

Introductory Notes

Postcolonialism, Children, and their Literature

I cannot speak: for I am a child.

JEREMIAH 1:6

CHILDREN ARE THE subaltern and simply for me to speak of them in the context of postcolonialism is to raise a contradiction: postcolonialism and children. If we think of postcolonialism as a phenomenon of late twentieth-century political, economic, and cultural reality—a liberating from an outmoded paternalism curtailing a people's freedom of expression and movement—then children are to a great extent exempt from the benefits of such postness. It is true that children's rights interest us, and that, as Gareth Matthews points out, "our society is moving slowly in the direction of assigning rights at an earlier and earlier age" (80). Having remarked this, I hasten to add that children remain the most colonized persons on the globe. This is apparent even in the literature we label for them. As Jacqueline Rose pointed out well over a decade ago in a comment on J. M. Barrie's *The Little White Bird*, the literature published for children is "a way of colonising (or wrecking) the child" (27). Perry Nodelman argues something similar when he applies Edward Said's notions of "Orientalism" to the study of children and their literature, and I suspect it is this colonizing tendency of both the literature for children and the adult criticism of that literature that Peter Hunt opposes when he calls for a "childist" reading of children's literature (192-94). So the first thing to be clear on is just how deeply colonizing are the activities of writing for children and commenting on children's books.

ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature, 28:1, January 1997

These activities are so colonizing that we might say, as Nodelman does, that none of us can escape the role of colonizer. Speaking of his own "imperial tendencies," Nodelman admits: "in order to combat colonialism, I am recommending a benevolently helpful colonizing attitude towards children" (34). If we conclude with Nodelman and Rose that both the writing about children's literature and the writing of it are colonialist, then we might have to say that no such thing as a postcolonial children's literature or a postcolonial criticism of it exists. If we assume that the term "postcolonial" designates a time after imperial powers have departed (in one way or another), and that the postcolonial voice is a voice speaking its own authority and identity in confidence of that authority and identity, then children only express a postcolonial voice after they have ceased to be children. Adults speak for and construct versions of children. Some evidence that this situation is not permanent or given as part of nature exists in the juvenilia of certain writers, in works published by quite young authors such as S. E. Hinton, who published *The Outsiders* when she was 16, or Gordon Korman who published his first novel at 14, and in a number of Web sites which feature the work and opinions of young people. On the whole, however, adults continue to "colonize" young readers.

Children, then, may not be in the position of postcolonial subjects, speaking for themselves and taking responsibility for their own actions. The literature which they read may also participate in a colonizing enterprise if we assume that it sets out to draw its readers into the world as adults see it and construct it. On the other hand, the postcolonial critic is not a quixote who sets out to de-colonize children; rather she or he tries to clarify how children's literature and the criticism of that literature manifest the powerful force of Eurocentric biases and in doing so tries to dismantle that powerful force.

And yet the contradiction I mentioned earlier takes another twist: children and their literature are always postcolonial, if by postcolonial we mean that which stands outside and in opposition to tradition and power. Although children and their literature are not inevitably outside a Eurocentric vision of things, they do represent a challenge to the traditions of mainstream culture.

Simply to acknowledge children and their literature in a journal such as *ARIEL* is a postcolonial act; it is a gesture toward reconceiving the canon and toward redefining what academic and professional criticism does and says. In this sense, children's literature benefits from the expanded field of inquiry that is an aspect of cultural studies. If we are willing to take certain genre films or certain forms of graphic art such as the comic book seriously, then we can rest fairly easy taking books for children seriously. I cannot, however, get away from contradiction: when we take children's books seriously as an object of study, we initiate the very colonizing of the field that that field had seemed to resist. In short, the notion of "postcolonialism" in relation to children's books requires some organization. What do we mean by "postcolonialism" in relation to children's literature?

Here's a vexed question. As others have noted, "postcolonial" now serves to mean many things to many people. Postcolonialism is a site of debate as much as it is anything else. Stephen Slemon, in an earlier number of *ARIEL*, notes that "the attributes of postcolonialism have become so widely contested in contemporary usage, its strategies and sites so structurally dispersed, as to render the term next to useless as a precise marker of intellectual content, social constituency, or political commitment" (8). More recently, Shaobo Xie argues that no such a thing as an "uncontaminated" or "indigenous" postcolonial theory" exists (7). What is of central importance Xie finds in Simon During, who writes: "post-colonialism is regarded as the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images" (125; or Xie 7). Xie, speaking in a general sense, remarks that "postcolonialism represents an urgent need and determination to dismantle imperial structures in the realm of culture" (15). The tension here resides in the inability of these descriptions of postcolonialism to account for children who are a group well practised in colonial attitudes, and who hope to grow out of their colonial positions through accommodation to their colonial "elders." Children are always marked by (contaminated by) the attitudes of an older generation. As my epigraph indicates, especially when the reader views the entire passage—

verses 6-9—this older generation might encourage children to speak, but it does so expecting them to speak its words, to pass on its wisdom, to perpetuate its vision of the world.

What does speak to the subject of children's literature in the passages from During and Xie that I quote, is the notion of cultural multiplicity. Children may not speak their own literature, but we can assure that the literature they read comes to them in the fullness of the cultural situation of the late twentieth century. We can, for example, acknowledge a novel such as Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994), set in Sri Lanka, as a "welcome contribution to [Canadian] literature" (the quotation derives from the *Globe and Mail* and appears on the back cover of Selvadurai's novel). A similar example is Althea Trotman's *How the East Pond Got its Flowers* (1991), a Canadian picture book for children, set in Antigua during the time of slavery. In other words, we can introduce our children to works of literature that represent the range of cultural experiences and histories that make up the national and international communities that touch all of us. This is one aspect of postcolonial studies: breaking the hold of the great traditions that have dominated the study of English literatures since the rise of English studies during the heyday of British imperialism. We have arrived at a consciousness that, as Charles Larson argues, "when we try to force the concept of universality on someone who is not Western . . . we are implying that our own culture should be the standard of measurement" (64).

Heather Scutter's essay in this issue, "Hunting for History: Children's Literature Outside, Over There, and Down Under," points out how persistent is the tendency to see even the literatures of such postcolonial countries as Canada and Australia in terms of Western European and American traditions. Indigenous voices and diasporic voices continue to speak from the periphery of what Zohar Shavit refers to as the "literary polysystem." To see just how inveterate is this focus on canonical "Western" texts, you might glance at the most recent history of children's books, John Goldthwaite's *The Natural History of Make-Believe: A Guide to the Principal Works of Britain, Europe, and America* (1996). The essays in this issue of *ARIEL* are a gesture towards greater inclusivity.

Here you will read about works from Canada, Australia, South Africa, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and the United States. If we locate the term “postcolonial” in the period of national independence movements arising with greater urgency after World War II and the Korean War than they did prior to these wars, then at least one of the texts featured in these pages will appear anomalous: Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, considered in Michael Cadden’s article. Here is a decidedly “colonial” book, but one we need to examine from a postcolonial perspective. Just as Said has taught us to read early texts by the likes of Jane Austen or Charles Dickens for their evocations of a colonial mind-set, so Cadden teaches us to look for a similar mind-set in Burnett. John Ball does the same for our understanding of Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, also noted as an “imperialist” text by Michael Joseph in his essay on Achebe, and June Cummins does something similar in her treatment of the Curious George books.

Our current awareness of cultural diversity within political and economic borders goes some way to readjusting the manner in which we read such familiar texts as *The Secret Garden* or *Where the Wild Things Are* or the books about Curious George. I want briefly to give another example of how our reading of traditional (canonical) texts can grow, by drawing on the work of one of my students. Lynn Braithwaite, a student in a children’s literature class I teach this year, recently gave a presentation on E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*. She began this way:

In *Charlotte’s Web*, the reader meets many animal groups on the Zuckerman farm; the animals face other animals very different from themselves. Each animal comes to recognize and accept the other animals’ cultures. The animals accept one another because they acknowledge the others’ perspective, habits, feelings. In short, they accept the “culture” of the other animals, and they attempt to understand creatures different from themselves.

Because children identify with animals, this kind of literature (i.e., animal fantasy) can show that the different cultures in the animal’s world are similar to the different cultures in the humans’ world. In education today, children are faced with classrooms full of children from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Through literature, we can introduce the concept of cultural diversity, and facilitate an understanding and acceptance of this diversity.

I quote at some length to indicate how this student's focus on *Charlotte's Web* derives from the perspective of our cultural moment. She is, in effect, using a postcolonial perspective to read what I think is a deeply colonialist book. I suspect that had I turned my attention to the "cultural" implications of *Charlotte's Web* before hearing Lynn's presentation, and certainly before the advent of postcolonial studies, I would have argued that the farm with its various animals served as an allegoric reminder of America's great melting pot. My argument would have attached this book to the traditions of American populism and agrarianism; it presents an idyllic vision of just how America brings a disparate group of people together and forges a homogeneous culture. Lynn, however, sees another model at work in *Charlotte's Web*, the model of multiculturalism. If the book is multicultural, this does not necessarily mean it is postcolonial. But Lynn's reading is itself a sign of a kind of reading I think we can call postcolonial because it partakes of the ideological urge to read texts within our cultural moment and to argue for the rights of diversity and for what Charles Taylor calls "a regime of reciprocal recognition among equals" (50).

One aspect of postcolonialism, then, identifies a revisionary reading of canonical texts that articulates how these texts construct worlds. Graeme Harper, Clare Bradford, and Robyn McCallum take up this subject in their essays in the pages that follow. The books we read inevitably construct versions of the world and its various peoples, and we need to understand just how these constructions influence our notions of what we have become accustomed to refer to as the "other." Difference, diversity, otherness—these are watchwords when we come to examine any world construction. Canonical texts—works such as *The Secret Garden* or *Where the Wild Things Are* or *Charlotte's Web*—tend not to foreground issues of difference; rather the notions of difference remain a backdrop hardly impinging on our consciousness. We tend to take difference and the privileging of one group over another as natural. Postcolonial reading uncovers the constructedness of cultural identity.

More recent and directly postcolonial texts bring difference into the foreground, and by doing so they remind us just how

unnatural the division of human beings into hierarchical groups is. Works such as Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* or Himani Bannerji's *Coloured Pictures* confront us with racial diversity and the agony that can accompany decolonization. Speaking of her teachers in a Toronto (Canada) school, thirteen-year-old Sujata, in Bannerji's *Coloured Pictures*, remarks to a friend: "They don't hate us or anything, they think we are different from others but don't much want to know what that means" (24). As Raj Rao's article in this issue points out, Selvadurai illustrates just how the colonial mentality that often surfaces as racism works its way into gender relations, both heterosexual and homosexual. Part of the post-colonial enterprise is a liberation from the diminishing placement of people according to their racial origins, their religious beliefs, their gender, or their sexual preference. The relationship of an individual to a group marks the beginning of the colonial process, as the novels of Emecheta indicate. Rose Mezu's schizoanalytic analysis of two of Emecheta's novels points up this continuing tension between individual desire and group cohesion.

My mention of fiction by Emecheta, Selvadurai, and Bannerji raises another problem: the definition of children's literature. Clearly, the publishing and marketing of the books by Emecheta and Selvadurai differ from the publishing and marketing of Bannerji's *Coloured Pictures*. And a glance through the table of contents to this issue will indicate that the "children's literature" examined in these various articles comprises books clearly targeted at a very young readership, at books for the "middle" years, and at books accessible to adolescents. The most difficult area is the last. Publishers now explicitly label certain books as "young adult," and we have books placed in such sections in book stores. But books such as *Funny Boy* or *The Bride Price* are not marked off for such a specialized readership; some will argue that they are not what we mean when we refer to "children's literature." And yet they not only concern childhood and adolescence, they are also important for young readers. Their content (their diegesis, if you will) offers important experience for young readers. They deal with difficult issues both relevant and accessible to young readers; I refer to such themes as social, national, and sexual

identity. In short, a novel such as *Funny Boy* deals with growing up, and the problems and anxieties attendant upon growing up that this book presents are not in any way inaccessible to an adolescent readership.

The question as to what makes a work of literature suitable for children remains vexed. And we continue the vexation in our choice of creative work for this issue. Clearly, a poem such as Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's "Presumed Guilty," participates in the textual web of folklore and fairytale, but it does so in the revisionary and haunting manner of Sexton's *Transformations*. And Lim's "The Rebel" speaks from the point of view of an adolescent (like M. Nourbese Philip's "The Bearded Queen," an extract from her Young Adult novel-in-progress), but it seeks an audience that crosses generations. Poems such as Rienzi Cruz's "Distant Rain," Lynne Fairbridge's "I Do Not See Them Here," Claire Harris's "Tower Power," Richard Harrison's "speaking of voice (identity[politics])," and Richard Stevenson's "Homo Sapiens Strut" speak across age lines, but are clearly not inaccessible to young readers. Some of these poems have strong political voices; we might argue that political work offers young readers an important perspective from which to view the world into which they are growing. In other pieces, we move into experiences that depend upon age and maturity; but who is to say young readers ought not read of an older person's coming into realization. The experience of understanding knows no age limit. What many of the speakers of these poems confront is identity.

Identity is at the heart of the matter. Just what does this familiar and over-worked word mean? Is "identity" some Keatsian afflatus derived from an act of anti-self-consciousness? Do human beings have an "identity" in common? Does "identity" take shape from social, cultural, and political realities? Does "identity" derive from blood ties to specific groups? Can any "identity" follow from an act of liberation untying the individual from ideological forces which seek to corner him or her at every turn? Can such a thing as a "postcolonial condition" exist? The essays in this issue of *ARIEL* seek to investigate such questions. They provide intriguing forays into relatively new territory, but of course they do not provide definitive answers. The best they can hope to do for

us is unblind our ears to the global reality in which that which we have taken for granted for so long—the Eurocentric vision of things—can no longer smugly assume primacy of value in the human community. Postcolonialism is a manifestation of the desire for the acceptance and understanding of otherness, and as such it has a logical affinity with children who seem to strive for recognition. The contradiction lies in the desire of children to join the group that holds authority over them. The desire is always and ever to become the other.

I wish to acknowledge my co-editor Meena Khorana whose editorial acumen, timely reports, and emotional support were invaluable to my work on this issue. I wish also to thank Victor J. Ramraj for his patience; and I ought to point out that although this issue has co-editors, the editor, as always, does the lion's share of the work.

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Postcolonial or Postindependence?

“**W**HY POSTCOLONIAL? Why not postindependence?” asked Prabhat K. Singh, a colleague in India, when I told him about this special issue of *ARIEL* on postcolonial perspectives on Children’s and Young Adult literature. He argues that the term postcolonial places emphasis on the political, economic, social, and cultural subjugation of a nation’s spirit of nationalism, freedom, and heroic struggle against foreign oppression. Rod McGillis in his editorial note looks at the relationship between postcolonialism and children’s literature and children’s literature in postcolonial societies. I want to address briefly some aspects of the “postcolonial,” this contentious term that Singh and many others in “postcolonial” societies find troubling.

Singh’s comments makes me reflect on my recent editorial for the postcolonial issue of *Bookbird*, in which I trace my colonial heritage—my British-style schooling, the conflict between Western and Indian values, the clash between school and home. Had the term “postcolonial,” which leads to “colonial constructs” and “imperial nostalgia,” according to Singh, prompted me to focus on my experiences at Auckland House School, in Simla? Would the term “postindependence” have made me stress my nationalistic side, my fierce pride in being the first member of my family to be born in a free India—one of Rushdie’s “midnight’s children”? Would I then have focused on my enjoyment as a child in reading the biographies of freedom fighters like the Rani of Jhansi, Bhagat Sing, Gandhiji, Subhash Chandra Bose, and Jawaharlal Nehru? This aspect of my upbringing infused in me no confusion of values, no contradiction of loyalties and motives; rather, it was an empowering moment to grow up in the “new” India. The message of our leaders was that the young (women in particular) needed to throw off the shackles of the past, to become educated and forward-looking, to seize the untold opportunities in this new reality.

However, my ambivalence should not be mistaken for insecurity or disharmony. What I find lively about postcolonial dis-

course (whether of children's or adult literature) is that it is no longer a confrontation between colonial versus nationalistic. A blurring of boundaries is occurring as writers and scholars—both Western and non-Western—explore the contradictions and complexities of the postcolonial global situation. This has come about through changes in global politics, economy, trade, cultural exchange, and immigration policies.

Postcolonial literature covers a vast canvas and is essentially idealistic in nature as it attempts to right the wrongs of the past. If colonial literature was characterized by imperial propagation of the ideology of supremacy over the colonized races, postcolonial literature re-evaluates colonialism for its hypocrisy and self-serving racist attitudes. If colonial literature perpetuated stereotypes of backwardness, of barbaric and uncivilized peoples through narrative, characterization, and themes, postcolonial discourse counters this by recognizing achievements in the arts and sciences and contributions to technology and culture. It is the story of the "other." Postcolonial literature speaks in multiple voices; it gives agency to and embraces all hitherto marginalized segments of the population—children, women, untouchables, and ethnic and racial minorities.

Decolonization has led also to forms of liberation of children, not least of whom are the children of colonial officials, missionaries, and traders who were colonized through their upbringing, education, and leisure reading. As Argentinean author Graciela Montes states, adults colonize children by "granting" the "gift" of language to them: "words name things and, when they name, they inevitably carry with them a huge cultural load, a way of looking at, of feeling, and of dealing with the world" (22). Whether Portuguese, British, French, or Spanish, colonial children were exploited as historical "objects" to perpetuate their "empires." Colonial literature dictated how they should perceive the land of their birth and childhood. Yet the words, the characters, and situations in these stereotypical, derogatory books often contradicted the experiences that surrounded them. As adults, many of these colonial children have written about their lives in the colonies, rejecting the dissociation and rootlessness of their colonial life by linking their emotional and psychological well-

being with their rich experiences of indigenous cultures. Iris MacEarlane, Rumer Godden, Manuela Gerqueira, and Alberto Oliveira Pinto, to name a few, have tried to relive their isolation, redefine race relations, and integrate their dual identities. To Godden, who grew up in Bengal, the British were a "society of exiles"; they were "rootless" as "cut flowers" (qtd. in Macmillan 44). As Edward Said states in *Culture and Imperialism*, we are just becoming aware of "how oddly hybrid historical and cultural experiences are, of how they partake of many often contradictory experiences and domains, cross national boundaries, defy the police action of simple dogma and loud patriotism" (15).

Critics level charges of reverse élitism and exclusion against postcolonial discourse. Russell Jacoby, for instance, while applauding it for opening up new areas of study beyond traditional Western literature, censures postcolonial theorists for being contradictory, obscure, undefined, confused, and élitist. He raises the question of whether Western writing about postcolonial/postindependence societies should be construed as the appropriation of the voice of the other and as a form of domination. This attitude has led to debates concerning such works as Susanne Fisher Staples's *Shabanu*. Is Staples, an American, stereotyping Pakistani culture by focusing on one small group, the camel herders of the Cholistan desert? Can she write authentically of Pakistani culture? Is she not indulging in cultural appropriation. Other issues emerge in this debate: Who speaks for whom? Can Western writers/theorists speak for non-Western subjects? Whose voice is legitimate? Are such questions valid?

Many feel that postcolonial scholars have marginalized certain groups by not including them in the discourse. In 1995, at the Mid-Atlantic Writers Association Conference in Baltimore, one participant observed that postcolonial works routinely exclude diaspora Africans and the experience of slavery from their studies. Are postcolonial studies strictly a matter of history, or is it a modern all-embracing concept that brings all marginalized groups to the centre of the debate? The experiences of the enslaved and the distortions and omissions of their history have parallels in postcoloniality. For instance, James Berry's *Ajeemah and His Sort* fictionalize the thoughts and feelings of two enslaved

Africans uprooted from their home in Ghana. The postcolonial aspects of subalternity can be found in their stories: their internalized rebellion, their sense of outrage at being denied freedom, and their helplessness in the face of crushingly superior—often military—forces. Despite these dehumanizing conditions, they maintained their pride and dignity and safeguard themselves against the demoralizing impact of slavery by retaining something of their former lives.

Widespread immigration from the former colonies to Western countries (to find better economic opportunities, to flee political oppression in some instances, and to seek freedom from the constraints of traditional cultures) has created what could be seen as another form of postcolonial literature, a literature of exile characterized by conflict between Western and traditional values, by cultural marginalization, by racial conflicts, by pressures to assimilate or integrate. Lesley Beake's *A Cageful of Butterflies* (1989), Ramabai Espinet's *The Princess of Spadina; A Tale of Toronto* (1992), Rosa Guy's *The Friends* (1973), M. Nourbese Philip's *Harriet's Daughter* (1988), Indi Rana's *The Roller Bird of Rampur* (1993), Nazneen Sadiq's *Camels Can Make You Homesick* (1985), Bipsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* (1993), and Rukshana Smith's *Sumitra Story* (1982)—works on which we would have liked to receive articles—are all powerful narratives of children and adolescents trying to negotiate between their former and adopted societies.

Perhaps Prahbat K. Singh is right in stating that this preoccupation with a hybrid identity and the crisis of a split identity is relevant only to those living abroad in adopted Western homes and not to those in the newly independent nation, who are developing national identities, free of the ambivalences of the colonial period. They can do this despite the inescapable Western impact on their lives for they have integrated the English language, Hollywood films, Western medicine and technology, clothing and music, in their overarching "postindependence" culture.

This special issue is not as representative of what is happening creatively, critically, and theoretically in postcolonial children's and young adult literature as we would have liked it to be. But as

Victor J. Ramraj, the editor of *ARIEL* (whose editorial contribution to this issue was indispensable and very much appreciated), assures us, it is difficult with a journal operating on deadlines to wait for all the promised submissions; a published book can, but not a journal. What we have included here, however, does provide an interim report on some current areas of and approaches to the field. I would like to thank Rod McGillis, with whom it as a pleasure to work and who, I must acknowledge, did much of the work on this issue.

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