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Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature

Françoise Král
189 pages, 2009, £ 52
Palgrave Macmillan

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Undisputedly, *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature* (2009) is a unique contribution among the many existing works examining the theme of identity in diasporic literature. Françoise Král's monograph provides solid reflections on the trope of identity which, she argues, needs to be constantly renegotiated in a deterritorialized world. Král contends that the increasing number of contact zones resulting from (mass) migrations has made room for new identity categories which need to be reassessed critically. While this line of reasoning, which constitutes the starting point of Král's discussion, may not sound original to the critical community, the value of the rest of her thematic study is at least twofold.

The first distinctive feature of *Critical Identities* is its large scope of investigation. Whereas several surveys exploring the prismatic value of identity in diasporic fiction often concentrate on specific predefined geographical horizons such as South Asia or the Caribbean, or a particular author's works, Král's approach is rather all-inclusive and considers different authors from various geopolitical landscapes. The book proposes analyses of almost canonical diasporic authors such as Salman Rushdie, Caryl Phillips, and M.G. Vassanji, as well as close-readings of texts from emerging authors such as Monica Ali, Kiran Desai, Hari Kunzru, Jhumpa Lahiri and Zadie Smith. This does not mean, however, that Král fails to acknowledge and discuss the social, political, and cultural implications in which the works she examines were produced.

Yet, her discussion of this substantial palette of authors fails to comprehensively reflect "the dissonant polyphony which characterizes Anglophone diasporic literature" that she wishes to engage with (6). Král's undertaking indeed mainly revolves around the works of South Asian authors and fails to provide a fuller picture of diasporic authors from other geographical horizons. She primarily focuses on dislocated authors emerged in British, American, or Canadian cultures, but does not cover other diasporic movements towards, for example, the Middle East. Additionally, although drawing interesting parallels between the different texts of her corpus, one regrets the lack of a consistent comparative approach.

Král nevertheless sensibly re-contextualizes the debates around which the diversity of identity (de)constructions within diasporic literature has crystallized in revisiting the concept of interstitiality. In her first chapter, she acknowledges that her methodology is indebted to Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy's metaphorical understandings of the term diaspora. She discusses how both scholars have challenged the rigidity of interpretative binary models operating between poles such as center/periphery or minority/majority and offered middle ground models stressing the kaleidoscopic and mutable nature of diasporic identity. But Král goes one step further in this line of reasoning. She argues that these liminal spaces not only offer an alternative to existing polarities but constitute an interstice full of overlapping disjunctive definitions of identity. In particular, she is concerned with the potential of interstitiality for reinvigorating political questions and agendas within a diasporic perspective.

The other five chapters of the book are, to varying degrees, all concerned with this notion of interstitiality. The second, third, and fourth chapters, for example, highlight insightful parallels between diasporic fiction on the one hand, and postcolonial criticism and postmodernity on the other. In these sections, she examines how diasporic fiction "revisits key motifs of postcolonial literature" (37) such as the disruption of spatial continuity, the interrogation of the concept of belonging, the challenging of the notion of authenticity, and the constant renegotiation of diasporic identity "with elements imported by colonization" (36). Král's circuitous argumentation, however, complicates the close reading of her texts.

While her interdisciplinary approach is engaging and perceptive, she observes, for example, that diasporic identities challenge the alignment of the land/race/language/culture continuum.

Her argument regarding the political potential of interstitiality, however, comes to full maturity in the last two sections of the book which are by far the most compelling ones. In the fifth and sixth chapters, Král respectively engages with the disjunctions of diasporic fiction in terms of ethics and bilanguaging. Regarding ethics, Král raises the question of whether or not the diasporic subject -- characterized, she argues, by double consciousness -- can transform his/her ethical self into the broader context of the global and thereby participate "in the shaping of a [transnational] social [and political] network" (101). In the final chapter examining the importance of language, Král goes beyond the usual claim that English has been an instrument of domination which sabotaged indigenous cultures and diasporic identities. She emphasises the idea that the English language can also be considered "a liberating experience" (127). She suggests, for instance, that the liberating power of English allows diasporic female characters to distance themselves from predefined models of traditional patriarchal societies.

On the whole, Král's strategy of bolstering close textual readings with theoretical discussions is engaging yet nebulous at times. Although she is sensitive about the "potential pitfall ... of abstraction" (5) that is inevitable due to the scope of her undertaking, the lack of linearity of her argument and her occasional theoretical digressions complicate her discussion. Despite these repetitions and organizational hiccups, however, the book constantly displays critical acuity and depth. While *Critical Identities* may not always offer a fresh take on diasporic fiction, it nevertheless establishes the foundations for an interdisciplinary approach of the field and constitutes an important 'bush-clearing' effort in the debates animating the scholarship of contemporary Anglophone diasporic literature.