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Shakespeare and the Postcolony: ‘Loving’ the Colonial Icon Critically

BOOK REVIEW - Singh, Jyotsna G. *Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory*.

Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2019. xvi + 246 pp.

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Although William Shakespeare’s works were imposed in India as part of the British colonial enterprise’s civilising mission in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, postcolonial India’s almost-idyllic relationship with Shakespeare continues well into the twenty-first century. In 2022, seventy-five years after Indian independence, Shakespeare is still part of academic syllabi and is also repeatedly adapted for the stage and on screen to suit various regional contexts. The presence of this colonial icon in postcolonial spaces leads us to contemplate the reasons behind the commonplace pedestalization of Shakespeare as a signifier of Englishness, of the English language, and of his cultural superiority that has been internalised over the generations. The Indian Shakespeare scholar Poonam Trivedi points out that it is thanks to the development of postcolonial theory in the West that ‘Indian literary critics are now able to distance themselves, to question and examine this “love,” and expose its hegemonized dimensions.’ (22)

Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory, a 2019 book authored by Jyotsna G. Singh—a Shakespeare scholar who received her bachelor’s degree in India and went to earn her master’s degree and her PhD in the USA—provides us with tools to evaluate, challenge, destabilise and reinterpret the aforementioned sentiment of a largely-unquestioned ‘love.’ A valuable resource for postcolonial scholars and for Shakespeare scholars who seek to (re)read the playwright’s works using a decolonising and postcolonial lens, this book is divided into three sections, each of which is further divided into two or three chapters. Before delving into the various plays, people, and places discussed at length in the various chapters, it is essential to note that Singh considers Edward Said’s 1978 seminal work *Orientalism*—one of the foundational texts of postcolonial studies—as central to her work. Accordingly, she suggests that postcolonial theory is an ‘academic study of the cultural legacy of European colonialism,’ with ‘postcolonial criticism interested in the shaping power of European discourse about the “East,” identified by Edward Said as “Orientalism”.’ (3)

The first section of Singh’s book focuses on expansion and colonial imaginings in Shakespeare’s world during the early modern period using the vocabularies of Orientalism, with the

first chapter presenting a detailed study of three plays, namely *The Tempest*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*. Singh terms these plays ‘the most common choices for postcolonial interpretation’ (24) because of their characterisation of ethnic, racial, religious, and geographic Others such as Jews, Moors, and Turks, along with allusions to slavery and cannibalism to frame non-English, non-European identities. She warns against simplistic readings of these plays using essentializing binary oppositions of the ‘civilised’ West versus the ‘savage’ East, citing the example of *Othello*: ‘Othello’s tragedy reflects early modern racialism as much as his hubris.’ (53) As for the second chapter, it establishes a link between England’s early mercantilism—via the Levant Company, the Muscovy Company, and the East India Company that were founded at the turn of the sixteenth century—and Shakespearean references to East/West India/Indies as a source of riches. Mentions of India in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are scrutinised: the ‘spiced Indian air’ connected to the lucrative, highly sought-after spice trade, the Indian woman’s pregnant belly to English/European ships ‘pregnant’ with merchandise, and the changeling Indian boy as an allegory of the merchandise itself.

A shift beyond the early modern period and beyond the ‘metropolis’ and into the ‘peripheries’ is seen in the second part of the book, with the third chapter presenting the early legacies of decolonisation from the 1950s onwards in reinterpretations of *The Tempest* by five key writers from the Caribbean, Latin America, and East Africa. Following the decolonising movement of the 1950s to the 1970s came the field of postcolonial studies from the 1980s onwards; Singh writes about one of its landmark conferences held in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1996 in the fourth chapter. She also explores readings of three plays with ‘no obvious postcolonial affiliations’ (105) using a postcolonial lens to discuss private property, capital and the class struggle in *King Lear*, racialised and sexualised discourses related to the titular character of the Egyptian queen in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the gendered nation in *Cymbeline*.

The third and final section of the book contextualises recent Shakespearean adaptations on the stage and the screen in the West and otherwise. Chapter five introduces readers to an array of non-Western Shakespeares, including Chinese Shakespeares, Arab Shakespeares, Indian Shakespeares and Black Shakespeares, and chapter six tackles the subject of multi-racial and colour-blind casting on the contemporary British stage for ‘inter-cultural’ (150) performances. Finally, the seventh chapter analyses the Indian filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haider*—a 2014 Hindi-language adaptation of *Hamlet* that is set in the milieu of Kashmiri insurgency—even as Singh labels the qualifier of Bollywood (commonly used to designate Hindi cinema) as ‘both pliant and problematic.’ (178)

Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory is thus a remarkable text that proposes mechanisms to understand and undo essentializing, Orientalizing, racializing stereotypes advanced by (former) colonising powers about the (formerly) colonised world. As for why this book is not only important but also *indispensable* in the postcolonial era to grasp the full extent of past and present racisms and Orientalisms, the author's own experience within the field of Shakespeare studies (that she touches upon in the introduction) is proof enough. The fact that Singh's Indian education in English literature was seen as inferior to that of her Western-educated counterparts (17), that she has been dubbed an 'Indian Shakespearean' (19), and has been asked why did not choose to specialise in a more 'Indian' subject (20) makes this book crucial for scholars (especially from postcolonial spaces)—it equips them with tools to not only interpret Shakespeare's plays but also navigate the field of Shakespeare studies at large.

References

Singh, Jyotsna G. *Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory*. Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2019. xvi + 246 pp.

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