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***POSTCOLONIAL LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES:
OUT OF PLACE, JOHN THIEME. PALGRAVE
MACMILLAN, 2016. 238 PP. ISBN 978-1-37-45687-8***

Two quotes separated by millennia and continents bind the different areas covered in John Thieme's *Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place*, the Heraclitean aphorism that one can never step into the same river twice and Yi-Fu Tuan's notion that space becomes place in the process of being endowed with value (Tuan 1997:6; qtd. in Thieme 2016:5). The literary references are no less limited, with examples ranging from pre-modern mythologies to the most recent works of literature, the predominant focus being however on the work of contemporary postcolonial writers from South Asia, the Caribbean, Canada and Africa. Despite its broad time and space axis, the author's precedence given to the latter belongs to a wider trend in literary and cultural studies which, Thieme maintains, started with the publication of Foucault's essay "Questions on Geography" in 1980 followed by Soja's 1989 *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. The popularity of these texts coincided with an increased interest in postcolonial literature and Foucault's interest in the problem of management and ownership of space proved to be especially apt in the context of nations which had been subjugated to colonial control and misappropriation.

The focus on space enables the recovery of cultural difference without recourse to the essentialist notions of identity which are privileged in Western historical discourse. In fact, space itself is shown in Heraclitean manner as unfixed, ever-changing either in its physical dimension, forming palimpsests of maps, influences, shifting borders as well as in its epistemological dimension, the way it is perceived often overriding physical geography (Thieme 2016:11). Paradoxically, the prime agents of the shifting geographical and cultural boundaries in the time of the

European imperialism and American-led globalization have been the most vocal advocates of the fixity of space. The literary examples quoted in this study portray alternative, unstable and shifting landscapes, which yield multiple interpretative possibilities and postpone the possibility of closure.

The discussion of postcolonial geographies starts with the study of maps, highlighting the way colonial cartographies imposed an arbitrary, Western-biased worldview as in the time of exploration maps were far from objective representations of earth's surface and their political role was no less important than the informative one. Eurocentric cartographies inspired by the sixteenth-century Gerardus Mercator's world map depicted the continents in a disproportionate manner which encouraged and justified colonization. The characters in the stories told in this chapter, from Conrad's Marlowe, through texts by Derek Walcott, Amitav Ghosh, Jamaica Kincaid and Michael Ondaatje, find places to be likewise invented, shaped like fables in the mode of the highly imaginative medieval *mappae mundi*. Interestingly, the volume's cover depicts a fragment of the Hereford *Mappa Mundi*, a world map dating from c.1300 in which Jerusalem resides at the centre, West is on the top and Europe and Africa exchange places. The map clearly was an expression of a specific, Judeo-Christian, worldview and had little informative function. Probably the most convincing example of the instability of mapping is the shifting locus of the prime meridian which has been located in such diverse places as Lisbon, Christiana, Stockholm, Rio de Janeiro, Copenhagen, Cadiz, the Spanish island of Ferro or Jakarta. The multiple positioning of the place accorded temporal centrality shows also the entanglement of time and space which are not always possible to separate as they mutually influence one another. The literary examples chosen in this chapter provide personal, subjective idiosyncratic maps which prove that space is not passive but can be a site of resistance, offering *a corrective to the essentialist modes of Western discourses* (Thieme 2016:37). This chapter is followed by a discussion of the botanical tropes in literature and the garden as a site that played a part in the colonial enterprise. Botanical gardens can be viewed as the horticultural equivalent to map making but here again individual attempts at creating small personal plots like the one described by Jamaica Kincaid in *My Garden (Book)* (2000) constitute a vivid alternative. Thieme presents a fascinating history of horticulture from the early Judeo-Christian depictions of the Garden of Eden through first historical gardens in Mesopotamia, Persia and Egypt to the eighteenth-century Western collections of plants imported from the colonies to satisfy the mostly white male botanists' wish to map and systematize the world's diversity. The idiosyncratic nature of texts discussed in this chapter points at the futility of such enterprise.

The chapter discussing spices does not seem to fit, at first glance, with the theme of the book. It is shown, however, to be equally enmeshed in the oriental discourse as the world maps or botanical gardens. The aromatic food items were among the luxury goods that figuratively represented the exotic Asia and North

Africa from which they were imported. In early literary responses they were seen as a threat to cultural purity giving way, in Romanticism, to the fascination with oriental difference. In postcolonial texts the responses to spices are multifarious, the author, however, distinguishes three major trends: the heightened awareness of the commodification of spices, a pre-colonial tropology of spices in the Indian context and the strategic potential of spices presented as exotica in a more or less successfully subversive way.

The following two chapters belong to the fast developing field of ecocriticism that studies the relation between literature and nature and is concerned with the place of humans in the age of the Anthropocene. The title of the first one, “Borrowing the Earth”, is taken from the Native Canadian belief that we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; instead we borrow it from our children (Thieme 2016:101). This chapter looks at the dispossession of people due to colonization, globalization and tourism each of which tampers with unique ecosystems on which local communities depend. Thieme analyses works by two Native Canadian authors, Jeanette C. Armstrong and Eden Robinson, South African Zakes Mda, and the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh which, he shows, *dramatize the need to fashion a new bioregionally sensitive poetics of place, which can contest or absorb national and transnational imperatives* (Thieme 2016:102). The other chapter reads literary representations of human/animal relations in the works of R.K. Narayan and Amitav Ghosh, Witi Ihimaera and Barbara Gowdy and Yann Martel’s bestselling *Life of Pi*. It stresses the dispossession of animals due to human intervention and notices the particular challenge that writing from the animal perspective poses for creative writers. Their inability to speak for themselves in a language understood by humans makes them the ultimate subalterns. Thieme also describes the zoo as the very specific heterotopia which served as the iconic representation of the European powers. Interestingly, writing about animals can be a way of sidestepping national boundaries.

The final chapter discusses urban chronotopes in the context of contemporary London and Bombay with the city viewed as *multiple* and *constantly reshaping itself* (Thieme 2016:177). This sense of instability of place is reinforced by *the nervous condition* that is *the sense of psychic homelessness* (Thieme 2016:189) experienced by the city dwellers which is doubled in the case of postcolonial migrants displaced from their home countries.

Each of the topics in *Postcolonial Geographies* is discussed in a separate chapter which begins with a thorough background introduction followed by an in-depth analysis of carefully selected literary texts some of which ingeniously, some less successfully, resist the colonial and neo-colonial appropriations of space. These can be read individually, yet the way the author points to links and connections between the different topics turns them into one coherent discussion. The language is clear and luminous despite the complexity of some of the arguments. At times it is peppered with sentences like: *Two swallows don't make a summer; let alone*

drain a concoction of sherbets, raisin, orange and pomegranate juice (Thieme 2016:86), which make it an even more pleasurable read.

The book's subtitle, *Out of Place*, has a particularly poignant resonance in the time of today's refugee crisis, to which Professor Thieme alludes to time and again, especially in his discussion of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. Those nomadic travellers are seen as a threat to the settled societies and thus in most cases remain the world's underclass. The book ends, however, on a positive note, stressing the transformative potential of travelling, the voyages of self-discovery which take us out of the comfort zones of sedentary epistemologies and open up possibilities for articulating new identities. Reading *Postcolonial Geographies* is in itself a fascinating journey across times and continents via multiple routes and without a final, specified destination.

References

- Thieme, J.** 2016. *Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Tuan, Y-F. 1997. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.