

***Colonial and Postcolonial Theory* - Patrick Williams and Peter Morey**

Without doubt, the most substantial offering in the post-colonial field this year is the *Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray. With six hundred pages, and thirty essays by authors such as Bruce Robbins, Rey Chow, David Lloyd, Doris Sommer, David Goldberg, Jenny Sharpe and Sumit Sarkar, this collection is hard to ignore. All areas of the globe are covered, and the individual contributions range over ‘Postcolonial legality’, ‘Global gay formations and local homosexualities’, ‘Indigenosity and indigeneity’, ‘Global capital and transnationalism’, ‘Imperialism, colonialism, postcolonialism’, and ‘Feminist theory in perspective’. The book opens with a typically quirky Foreword by Gayatri Spivak, in which the person most cited is herself. Spivak is generally quite complimentary about the way the contributors address different aspects of postcolonialism, but is less happy about the way they discuss her work. (Bart Moore-Gilbert in particular gets a lot wrong in her view.) Henry Schwarz’s introduction to the collection is decidedly upbeat: ‘postcolonialism offers one of the most exciting and intellectually responsible paradigms for cultural study in the coming decades’, though the decision to limit the discussion of the rise of postcolonial studies only to the US may appear excessively parochial. It has its moments of incidental illumination: for example, the venerable belief in ‘American exceptionalism’ – i.e. moral and cultural superiority – apparently continues to form ‘the dominant climate in which American scholars are raised’ (and we thought that no one could possibly still believe that stuff!). Lots of the pieces in the collection are original contributions (though not all unfortunately: Ato Quayson’s “Postcolonialism and postmodernism”, for example, is a chapter from his book, reviewed in *YWCCT* 9, while Neil Larsen’s “Imperialism, Colonialism, Postcolonialism”, is from his forthcoming book – see *YWCCT* 11). Although it is no doubt highly invidious to select, (and impossible to review all thirty), I enjoyed Anthony Alessandrini’s “Humanism in question: Fanon and Said”, as well as Larsen’s combative overview.

The latter argues that the crucial term which grounds the three in his title is the nation – one of the areas where post-colonial theory is getting its analysis more or less right in his opinion. Areas where it is not getting it right are particularly in its textualist or discursive modes (ie. the world as text, and imperialism as discourse rather than material fact.) It is ironic that for Larsen the major problem is the abandonment of history, politics and Marxism by theorists, while not very many years ago the major problem for Robert Young was precisely their ‘residual classical Marxism’. (Presumably it has become all too residual as far as Larsen is concerned.)

Larsen also appears in *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks. This offers itself as a reader, though it perhaps looks more like an interesting collection of essays than the attempt to survey the field which readers routinely take as their task. It is a mixture of the old (approximately two thirds of the pieces were published over the last decade) and the new (the remainder seemingly making their first appearance in print). Of the old, some, like Ella Shohat’s “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial’” are very familiar indeed. In many ways it is a pity that Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks’ introduction, “At the Margins of Postcolonial Studies”, should be one of the reprinted pieces – one might reasonably hope for the introduction to this kind of book to be the most up to date section – though at the same time it does offer an interesting discussion of margins and marginality via the liberal multiculturalism of Charles Taylor and the postmodern postcolonialism of Iain Chambers. Seshadri-Crooks also takes issue with Aijaz Ahmad, though in different ways from the majority of his critics – among whom Neil Larsen is definitely not to be numbered. Larsen’s “DetermiNation: Postcolonialism, Poststructuralism and the Problem of Ideology” is, among other things, a staunch defence of Ahmad. Though it was written before the full storm over *In Theory* broke, Larsen sees no need to alter his support for Ahmad; indeed, he feels that any approach to postcolonialism which does not engage with Ahmad will be ‘reduced either to intellectual irrelevance, to intellectual dishonesty, or to both’. From that perspective - interest in and

engagement with Ahmad's polemicising having waned considerably over the course of the last decade – there is clearly a great deal of irrelevant and dishonest work being currently undertaken in postcolonial studies. Larsen goes on to critique poststructuralist assumptions which he sees as underlying too much postcolonial theory, most obviously in the work of Spivak and, above all, Bhabha. In particular, he is scornful of Bhabha's assertion that identifying colonialism's discursive incoherences or lapses of authority equates in a meaningful way to an overcoming of colonialism's material power and presence. As well as exposing the problematic ideology of this kind of theorising, Larsen aims to locate it in historical circumstances: "the recourse of postcolonial or poststructuralist theory to the first proposition – Bhabha's *ambivalence* or what I have termed *the primitive disunity of identity relations* – reflects both the generalised historical crisis of the cultural nationalism of the 'Bandung era' set forth by Ahmad and the desire to move beyond it." The fact that the final word in the collection belongs to Bhabha, in an interview with Seshadri-Crooks, would no doubt confirm for Larsen the extent to which post-colonial studies is on the wrong (political/theoretical) track. (The interview is entitled "Surviving Theory" - and ironically it is just this sort of theory which Larsen hopes we might survive.) Among other contributions, Ali Behdad's "Une Pratique Sauvage: Postcolonial Belatedness and Cultural Politics" at least begins from a Marxist position (though, being Althusserian, not one Larsen would commend). Behdad examines salient aspects of postcolonial studies in relation to questions of institutional location, and, like a number of other contributors to the volume, stresses the need for vigilance and self-reflexivity: "An *oppositional, savage* practice of postcolonialism must view itself as an interminable struggle and a perpetually revisionist project that constantly questions its theoretical assumptions." (PS. In case you're still wondering what 'The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies' might be, so am I.)

More Said: *Edward Said and the work of the critic: speaking truth to power* is an extended version of the special issue of *Boundary 2* (25, 2, Summer 1998) on Said reviewed in *YWCCCT* 8. It now

contains an interview with Jacqueline Rose, a third piece on music, and Aamir Mufti's "Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, secular criticism and the question of minority culture" (also reviewed in *YWCCT* 8). It is a useful and wide-ranging collection.

Valerie Kennedy's *Edward Said: a critical introduction* is both more properly introductory and in the end more satisfying as a discussion of Said than Ashcroft and Ahluwalia's *Edward Said: the paradox of identity* (reviewed in *YWCCT* 9). Like the latter, hers is a surprisingly (and disappointingly?) brief study, given what could be said on the subject. Also like Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, Kennedy almost entirely ignores anything written before *Orientalism*, but she contextualises Said in a more useful way than they do. Her four chapters, as against their six, means that there is a more substantial examination of her chosen topics (Orientalism, imperialism in the Middle East, Culture and imperialism, and Said and postcolonial studies); it also means that other subjects, such as intellectuals, are less well covered than in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia. Kennedy also has nothing whatsoever to say about Said and music, a subject on which Ashcroft and Ahluwalia at least offer some comments. Kennedy works very competently through a range of positions and debates in relation to Said, and it would have been good to have got more of a sense of her own position more often, rather than judicious summaries of others arguments. Having said that, in the section on the contradictory effect of Foucault, Gramsci and humanism in *Orientalism*, Kennedy's assertions in relation to Said's 'personalised' approach – that he is practising a form of 'possessive exclusivism' (the idea that, for example, only Muslims can write about Islam); that he is claiming to be typical of all 'Orientals'; or that by highlighting 'critical consciousness' he thinks he stands outside history – are simply not justified by the passage referred to. Similar efforts to find faults where there are none occur elsewhere. In connection with Said's much-criticised failure to elaborate on gender issues in *Orientalism*, Kennedy says "at other moments, Said's own description of the Orient as seen by the West seems to reproduce unwittingly the sexual stereotyping which he

criticizes”. But it would, wouldn’t it? If Said is cataloguing Western stereotypes of the Orient (sexual or other) how can he avoid ‘reproducing’ them? There are other areas where greater theoretical precision would have helped. For instance, in the section on Gramsci, Kennedy refers to hegemony as ‘the domination of one state over another’; and while that might have been its original meaning, it is certainly not how Gramsci extensively theorised it. She also says “‘Orientalism reconsidered’ offers no modification of the hegemonic view of Orientalism. Power, speech and representation are still located exclusively with the colonizer, while the colonised are seen as powerless, silent and objectified.” Again, the situation described here bears no relation at all to the Gramscian condition of hegemony as one negotiated with, and contested by, the subordinate groups in society. It is also inaccurate as a reading of “Orientalism reconsidered”, which, for example, talks about “Orientals who disputed the authority and objectivity of an Orientalism allied with the great mass of European settlement in the Orient.” Despite moments such as these, Kennedy’s book is a useful introduction to Said.

If Kennedy is unhappy with Said’s approach because of the perceived degree of personal implication in the theoretical perspective, I wonder what she would make of Sarah Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*, where the author positions herself very clearly and very personally in relation to the analysis, and some of the chapters feature separate sections, personalised and parallel to the main body of the text. Ahmed scrutinises the problems of ‘stranger danger’ (though she uses the term in a different way from its normal appearance, for example in the press) and ‘stranger fetishism’ which “invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts ‘the stranger’ off from the histories of its determination”. She also investigates the ways in which strangers are ‘recognised’, how they are located in relation to questions of identity, community and belonging, as well as the ways in which they are embodied. In all this, although Ahmed mentions, or draws on a number of familiar faces from the world of postcolonial theory,

there is nothing obvious about the path she takes. That less than obvious approach applies even more to her perspective on postcoloniality as “*a failed historicity*: a historicity that admits its of its own failure in grasping that which has been, as the impossibility of grasping the present.” It would be interesting to know how many people working in the field of postcolonial studies would be happy to sign up to that notion of a lack of grasp of either the past or the present, given that while an inability to influence the present directly might be conceded, the value of postcolonial work has usually been located precisely in its superior analytical or explanatory ‘grasp’ compared to other approaches, whether preceding or contemporary. Perhaps Ahmed does not mean exactly what she appears to in formulations of this sort, however, since she also says that “postcoloniality allows us to investigate how colonial encounters are both determining, yet not fully determining, of social and material existence”, which is altogether less problematic. Ahmed also critiques the fashionable form of ethics, associated particularly with Emmanuel Levinas, and premised on a welcoming of, or love for, the Other or the stranger, since such a stance, in her eyes, involves as much of an essentialising or fetishising of the figure of the stranger as any version of ‘stranger danger’. Finally, Ahmed examines “the ways in which contemporary discourses of globalisation and multiculturalism involve the reproduction of the figure of the stranger, and the enforcement of boundaries, through the very emphasis on becoming, hybridity and inbetweenness.” While certain assertions or assumptions may be questionable, this is a book which is never less than thought-provoking.

A proper assessment of Robert Fraser’s *Lifting the Sentence: A poetics of postcolonial fiction* probably belongs in *The Year’s Work in English Studies* rather than here – though a fully realised poetics of post-colonial fiction would constitute a significant theoretical achievement. (As Fraser realises, however, his book is not that, and, rather in the manner of an older literary criticism, it offers decided opinions on a wide range of post-colonial writers.) It is included here principally on the basis of its final chapter on ‘Theocolonialism’ - post-colonial theory as a purportedly

'theological' practice with revered high priests and fawning acolytes proselytising in the name of something they do not even understand - perhaps the most complete travesty you are likely to encounter this year. The chapter suffers from the errors which dog the book as a whole, (to give just one example: the name of the Subaltern Studies Group is wrongly taken to derive from the Indian Mutiny, rather than Gramsci); it also suffers from an appalling lack of self-awareness: while ridiculing the leaden wit of post-colonial theorists, Fraser offers examples of true wit such as "Post-colonial intellectuals looked odd dressed in a Lyotard..."; however, it is the chapter's account of contemporary intellectual practice, especially that of post-colonial theorists and critics, which is particularly inaccurate and objectionable. Fraser does not dare to name anyone, though presumably Spivak is the figure behind the grotesque assertion that post-colonial critics stop analysing texts in order to talk about themselves: "The result was a semi-autobiographical story written by a critic in which his or her own distended condition of torment was offered as emblematic of the whole postcolonial world." The wild claims pour out: "The final achievement of the academy was to turn theory itself into a locus of reputed potency. Since discourse is power, lecturers now argued, we are powerful. Since disadvantage of various kinds had now become a formalized subject of discourse, however, the casuistry of self-justification acquired an additional twist. Since we are weak, the pundits now argued, we are strong." Now we all know that academics will argue just about anything if they feel so inclined, or the inducements are strong enough, but has anyone ever heard that kind of nonsense being articulated? (If so, please let *YWCCCT* know immediately.) The chapter remains an unfortunate example of the effects of the fear – and loathing - of theory.

An excellent example of how to discuss a wide range of literature without being paralysed by theory is Roger Bromley's *Narratives for a New Belonging: Diasporic Cultural Fictions*. Bromley's book is a timely reminder of the way in which phenomena such as diaspora, which are so important in post-colonial writing and theorising, are nevertheless not simply reducible to the

concerns of post-colonialism. Bromley is concerned with the impact of social marginality and geographical dispersion on questions of belonging and cultural identity, and to that end examines a variety of novels, short stories and films by writers well-known (Bharati Mukherjee) or less well-known (Cristina Garcia, Shamsul Islam). The compound and hyphenated identities represented here include Asian-American, Asian-Canadian, Black British and Asian-British, and their formation is analysed via a judicious mixture of theoretical perspectives (Said, Gilroy, Bakhtin, Hall, and Bhabha, among others). One of the book's definite strengths is the way it avoids obvious or easy choices in its selection of authors and texts. The result is an illuminating discussion.

With its lists, bullet points, annotated bibliographies and frequent 'Stop and Think' sections, John McLeod's *Beginning Postcolonialism* is the most student-friendly introductory study of the area yet to appear. It tackles with fortitude the thankless task of wading through, summarising and explaining a huge number of texts, concepts and approaches, and still manages to offer perceptive comments in its own right about the key areas covered, including diaspora, the nation, feminism, and colonial discourses. Most usefully, particularly in relation to its target undergraduate audience, it discusses both theory and literary texts in a manner which, despite the constraints of space, avoids being reductive.

"Film and the Postcolonial" is one of the sections in Robert Stam's *Film Theory: An Introduction*. That recognition (belated, partial) is warmly to be welcomed. The fact that the discussion rehashes things Stam has published several times already is, however, extremely disappointing, especially given the generally high quality of his work.

As ever, the issue of nationalism continues to exercise contributors to the various postcolonial journals. It has been joined, this year, by considerations of the nature and limits

of multiculturalism, and an engagement with the origins of this often laudable but sometimes uneasy and contradictory notion whose limits have been exposed as it is played out in reality. Much of this is to do with how nations are conceived, constructed and retrospectively reinvented. So a piece on the ideological construction of national belonging appears a good place to start. In her essay, 'Nation and Institution: Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of Indian Independence', in *Interventions* Vol. 3, No. 2, Srirupa Roy examines the overlaps between official and commercial events and imagery commemorating the independent nation's anniversary. She remarks on Coca Cola's appropriation of the symbols of the freedom struggle -- the Gandhi cap, the idea of the 'Real India' as that of rural life (reclaimed from the British by Gandhi), and so on -- in a fiftieth anniversary celebratory pop video released in 1997. Coca Cola was not the only outside commercial enterprise involved in repackaging nationalist iconography and themes, but Roy uses this particular example as an instance of how consumption was co-opted and presented as an expression of 'true' Indian identity. As a senior Coca Cola official is reported to have said: 'We are not multinational ... We are multilocal'. Roy observes, 'In 1997 nationalism was presented as a consumerist act: now the consumer-national could realize her nationhood only through the act of consumption. If we Buy Indian, then we can be Indian' (257). Interestingly, however, the official state celebrations also repackaged nostalgic themes in similar, easily digestible, nostalgic forms. Parliament saw a re-enactment of Nehru's famous 'Tryst with Destiny' speech, and the voices of Gandhi -- who pointedly boycotted the original celebrations because of on-going communal violence -- and, curiously, the archetypal anti-Gandhian and fascist collaborator, Subhas Chandra Bose, were relayed over a tannoy.

Roy argues that the fiftieth anniversary events constituted a revisioning of postcolonial Indian history as a seamless progression, and a celebration of regional cultural diversity. The

theme of sacrifice which was invoked, can be read as an attempt to encourage contemporary forbearance and stoicism in the face of modern hardship and social fissility. Ultimately, the state and the nation are conflated in these official commemorations. Of course, as Roy points out, India in 1997 was a very different place from India in 1947: with the end of the Congress Party's political domination; the rise of regional, religious and caste-based politics; the move away from socialism with the liberalisation of the economy in the early nineties; and the decline of the secular consensus and the rise of Hindu nationalism. In 1947, with a new nation still -- to invoke the early theorists of Indian independence -- 'in the making', statism was a necessity for the process of uniting and shaping the vast and disparate new country. Roy argues that such statist manoeuvres were deployed in 1997, perhaps more cynically, 'to blunt the edge of contemporary turmoil' (264). The confluence in the channels of both national and, one might say, multinational modes of celebrating the anniversary, is identified by Roy as an act of representation designed to construct an ideologically embellished continuity in how India is 'stated'.

The tenor of this intriguing account of the act of imagining a national community at the moment of independence is also present, albeit in a less consistent form, in Robbi H. Goh's 'Composing the Modern Nation: Mission School Magazines, Narrative Models and Cultural Typologies in Colonial Singapore' (*Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2001). Goh offers an interesting overview of the discourse of the Singapore mission school, its rituals and publications, in composing the modern nation. As with all such replicas of the British public school, metaphors of 'building on strong foundations' are coupled with cultural conservatism. The interesting thing about Goh's object of analysis is that the examples he chooses come from the 1950s, when Singapore stood on the verge of independence. In this context, an attempt to build up the moral fibre of the elite of the soon-

to-be-independent colony was undertaken, drawing on a retrospective ethic of sentimentalism, self-improvement and service bequeathed by the departing British. Missionary school magazines in particular provided the kind of ‘administrative vernacular’ of which Benedict Anderson writes, creating a language and a lexicon for those top students destined for the ranks of the civil service. Goh offers a nuanced reading of school magazines as a colonial vehicle for the centrality of literature in the project of improvement established by nineteenth century critics such as Coleridge, Shelley and Matthew Arnold, but one which could be appropriated and subverted by playful schoolboy pastiche. However, this latter assertion is never fully substantiated and one is left with the feeling that, although the contextual specificity of his examples is the strongest point in Goh’s essay, the theoretical underpinning is comparatively weak. He describes the mission schools’ use of ceremonials, speech-days and the like as an example of Foucault’s ‘microphysics of power’, operating not simply through corporeal discipline but through the ‘healthy rivalry’ of the house system. On the one hand such forms require ‘the inherent conformity of repetition’, while on another they permit dissent in the schoolboy tradition of parody and subversion. In fact, what Goh describes seems more akin to the Gramscian notion of ‘hegemony’, rather than Foucault’s ‘microphysics of power’. The subversion is hard to locate and, in any case, is sanctioned by and contained within the system itself. Goh also weakens his theoretical base at the outset by a curiously inflexible interpretation of Said’s concerns in *Culture and Imperialism*, at the centre of which he sees the model of French colonialism/Algerian resistance providing the template for colonial conflict. Leaving aside the fact that Said’s treatment of French colonialism takes up slightly less than half of *Culture and Imperialism*, the specific context and bloody, protracted nature of the Algerian struggle make it less useful as a point of comparison for the decolonisation of Singapore than Goh claims. Far from subverting the values of the coloniser, the phenomena he has described seem more likely to ensure their

longevity. One would be interested to hear about the extent to which the values inculcated by the mission schools, and the creation of a westernised elite, actually provided a wedge to keep open the door for neocolonial forms of influence.

The suggestion of a kind of Bhabhaesque (mis)appropriation of colonial forms is far more persuasive in the special issue of *Interventions* devoted to South Africa (Vol. 3, No.1). This edition deals with some of the questions raised by Jean and John Comaroff's two volume study of the processes of colonialism as played out between nineteenth century missionaries and the Tswana people of South Africa, entitled *Of Revelation and Revolution*. As examples of critically self-aware, post-Orientalist anthropology their arguments that the effectiveness of missionaries as imperial agents depended on 'unconscious', 'hegemonic', rather than 'conscious', 'ideological' modes of control reveal a take on the study of colonised cultures informed by the insights of contemporary cultural theory. The second volume, *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (1997), expands the central thesis to consider how, despite their best efforts, aspects of the missionaries' discourses were 'indigenized' and 're-authored' by the Tswana, producing hybrid forms, in a process reminiscent of Bhabha's recalcitrant and creative Indians under their tree outside Delhi, in the seminal essay. Comaroff and Comaroff's interpretations are debated by commentators such as Akhil Gupta, Shula Marks and Zolani Ngwane.

The following issue of *Interventions* (Vol. 3, No. 2), entitled 'Discipline and the Other Body', deals with the social uses of violence and the physical disciplining of the body in colonial regimes, especially in India and Northern Nigeria. Of particular interest are essays by Anupama Rao and Steven Pierce on how colonial mechanisms of discipline expose contradictions in the discourse of liberalism which stands at the very centre of colonial

power. Rao's piece, 'Problems of Violence, States of Terror: Torture in Colonial India', sets out the contradictions at the base of colonial law in India as they were exposed by the death in police custody of Gunnoo, a young Maharashtrian man accused of theft and murder in 1855. Rao describes how the colonial authority's simultaneous reliance on extreme native police practices, and professed abhorrence and racialised depiction of it in terms of a precolonial hangover, reveal the faultlines of rationalist forensic discourses. Paradoxically, this discrepancy is exposed further by medical science which attempts to measure the scope and scale of corporeal violation, and in so doing indicts British claims to moral, enlightened superiority.

In 'Punishment and the Political Body: Flogging and Colonialism in Northern Nigeria', Pierce outlines the politics of flogging as a mode of discipline in early twentieth century northern Nigeria. He argues that the two different legal traditions -- colonial and Muslim -- allowed to exist side by side in Nigeria helped highlight differences in the perception and application of punishment. The British authorities defended flogging as part of a traditional disciplinary economy, against criticisms from Britain caused by a series of scandals and claims of excessive force. As in Rao's essay, the use of flogging as a colonial tool is also seen to bring to the fore questions of both religious difference -- application methods differed between Muslim and non-Muslim systems -- and gender, in anxieties about the violation of the female body and conventions of modesty. Pierce comments: 'To the extent that corporal punishment was conceived as a necessary adjunct to colonial governance, it also implicated the project as inherently contradictory'(210).

However, it is not simply as a historical marker of the shadow that falls between the idea and the reality of colonialism's power that the body becomes a battlefield. This is amply

demonstrated in the next essay in the same volume, by Susan M. O'Brien. In 'Spirit Discipline: Gender, Islam and Hierarchies of Treatment in Postcolonial Northern Nigeria', O'Brien brings the story of the body's invasion and the play of forces seeking to control physical, mental and spiritual life up to date. She analyses an outbreak of 'spirit possession' at a girls school in Kano, Nigeria in 1995 in terms of the contesting power drives of local Hausa and orthodox international brands of Islam. These clash around the notion of the correct form of 'healing' for such demonic manifestations: the standardising efforts of Arab-born *Wahabi* Islam seeking to displace *Sufi*-influenced *bori* custom and practice. In turn, this can be linked to certain conservative Islamic notions of the proper role of women in this society in the face of apparent westernisation and an expansion of education and opportunities for women. While seeking a more complex and syncretic understanding of both the psychic phenomena and its various readings than as symptoms of either female resistance or patriarchal oppression, O'Brien nonetheless concludes that this is a battle over 'who defines Islamic "orthodoxy" in contemporary Kano'(230).

This struggle, between the almost infinite variety of practices within religions as they develop locally and ideas of orthodoxy, often fought out within the bounded space of the nation, also exercises the well-known Indian theorist Ashis Nandy this year. In the whimsically entitled 'A report on the present state of health of the gods and goddesses of South Asia', in *Postcolonial Studies*, Volume 4, Number 2, July 2001, Nandy contrasts the lived experience of heterogeneity in Hinduism, with the power-fixated attempts to hijack the religion by *Hindutva* ideologues. He begins with the story of a young Muslim playwright who had included Hindu gods and goddesses as characters in one of his plays and who was, subsequently, set upon and publicly humiliated by a Hindu nationalist mob. In this case, Nandy muses, *Hindutva* might have won but Hinduism definitely lost.

Nandy offers a refreshing diagnosis of the contemporary move in India to remake religion in the interests of politics. He effectively deconstructs the exclusivist ideologies of *Hindutva* by providing both a history of the political and social ‘uses’ of the divinities in India, and an account of the multiplicity of religious forms and identifications which constantly transgress the artificial barriers erected by purists. His argument is that for at least 1500 years Hinduism has been ‘a style of interaction between humans and gods’(126), in which the gods become part of everyday life. They are anything but inviolate and ethereal beings, having personalities every bit as mischievous and fallible as those of their worshippers. Nandy traces *Hindutva*’s attempts to obscure this to cultural complexes caused by nineteenth century British attempts to regulate and tidy up the ‘overpopulated’, ‘textured’ and ‘unpredictable’ Hindu pantheon, thus creating a religion more in accord with the chilly austerities of Protestant Christianity: a ‘proper’ religion, so to speak. This is a curious legacy for rampant cultural nationalists to have. Yet, Nandy argues his case persuasively, offering as evidence the way that *Hindutva* literature often directly attacks certain Hindu gods and goddesses for not demonstrating the requisite martial properties or degree of malleability for a religious nationalist cause. Indeed, ‘Most stalwarts of *Hindutva* have not been interested in Hindu religion and have said so’(127).

Turning to everyday practice, Nandy comments on the overlap between polytheism and monotheism in South Asia: finding continuities between the qualities of God venerated by Muslims and those valued by Hindus; recalling the observance of some Hindu rituals by early British households in Calcutta in the days of the East India Company; and noting the popularity of the goddess Saraswati among musicians of various faiths. There are also certain consistencies between the faith and practices of Muslims, Christians and Hindus

across the subcontinent; drawing on Kumar Suresh Singh's survey of Indian communities, Nandy remarks that there are hundreds of communities in India which can be classified as following more than one religion. We are told that 'there are one hundred and sixteen communities that are both Hindu and Christian; at least thirty five communities that are both Hindu and Muslim'(133). While prompted to write partly by the danger represented in the hardening lines of religious identity being erected on either side of the Indo-Pakistani border by religious nationalisms of both hues, Nandy argues that such moves force arbitrary choices on communities and individuals, artificially divide them, and impoverish all the faiths of South Asia. However, just as the characteristics and even the popularity of Hindu deities can change over time -- and just as Hinduism offers no dualist separation of good and evil -- so he extrapolates optimistically that such 'conclusive, non-equivocal' dividing lines 'seem eventually doomed in the region'.

While some of Nandy's conclusions depend on the operation of a sceptical rationalism which the *Hindutva-wallahs* show no sign of possessing with anything like equal clarity, and it is possible that he underestimates the ability of religions and their adherents to reconcile seemingly contradictory discourses -- such as those of Brahminical arcana and technological modernity -- he has undoubtedly performed a service in dashing a cup of cold reality into the face of a discipline sometimes more preoccupied with the heady subtleties of discursive ambivalence. Although somewhat anecdotal, as befits a paper that began as an informal presentation at a cultural studies workshop in Karnataka, this is still a key intervention in one of the most important debates confronting the postcolonial world today.

At one point in his essay, Nandy describes the interrelationship -- one might almost say interdependence -- of religions as 'the South Asian version of multiculturalism'(132).

Perhaps this is a slight case of rhetorical exaggeration. Nevertheless, the inevitably context-specific nature of official multiculturalism, and its genesis in doctrines of liberalism, is an interesting seam worked effectively by several critics in 2001. One of the most interesting contributions comes from Sanjay Seth in *Postcolonial Studies*, Volume 4, Number 1. Seth begins his essay, 'Liberalism and the Politics of (Multi)culturalism: or, plurality is not difference', by pointing out the specific origins of liberalism and how the universality it proclaims for its core values actually masks what is often a male, western and heterosexual perspective. These are, of course, just the elisions that have recently been assailed by a phalanx of queer theorists, postcolonialists and feminists too. Here Seth is concerned with liberalism's engagement with cultural difference. He traces two types of liberalism: that deriving from Locke, Bentham, and Mill which sought to reorganise the social world to accommodate it to what was perceived as 'the nature of man', an entity fixed, immutable and transcultural; and that stemming from Kant where core moral propositions can be deduced from the structure of human reason. For Seth, this second strand is potentially the more fruitful for an engagement with cultural difference. As such it seems to offer an answer to his central question: 'can one devise a genuinely culture-neutral liberalism which does not privilege some cultural values above others and which might therefore provide intellectual foundations for multiculturalism'(66). The Lockean mainstream of eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism is based on a view of human *nature* as prior to any society and, therefore, universal. However, this strain was soon confronted by its discursive limitations in the colonial era and in contact with races and cultures standing outside its presumed norms. It soon became clear that this liberalism needed certain socio-economic conditions to be present, conditions that did not exist among non-western peoples. Infamously, this resulted in otherwise generous thinkers such as Locke and David Hume excluding other races and cultures from their influential paradigms of civilisation. Seth remarks sardonically: 'In the

triumphal moment of liberalism, and in the era of colonialism, this occasioned no embarrassment, for the truth and rightness of liberalism established the truth and superiority of European and North American culture, and vice versa. (Surveying some of the intemperate political language following September 11 2001 as the latest manifestation of such discourse, one might conclude that *plus ca change ...*) Kant, on the other hand, replaced the empiricist underpinnings of Lockean liberalism and instead posited that the very fact that man is capable of posing such philosophical questions suggested certain context-transcending characteristics. Thereafter, the second half of Seth's essay asks whether the Kantian model offers the prospect of a claim to truth which is not specific to any context or culture.

The more sceptical reader may, at this point, already be unconvinced about the existence of any context-free value system, and may even want to challenge the terms in which the question is raised; both Lockean and Kantian models of liberalism appear mired in the concerns of their respective moments and, although philosophers may abstract principles for a living, postcolonial understandings of cultural exchange seem fundamentally opposed to the reifications historically attendant on intellectual colonialism. Undeterred, Seth traces the survival of Kantian liberalism in the work of philosophers such as Ronald Dworkin, Bruce Ackerman and John Rawls, describing their brand as 'procedural' or 'political', rather than 'metaphysical' liberalism. Says Seth: 'The search for a "postcolonial" rather than a metaphysical liberalism is a search for a liberalism which explicitly abjures public commitment to even liberal values like autonomy and individuality in favour of a studied neutrality...'(68). However, even as Seth paraphrases Rawls this begins to sound like old-fashioned relativism -- something Seth himself concedes -- even when a collective dimension of cultural attachment is substituted for the usual individualist model. Still, Seth believes that

the traditions of the 'procedural' mode can yield a liberalism which demonstrates its awareness and valorisation of the role played by cultural groups in establishing a system of values by cultivating a studied neutrality so as not to favour one group over another. If this seems a disappointingly tame conclusion, Seth argues that a liberalism which does not privilege any one culture need not necessarily lead to a free-for-all.

Nandy's essay has already reminded us of the sometimes antagonistic elements that can be roped in to support a political philosophy. Specifically, the separation of the religious and the political -- a key (one might almost say founding) principle of liberalism ever since Locke's *Letter on Toleration* (1689) -- is, as Nandy has reminded us, not necessarily one that would receive universal assent. Seth acknowledges this but, in an under-explored move, explains the operations of religion in the language of the free market: suggesting the existence of a sort of 'market place of souls'(73) where religions presumably sit on the shelf waiting for purchasers/converts. This is seriously to misunderstand the operation of religion when it enters the public sphere, and especially when it claims a stake in national politics. It is not simply a case of, in the free market idiom, 'choice is good'; it is an issue about the tendency of religions by their very nature as social critiques to contest and, if possible, to take over the political space. In this respect religion is not just one more commodity. But Seth does recognise the shortcomings of the 'procedural' liberal approach too: 'this valuing of diversity is made possible only by presupposing that the differences are within a certain range, or share family resemblances, and thus are not ultimately incommensurable'(74). In short, toleration of other values only operates within the limits defined by the majority culture in any society. Moreover, he concedes that there is a danger that *plurality* '(where things are so many variations on a theme)', and not actual *difference*, is what is valorised. Often liberalism domesticates its Other in order to accommodate it in terms liberal

discourse understands: 'Confronted by ways of being which do not accept the differentiations and distinctions fundamental to liberal politics, the liberal reifies what he confronts so that it fits the categories familiar to him'(74); a tendency frequently visible in liberal approaches to certain forms of Islam, for example. This is the tendency of current 'real-world' multiculturalisms as they are practiced within nation states. 'Procedural' liberalism may make for more circumspection, but Seth's final note is cautious. While liberalism as it exists 'can accommodate ways of being different, it cannot recognise, let alone accommodate, different ways of being; it can allow and even celebrate plurality -- but plurality is not difference'(76).

Overall, Seth's essay offers a considered and in many ways perspicacious account of the different strands of liberalism which have characterised social thought. His diagnosis has an added piquancy in that it gives a historical context for the hesitant, ambiguous and grudging nature of official dealings with minorities. This is clearly a pressing issue in white settler colonies such as Australia and Canada, where issues of majority/minority status overlay the still visible traces of initial colonial displacements. However, it is also timely in the light of current racial tensions in the UK and given Home Secretary David Blunkett's ham-fisted attempts to ring-fence national identity with his projected oath of allegiance and compulsory anglicisation ideas, which play to the soft racist element of British public opinion. Given the impact of September 11 on international politics, the need to recognise both the distinctions and correlations between individualism as autonomous expression and as the legitimising slogan of free market economics -- both of which snuggle beneath the blanket of liberalism -- is greater than ever. When right wing American governments can habitually use 'liberal' as a term of abuse for the more libertarian sections of their own society, while claiming to be champions of freedom and even of civilisation itself -- which comes to be equated not least

with symbols of global capitalism -- the word 'liberal' has perhaps become so elastic as to be almost meaningless. Although Seth's essay appeared too early to gauge the impact of a shift in global political language which appears to be still on-going, his essay does nonetheless offer a valuable overview of the development of a discourse which, having given birth to multiculturalism, appears now deeply uncertain about the nature and fate of its progeny.

Multiculturalism and its limits also exercise Selvaraj Velayutham and Amanda Wise in their essay, 'Dancing with Ga(y)nesh: rethinking cultural appropriation in multicultural Australia' (*Postcolonial Studies* Vol. 4, No. 2, 2001). The authors interrogate the faultlines of Australian multiculturalism -- and specifically the difference between multiculturalism as a state-endorsed programme and its problematics as lived experience -- in a move which has important implications for the issue elsewhere too. Specifically, their paper focuses on the controversy surrounding the appropriation of Hindu religious imagery, especially that of the god Ganesh, at the 1999 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Sleaze Ball, themed 'Homosutra'. The use of Hindu iconography and its playful yet certainly ill-advised redirection towards a camp aesthetic prompted a backlash from the Hindu community in Australia and beyond. The authors examine the ethics of a situation where one marginalised group appeared to insensitively plunder the sacred imagery of another. They examine 'the very thin line between "enrichment" and problematic "appropriation"', arguing the need for 'a sustained analysis of contextual and situated instances of intercultural and intercommunal interaction and borrowings' (143).

The outrage caused by 'Homosutra' brought together an unlikely alliance of Hindu activists - - some with links to militant Hindu political bodies in India and worldwide -- and Australia's Christian Right. Velayutham and Wise point out that, while the motives of the religious

objectors should be viewed with suspicion, and the perceived blasphemy understood in the context of discourses of power within Australia, nevertheless the organisers of 'Homosutra' naively participated in the kind of insensitive, decontextualising exoticism reminiscent of the moves of Orientalism. It perpetuated Orientalist myths, among them the tenacious fantasy of the East as a space of sexual license and 'liberated alterity'. In short, when the rights of two minority groups collide the fractures in multiculturalism's cosy mosaic are exposed most acutely. Moreover, decontextualising Hindu imagery in this way is also redolent of the contemporary interpellations of consumer-oriented cultural tourism. Velayutham and Wise comment: 'the act of divorcing religious symbols from their spiritual context in this manner has the effect of dissociating Hinduism from the people who practice it and who experience their identities through it in very real ways.'

All this is entirely convincing and made more so by the almost phenomenological precision of the context offered. However, if there is a problem in this essay it is just this: the tendency the authors have to get too close to their material, thereby losing the longer view offered by an international dimension. For example, citing the complaints of the outraged Hindus, Velayutham and Wise remark on the fear expressed that the younger generation will lose a true understanding of the meaning of the gods because of such sacrilege. While anxieties such as this are characteristic of minority identity among diasporic communities, the weight the authors give to such articulations needs to be tempered by a consideration of the contexts in which these discourses sometimes operate. It is a commonplace of ethnically marginalised discourses that they express the fear of eventual assimilation and/or extinction. However, the Hindu right -- as evidenced by their powerful ally within the majority culture in Australia -- have access to international resources which can work to minimise such an eventuality, partly by raising the profile of their far-flung co-religionists in circumstances such as these. This,

plus an emboldened modern dimension to Hindu activism -- the groups involved apparently enjoyed links with militant Hindu groups across the globe, who had threatened an anti-Australian backlash -- mean that although one may lament the offence the 'Homosutra' organisers needlessly gave, such religious groupings have powerful tentacular support, whereas the gay and lesbian community does not. This is something Velayutham and Wise do not consider. Despite their acute sensitivity to the nuances of disempowerment, and the ironies of two such groups being at loggerheads, their conclusions are limited by the necessarily narrow geographical focus and interest in the discursive coordinates of the dispute -- around homophobia and the sacred and profane -- which takes the place of a consideration of how justifiable religious sensitivities were overtaken by what, as Ashis Nandy's essay showed, is actually a political movement. One feels that the issue is not so much about 'lived experience', or the loss of faith by future generations, as the authors claim, but is more to do with the claims to centrality of one particular version of the sacred. (After all, Dr A Balasubraminiam, Chair of the Hindu Council of Australia remarked that 'some people in every religion will take offence at any perceived opportunity' and distanced himself from the protests.)

Like Sanjay Seth, Velayutham and Wise recognise that freedom of expression in a liberal democracy has its limits defined by the majority culture. Essentially, they say the issue is about two conflicting interpretations of multiculturalism. This seems entirely plausible. However, they then display the less-than-solid theoretical coordinates of their own approach when describing this difference. The 'Homosutra' organisers understand multiculturalism in terms of a celebration of ethnic diversity: something they argue the Sleaze Ball performed. Velayutham and Wise then continue: 'The *Indian protesters*, on the other hand, claimed the Sleaze Ball had in fact *defiled* the very basis of multiculturalism ... The Mardi Gras

organisers appear to envision multiculturalism as an abstract ideology which encourages the enrichment of *mainstream culture* [?] while the *Indian protesters* experience it as a lived practice, which allows them to maintain their own cultural identities. To the *Indian protesters*, then, the appropriation of Hindu imagery at Homosutra ... was a blatant act of blasphemy and vilification'(155)[Emphasis added]. The phrases I have emphasised illustrate a contradiction in the authors' own position. The gay and lesbian community hardly represent 'mainstream culture', while the unremarked introduction of issues of purity and defilement -- significant when discussing religious reactions to an event celebrating non-heterosexual orientation -- are also significant here. The use of the term 'Indian protesters' for a group which included many naturalised Australian citizens is a curious but telling slip, revealing a conflation of religious, cultural and national identity which recalls the murky exclusivist manoeuvres of nationalists with whom Velayutham and Wise would certainly not wish to be associated. The phrase is indicative of a well-meaning but nonetheless intrusive othering which takes place in the essay as a whole: the protesters are Indians (identified by their nationality as outsiders in Australia) no longer simply Hindus; they are 'othered' so that they can be defended by Velayutham and Wise as the more marginal marginalised group. One is reminded of Sanjay Seth's observation in the above essay on liberalism and multiculturalism: 'Confronted by ways of being which do not accept the differentiations and distinctions fundamental to liberal politics, the liberal reifies what he confronts so that it fits the categories familiar to him'(75).

Elsewhere the authors are more vigilant against the seductions of simplistic liberal approaches. According to them 'freedom of expression', that liberal *passe-partout*, allows the Mardi Gras organisers 'to display both an arrogance and an ignorance of the very real ways in which people's identities are experienced in and through religion and religious

practices'(156). And we can agree when they state that, although working in the name of tolerance and diversity, 'the artistic elite who created "Homosutra" in the end served only to mask another set of power relations -- those between western and "Oriental subject"'(156). However, to claim finally that, 'one group, as a means of affirming and exploring their own frequently marginalised self-identity, robbed the Other group of the power to rearticulate their own'(157), seems excessive. It was certainly crass beyond belief on the part of the Mardi Gras organisers to consider raiding the cultural symbols of another comparatively disempowered group, but the broader agenda raised by the invocation of 'blasphemy' needs consideration too. Velayutham and Wise are right to say that the whole affair has 'exposed a blind spot within the rubric of Australian multiculturalism to do with the far-reaching consequences of certain kinds of cultural appropriation'(157). However, one need not conclude from this, as they do, that insensitive and thoughtless appropriation in the carnivalesque (and therefore temporary) sphere of Mardi Gras, 'in the end silences the "Other", whose access to their own self-narratives are displaced'. This is to take the protesters' arguments too much at face value: one suspects that Ganesh (whatever his sexuality) will continue to be worshipped long after the Sleaze Ball is over and the caterers have cleared up.

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