only for the academics, but also for any curious reader from the once-colonised countries.

Another trait which enchanted me is that the book does not offer any parochial readings. Besides the aforementioned colonialist underpinnings it contains a most fascinating part called 'Perspective from Elsewhere.' It includes the writings of some four writers who went against the common current of ideas and practices of the imperialist conceit. They are Lady Mary Montagu, of whom once Alexander Pope was enamoured and to whom he wrote a series of letters, the Great Shakespearean scholar Samuel Johnson, Phillis Wheatley, a Negro maidservant of Boston, and an African slave named Gronnisaw. Whereas the first two tried to put opposite ideas and pictures of the colonised world presenting an idealised cultural, social and political character of the women, inhabitants and rulers of those countries, the latter writers express their anguish for their origin in an acculturated environment. This chapter thus unmasks the true and ironic face of imperial representational politics and creates a space for both present neo- and postcolonial scholars to look deep into the matter.

The conclusion of the book works as a reminder. It reminds the readers that in celebrating the 'language as arts' (156) we ought not to forget the history that produced the ideological foundation of imperialism. 'Gazing into the Future' (155) Kaul discerns the same background of imperialism as in the literary creations.

Structurally the book is a very fine one. The wise crafting of the timeline and the lengthy Introduction make the main chapters progress logically. The titles of the chapters themselves are literary and hence charming and expressive of the writer's literary attributes. Notes after every chapter provide additional information along with the clarification of the stated points, and the Bibliography and Further Reading are rich and greatly enhance my curiosity. Moreover it is a text from a series called 'Postcolonial Literary Studies' that create eagerness to read other books – published and yet-to-be-published. Although sometimes the sentences are long, ambiguous and set off with many commas which hamper smooth reading, the use of attractive phrases such as 'the powerful afterlife of colonialism,' 'world-systemizing ambition,' 'an uneven promise,' 'constant re-adjustment,' 'the fantasy of European self-sufficiency,'

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'near-hallucinatory fears' etc. deserves special remark.

On all scores Suvir Kaul's *Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* carries the possibility of formulating postcolonial consciousness against the Eurocentric reading of eighteenth-century literature. It is not an end but a path to traverse the other arena of postcolonialism. Thus it can be an authentic source of knowledge for students, teachers and researchers in the field of colonialism, postcolonialism and neocolonialism that must be read and re-read, thought about and discussed. It is a book that will endure with an extraordinary impact on the postcolonial/neocolonial thinkers' realisation of the rough realities of the colonial period.

**Umme Salma**