

JAHAN RAMAZANI

Introduction

Since World War II, writers from regions once part of the British Empire have produced a significant share of the most extraordinary imaginative literature in English. The roll call of illustrious names includes novelists and dramatists such as Chinua Achebe, V. S. Naipaul, Wole Soyinka, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Nadine Gordimer, and J. M. Coetzee. Other than Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, however, the names of the poets are much less widely known. Yet postcolonial poets have arguably made profoundly important contributions to literature in English. They have hybridized European with indigenous forms, inventing new literary structures for cultural expression in lyric and experimental styles. They have vitalized the language of poetry, enriching it with the sounds, rhythms, and wordplay of creoles, pidgins, and local idioms. They have recast their cultural inheritances, remembered the histories that shaped them, and renewed local cultural resources, sometimes critically reconsidering them in light of distant affiliations. They have found new ways of aesthetically embodying, probing, and dramatizing the divisions and complexities of postcolonial worlds. Sometimes pained, sometimes energized by living in between cultural spaces, they have built on their inheritances from the global South, the global North, and mixtures of these mixtures.

The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry explores some exemplary poets from the postcolonial world, mainly from World War II to the present, approaching their achievements through the lenses of regional, historical, political, formal, textual, and comparative analysis. The companion is built around an understanding of postcolonial poetry as poetry written in the shadow of colonialism, the time leading up to and in the aftermath of independence, especially by peoples from regions of the so-called global South or Third World. But authors of the companion's individual chapters have been free to give the term "postcolonial" varied inflections, to question its use, or to substitute cognate terms such as "decolonizing." Both within and outside the field of postcolonial

JAHAN RAMAZANI

studies, the term “postcolonial” has been criticized for being too political, too homogenizing, too victim-centered, too colonially-fixed, or just premature amid persisting neocolonialisms. For these reasons, some scholars and poets prefer the localizing designations of area studies (e.g., Caribbean, African, or South Asian studies), or, conversely, the unfettered breadth of global studies or world literary studies. But for all the disciplinary jockeying of postcolonial studies and area studies, global studies, and world literary studies, a postcolonial perspective is hardly incompatible with these overlapping approaches. Indeed, when used in conjunction with them, it continues to be a powerful tool for revealing linkages across regions emerging from colonial rule, even as it avoids dissolving all writers in an undifferentiated globality, heedless of the differentials of power, history, and language.

The focus of this volume is on the poetry of English-speaking peoples of the Caribbean, Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and the Pacific Islands; of the former settler colonies such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, especially non-Europeans; of Ireland, Britain’s oldest colony; of other former British colonies, such as Cyprus and Singapore; and of postcolonial Britain itself, particularly black and Asian immigrants and their descendants. Although lists can often be dull, they can also be sublime in their multiplicity, and a sampling of names indicates the amplitude of this companion’s subject and the variety of its locations, including Caribbean poets Louise Bennett (Jamaica), Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados), and Derek Walcott (Saint Lucia); African poets Christopher Okigbo (Nigeria), Okot p’Bitek (Uganda), and Karen Press (South Africa); South Asian and Southeast Asian poets A. K. Ramanujan (India), Agha Shahid Ali (Indian Kashmir), and Arthur Yap (Singapore); Oceanic poets Craig Santos Perez (Guam), Steven Winduo (Papua New Guinea), and Anne Kennedy (New Zealand); Australian and New Zealand/Aotearoa poets Oodjeroo Noonucal (Australia), Lionel Fogarty (Australia), and Albert Wendt (New Zealand); Canadian poets Lee Maracle, M. NourbeSe Philip, and Renée Sarojini Saklikar; Irish poets Seamus Heaney, Medbh McGuckian, and Paul Muldoon; black and Asian British poets Linton Kwesi Johnson, Bernardine Evaristo, Patience Agbabi, and Daljit Nagra. Not that these regional groupings are stable or discrete: poets of New Zealand, as this list indicates, can be seen in the contexts of both Australasia and of the Pacific Islands; a South Asian British or Caribbean Canadian poet such as Daljit Nagra or M. NourbeSe Philip can be seen in the northerly framework of the British Isles and North America or the southerly framework of South Asia and the Caribbean – or both; and a poet like Louise Bennett or Kamau Brathwaite may be Caribbean but lived for extended periods of adulthood in Britain, while a poet like Linton Kwesi

Introduction

Johnson may be black British but lived until he was a teenager in the Caribbean.

Because poetry can be understood in part in its relations to local or regional cultures, the companion's first section, "Regions," devotes a chapter to each of eight areas, roughly traveling eastward into the sun that was said never to set on the British Empire: the Caribbean, Africa, South Asia, and the Pacific Islands, then the settler colonies (Australia, New Zealand, Canada), before concluding with Ireland and multiethnic Britain. These groupings are not meant to be exhaustive (e.g., writers from Singapore and Cyprus appear elsewhere in the companion), nor are they meant to impose equivalence. Colonialism, the practice of a nation extending often exploitative control over weaker, poorer peoples and territories, comes in many different varieties. The settler colonialism that characterized places such as Australia and Canada, where large immigrant European populations transplanted themselves and dominated indigenous peoples, differs from the plantation colonialism in the Caribbean, in which smaller numbers of European colonists exploited a majority population of enslaved or indentured indigenous and imported workers to extract resources for the metropole. Colonialism in India was slow, incremental, and long term, whereas it was sudden and violent in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Nor is there only one kind of experience in each region. The settler colonies invite distinctions among the historical experience and cultures of colonized indigenous populations, recent immigrants and their descendants, and the descendants of European settlers. So, too, various kinds of colonial experience are to be found among the populations of the British Isles, including that of the Irish, colonized on their island for hundreds of years, and of recent arrivals from the British Commonwealth. The companion leaves aside some regions of the former British Empire, such as the Middle East, since a substantial body of English-language poetry didn't take root there, as well as the United States, since its eighteenth-century decolonization and its ascent to superpower status render it anomalous, although an argument could be made for the inclusion of some of its ethnic and racial minorities under pertinent historical circumstances, as indicated by connections drawn in some of the companion's chapters. The "postcolonial world," "global South," and "Third World" are not discrete geographical spaces; "underdevelopment" and "postcoloniality" can be found even in "developed" parts of the world, or "global North," even as patches of "development" and the "First World" can also be found in the "global South."

It is important to acknowledge that there are major bodies of postcolonial poetry written in other European languages and in indigenous languages, including the work of luminaries such as Rabindranath Tagore, Aimé

JAHAN RAMAZANI

Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Nicolás Guillén, and Mahmoud Darwish, which fall outside this book's focus on poetry written in English. These non-anglophone postcolonial poets share a great deal with the poets under discussion: they, too, often grapple with the legacies of colonial occupation and violence, and they, too, aesthetically mediate between local and imperially transmitted cultural forms, traditions, and languages. Poets often read and write across languages, and so these poets have been influential for anglophone poets, as anglophone poets have also been for them. Translation and code-switching between languages have been important stimuli to poetic creativity in the postcolonial world, as indicated by various chapters in the companion. Postcolonial poets writing in varieties of English creolized with non-European languages indicate the porous boundaries between what we construct as a discrete language, English, and a multiplicity of other languages. To adapt a pun of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's, there's inevitably something phony about the artificial lines we draw around anglophony.¹

But so long as we understand such lines to be provisional and permeable – disciplinary fictions that focus attention – they can have some value in circumscribing a subject for analysis. The study of poets working in the common if heterogeneous language of English has coherence due to their shared literary and formal inheritances and linguistic resources, and due to the overlapping histories of colonial rule under the British Empire. As we've already seen, despite this companion's linguistic self-limitation, the body of work to be considered remains substantial. Because of the vast size and scope of the British Empire, as well as the economic and military status of the United States, the English language is spoken by between a fourth and a third of the world's inhabitants, with the result, for poetry, of an especially large and various range of idioms, styles, and forms. When criticism is written primarily for an English-language audience, moreover, a focus on English-language poetry makes possible a kind of close reading that can be difficult in studies that rely on translation. Although the disciplinary formation of "world literature" has been a valuable force for deprovincializing literary studies, its emphasis on literature in translation is less amenable to poetry studies. The paraphrasable and thus translatable meaning of poetry is often less significant to its specificity as poetry than are its forms and sonic textures, its rhythms and wordplay, the resonance and weight of specific words in a particular order. Although some forms of narrative poetry may be partial exceptions, for most poetry to be read as poetry, with due attention to its linguistic specificities and aural intricacies, it must be read in the original.

Many companions consolidate and update the insights of a vast archive of existing scholarship on heavily explored topics – say, Chaucer, T. S. Eliot, British Romanticism, American poetry since 1945. *The Cambridge*

Introduction

Companion to Postcolonial Poetry draws on existing scholarship, but while regional studies and studies of individual authors exist, there are remarkably few studies of postcolonial poetry. This lack gives the companion a special opportunity to forge connections among disparate areas of regionally focused critical terrain – studies of the anglophone Caribbean, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Oceania, the settler colonies, and the British Isles – that often don't conceive themselves in relation to postcolonial studies. The companion's second section ("Styles") and its third ("Spaces, Embodiments, Disseminations") counterbalance the first section's regional depth and specificity with the comparative lenses afforded by postcolonial studies. These essays explore examples of poetry from across the postcolonial anglophone world in relation to large thematic and formal topics – in the second part, where the formal emphasis is strongest, these include postcolonialism and modernism, fixed and free forms, experimentation, oral performance and creole languages, and protest poetry; and in the third, where the emphasis on content is greater, topics include the poetic mapping of urban and rural spaces, poetic embodiments of sexuality and gender, poetry and publishing history, and poetry's response to, and reimagining of, globalization. None of these topics is limited to a single region or nation, and so a comparative approach to them is crucial.

The companion also presents an opportunity to forge connections between postcolonial studies and poetry studies. Because of the increased interest in poetry and aesthetics among some scholars of literature, and because of the critical turn toward more global and transnational conceptualizations of and engagements with literature, *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry* is meant to play a role both in globalizing poetry studies and in advancing the claims of poetry for a larger role in postcolonial scholarship.

Usually seen as initiated by Edward Said's landmark book *Orientalism* (1978), postcolonial studies has been a potent force in the academy in recent decades, including its influence on transnational and global studies. But, with some exceptions, poetry has been largely ignored in postcolonial studies.² Poetry's formidable strangeness, deliberate artifice, and literary self-consciousness have made it less amenable to the historical and political imperatives of postcolonial studies than more seemingly documentary or socially mimetic genres. Whether a ghazal or a praise song, a sonnet or a ballad, poetic forms are self-consciously tied to long literary histories that they echo, adapt, play with and against. "Form" isn't only a matter of a work's overall structure: in poetry it also involves microlevel shaping patterns and structures such as rhythm, line breaks, phonetic patterning, registers of diction, and figurative language. And these, too, bring with them long and often self-conscious histories. Even experimental or open forms,

JAHAN RAMAZANI

such as concrete poetry, disjunctive syntax, collage, and found poetry, come out of, and often refer back to, a series of precedents. So too, oral and performance poetics are built on rhetorical, sonic, and narrative structures that have a history. To miss how a poem engages the verbal and formal histories it embeds is to miss its mining of a richly remembered and ever-changing trove of possibilities. Postcolonial poetry is responsive to, and emerges out of, social and political realities such as global inequities, racial oppression, and imperial violence, and yet it is also responsive to internal histories of form and language, lifting off from current realities even as it answers them, playing in the gap between its linguistic surfaces and the world it engages.

Because it would be a mistake to consider poetry without as much alertness to the “how” of what it says as to the “what” of what it says, poetry can help renew the attention in postcolonial studies to the formal and literary aspects of postcolonial expression. Such renewal is needed today. Postcolonial studies may match or outpace other areas of literary study in its theoretical sophistication, political self-consciousness, and global reach, but for all these strengths, it often tends to be less savvy about form than are other areas of literary study, except for macrolevel considerations, such as the links between nation and narration. In recent decades, the field’s ever-stronger drift toward geopolitics and the social sciences has risked exacerbating this weakness. Ironically, at the field’s origins, the first leading scholars, such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, were all literary critics, albeit highly interdisciplinary in their interests. Said set out as a scholar of Joseph Conrad’s fiction; Spivak’s dissertation was on the Irish poet W. B. Yeats; and Bhabha, who was a poet in youth, published critical commentary on South Asian poetry in English before he became a famous theorist.

Initially located primarily in literary studies, postcolonial studies has expanded into such disciplines as history, art history, film studies, political science, and anthropology. While this expansion is in many ways salutary, bringing increased attention to often marginalized parts of the world and opening up disciplinary presuppositions for scrutiny, there may also be some risks. After reading the thirty chapters of an authoritative recent handbook to postcolonial studies, the thirty-eight thought-provoking essays in a new anthology of postcolonial studies, or the seven brilliant essays on the state of postcolonial studies recently published in a literary journal, one might come away with the impression that postcolonial poetry does not exist. It is scarcely mentioned in any of these collections, even though most of the contributors were trained as literary scholars.³ Of the seventy-five selections, the only one that quotes or engages poetry at any length is the oldest, an excerpt

Introduction

from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952). Words such as "poetic" and "ballad" appear in the essay titles in these collections, but like symbols appropriated from an exterminated people, their function is purely metaphoric, with no reference to actual poems. If these collections are any indication, postcolonial studies may be unwittingly repeating history. In 1973–74 Wole Soyinka was infamously consigned to a department of anthropology to deliver a series of lectures at Cambridge, apparently because the English department couldn't "believe in any such mythical beast as 'African Literature.'"⁴ Ironically, postcolonial literatures have been at risk of being shunned all over again, albeit this time not by Euro-traditionalists but by their presumed supporters in postcolonial studies.

Just as the formal investments of poetry studies can help develop the role of aesthetics and critical commentary in postcolonial studies, so too the global dimensions of postcolonial studies can help widen the scope of poetry studies. The study of poetry has long focused largely on the so-called developed world. For scholars of poetry written in English, the United States and the British Isles have taken the lion's share of attention – perhaps understandably so, given the richness, variety, and longevity of the poetic traditions and antitraditions of these nations. Yet at a time when scholars of the novel are assumed to have some conversancy with anglophone novels written by authors of African, Indian, and Caribbean origin, the reach of poetry studies into "developing" regions has remained more limited. But the field cannot hope to become a vital player in global studies, comparative studies, world literary studies, and the like unless it takes poetry of the global South more seriously.⁵ Poetry studies has also tended to be nationally and regionally compartmentalized – the poetry of Ireland, the poetry of England, the poetry of the United States, and so forth. As indicated by the first section of this companion, national and regional frameworks play an important role in understanding poetry, insofar as these geopolitical structures and their unique histories inflect the social networks by which it migrates and the imaginaries in which it comes to life. But here again, the inherently comparative framework of postcolonial studies, reflected in this companion's second and third sections, can help open up poetry studies beyond these geopolitical constraints, particularly since poets, poetic forms, and poetic languages often travel across these boundaries.

The predominant templates for the study of contemporary poetry need to expand and change if postcolonial poetry is to find a seat at the table. The reigning paradigm of one branch of contemporary poetry studies, in which a poem's worth is gauged by the extent of its formal or conceptual avant-gardism, misses out on a broader way of thinking about poetic

JAHAN RAMAZANI

innovation that would include intercultural hybridization and creolization. The negotiation of discrepant cultural spaces, memories, and inheritances can be vitalizing to literary development. Another branch of contemporary poetry studies, sometimes reflected in MFA programs, places its emphasis on subtleties of self-expression, sensibility, and lyric voice, potentially missing the embeddedness of poetic form and language within global networks and political histories. We need attention to subtlety, nuance, and craft in poetry studies, but we also need alertness to how global human histories of colonization, power, migration, and economic inequity shape the world out of which that poetry emerges and to which it responds.

Postcolonial studies has been especially alert to such large-scale issues, sometimes styling itself inheritor of the mantle of the struggle for decolonization. At perhaps the most basic level, postcolonial poetry can be seen as resisting empire in its many forms, reclaiming the land from colonization, and restoring damaged precolonial histories and cultures. As Frantz Fanon argued, colonialism often seeks to destroy the self-respect of dominated peoples, partly by distorting and degrading their cultural past.⁶ Poets from colonized populations play a part in struggling to restore that past, a sense of self-worth, and pride in their natural and built environments. As Chinua Achebe wrote, “I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach . . . that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm tree is a fit subject for poetry. Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement.”⁷ Postcolonial poetry shows that the flora, fauna, weather, peoples, and cultures of the colonized world are each “a fit subject for poetry,” helping to undo the “denigration and self-abasement” inflicted by colonialism.

But to see postcolonial poetry as dedicated exclusively to ideological resistance and redemption is to oversimplify it, and this may be yet another reason why it has figured modestly in postcolonial studies. Let’s turn, at last, to a few actual poems. Lorna Goodison’s work, like that of many other poets, demonstrates how postcolonial poetry often fits and yet complicates the resistance model. Her poem “Nanny” could be seen as paradigmatic of the decolonizing struggle in postcolonial poetry. It takes as its subject the great Jamaican Maroon leader and warrior who led fugitive slaves in their fight against the British in the eighteenth century. In the dramatic monologue, Goodison bestows a voice on the heroine who is seen as surrendering sexual dependency to become mother to a nation:

My womb was sealed
 with molten wax

Introduction

of killer bees
 for nothing should enter
 nothing should leave
 the state of perpetual siege
 the condition of the warrior.

From then my whole body would quicken
 at the birth of every one of my people's children.⁸

The body of the poem aesthetically extends and perpetuates Nanny's heroic struggle against slavery and colonization. But this perpetuation includes a complicated calculus of private and public, losses and gains. The poem's tense oscillation between opposites – the generative womb and its killer-bees-wax seal, national fecundity and personal sterility – highlights the personal costs of the warrior's struggle. Nanny is a public figure, but the poem, partly by virtue of dramatic monologue's staging of interiority, is also about her intensely private struggle:

my battle song opened
 into a solitaire's moan
 I became most knowing
 and forever alone.⁹

Nanny is a figure of both public action and mournful solitude – a solitude poignantly evoked by the long-vowel rhyme of “moan” with “alone.” Although the poem is written in free verse, this rhyme draws our attention to four lines that, if joined instead as two, could be read (as they can be heard) as approximating a heroic couplet, or rhyming iambic pentameter – a signature poetic form of Nanny's eighteenth-century English opponents, in the era of Dryden and Pope. The poem's last four lines reinforce this effect by closely rhyming “within me” and “to history,” “skies” and “rise”¹⁰ – a closing that also echoes the resurrective prophecy at the end of Sylvia Plath's “Lady Lazarus.” While recalling British and American literary traditions, the poem draws at the same time, through its assonantal insistence and song-like effects, on an African Caribbean orality. Mixing literary traditions, straddling public and private, the poem celebrates a Jamaican national heroine, a paragon in the struggle against colonialism, but even such an overtly anticolonial poem isn't only anticolonial. Goodison has returned to the figure of Nanny in various other poems, such as one that, recalling the warrior's unique defensive power (“bullets ricocheted off her hinder parts”), sees her in an exuberant multicultural vision of foremothers: she places the official national heroine in a transnational company that ranges from Caribbean mother goddesses like Yemanjá to the multi-breasted Diana of

JAHAN RAMAZANI

Ephesus and a Dogon deity.¹¹ She revalorizes and remythologizes a gendered resistance against colonial oppression, but the transnationalism of her poetry's formal memory and associative powers preclude an exclusively nationalist vision.

In other poems Goodison dramatizes and denounces specific injustices of Jamaican colonial history of the sort that Nanny fought – enslavement, torture, incarceration, and the breakup of families. Yet if we bring to her poems the preconception that they smoothly fit an anticolonial template, we are likely to be disappointed, or at least surprised. Goodison powerfully recovers her African ancestors in poems such as her lyric “Guinea Woman” about her great grandmother. But elsewhere she is no less generous toward a great-grandparental Englishman and Irishman. In the poem “Annie Pengelly,” she pleads against the injustice of an English slave mistress’s abuse of a young Jamaican girl, but at the same time she also recognizes the slave mistress’s suffering under the patriarchal domination of an unloving husband. Here, as in other poems, she parallels the suffering of oppressor and oppressed, without drawing moral equivalences. In some poems, she goes so far as to recognize the courage and humanity of someone we might think of as Nanny’s opposite, Christopher Columbus, even as she doesn’t shy away from the mass-scale atrocity that his so-called “discovery” unleashed in the West Indies:

In the days of sail, Don Cristobal embarked for Cipangu
 and India, give him propers, he was no coward
 Genoan and crew in three ramshackle ships.

Imagine setting forth across the vast shoreless ocean
 of ambition; not knowing if they’d slip and fall off
 the edge of a skywide waterworld.

I too these days share that exact same concern.
 I too today feel as if the Blessed Isle I set sail for
 is not the one on which I have made landfall.¹²

“Imagine,” Goodison entreats her audience, what it was like for Columbus to face vast uncertainty, albeit implicitly distinguishing her response from his fateful refusal “to admit / to being lost.”¹³ Whereas Langston Hughes’s “I, Too” opens up the Whitmanian vision to include African American experience, Goodison’s “I too” ironically reverses the direction of this white-black convergence. Columbus’s mistaking of the Caribbean for a kind of “Indies” becomes paradigmatic for how we seldom land where we expect to. Exploring the past, Goodison doesn’t consign it to moral fables about the colonizers and the colonized. One of poetry’s strongest capacities is for