

BOOK REVIEW

The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial literatures,
By Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffins and Helen Tiffin, 2nd ed., Abingdon, Routledge, 2002. xi + 283 pp.

Reviewed by Tushaara Kannan, Universiti Malaya
<rakee96right@gmail.com>

The Empire Writes Back, first published in 1989, remains one of the most important analyses of the range and contexts of post-colonial texts, and their relation to overall issues of post-colonial cultures. This second edition is a timely reminder of its continuing relevance and importance despite the many developments that have since occurred in the field of post-colonial studies.

The Empire Writes Back presents post-colonial literature as a rejection of the “‘privileging norm’...enthroned at the heart of the formation of English studies” (3). Similarly challenging the Eurocentric notion of “the universal”, and highlighting “the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing” (11), postcolonial theory examines issues of hegemony, linguistic hierarchy and the relationship between identity, place and self. Its opening chapter contextualizes the emergence of postcolonial theory by analysing the development of critical models of post-colonial writing, beginning with the ‘national’ model in post-colonial society, traced in American literature circa the late eighteenth century and newer literatures from other former colonies. The questions these raised regarding the interaction of literature and place are shown to have led to regional models and other less geographically-defined models, thereby revealing the difficulty of putting a name to a wide and varied body of texts.

The subsequent chapters highlight the need to understand colonisation’s subtler impact on post-colonial existence, with language and text as the major considerations of Chapters Three and Four, respectively. Emphasising the importance of language in defining the relationship between coloniser and colonised, the authors argue that “post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place” (37). Two methods are highlighted, namely abrogation and appropriation, and the writers show how these methods work to subvert colonisation. They provide analyses of various texts by writers such as Lewis Nkosi and V. S. Naipaul on issues such as regaining control of the narrative of colonisation, the supposed authenticity of post-colonial texts, and radical otherness and hybridity. The writings of Janet Frame and R. K. Narayan are also examined to elucidate the appropriation of marginality.

Chapter Five returns to the opening premise that post-colonial theory developed due to the inability of extant European theory to cope with the diverse cultural complexities of post-colonial texts. The authors discuss indigenous theories which existed in cultures and countries prior to colonisation, showing how colonisation led to a hybrid of philosophies, languages, and cultures, and aided the development of new literary theories. More recent theories of post-colonial writing are also shown to intersect with recent European movements. Crucial to this discussion is the argument of critics like Wole Soyinka, who resist the assumption that these theories supersede or replace the local, and argue instead that they are interconnected. This framework opens up new areas of interest in the field, in that the application of post-colonial discursive practices allows a subversive reimagining of established tropes in canonical texts.

Finally, the last chapter of *The Empire Writes Back* considers the rapid development of post-colonial theory into “one of the most diverse and contentious fields in literary and cultural studies” (193). Various issues are raised, such as the vexed question of post-colonial identity, the further development of other theories addressing language and translation, and the future role of post-colonial studies in the re-examination of history in order to understand current cultural concerns.

It is striking and somewhat disappointing that this second edition does not include a new preface or any other additional matter, unlike that which is often appended to new editions of standard texts. But *The Empire Writes Back*

still stands as a major work emphasising that post-colonial literature and theory are not continuations or “adaptations of European models” (220). Its insight into how post-colonial theory and literature, while not “a grand theory of everything”, serves to frame the “radical dismantling of...European codes” and the “subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses” (220) in an increasingly globalised world and remains just as pertinent, if not more, than when it was first produced.