Journal of American Studies of Turkey
10 (1999) : 91-92.

Book Review

Postcolonialism and Autobiography: Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, Opal Palmer Adisa, edited by Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe. Studies in Comparative Literature 19. 1998, 263 pages. U.S. $ 50 plus postage and handling. Available from: Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Dilek Doltaş

This book contains the revised manuscripts of the Anglophone workshops at the symposium on "Postcolonialism and Autobiography" which took place in Würzburg, on 19-22 June 1996. (The papers of the Francophone workshops appeared in a separate volume entitled *Postcolonialisme et Autobiographie: Albert Memmi, Assia Djebar, Daniel Maximin*. Note 1) The English volume analyzes from a postcolonial point of view the autobiographical writings of Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, Opal Palmer Adisa, George Lamming, Wilson Harris, and Jamaica Kincaid. According to the critics who study their work, all of them display a consciousness of their different, "original" cultural identity while living in England or the United States.

Interweaving the concerns of the autobiographical genre with those of postcolonialism, the volume points to the "dialectical" relationship between self and the world, inside and outside. The categories of fiction and fact, individual and society, mind and world are repeatedly questioned as artificial divisions in the articles discussing theoretical issues and their boundaries crossed and recrossed by the main characters in the excerpts taken from postcolonialist autobiographical writings. At each intersection psychological, philosophical and political concerns fill the gap left by so-called historical events and deeds.

The book begins with two introductory essays. The first is written by the editors and summarizes the issues brought up by the critics and the fiction writers included in the book on the changed form of autobiography in postmodern times. The editors assert that

> Postcolonialism . . . since the 1980s gained dominance in the field of literary studies and has been concerned with the "various cultural effects of colonization." . . . Questions of agency, subjecthood, cultural memory and ethics seem to be of central concern to the colonized and decolonized condition. . . . Autobiography in its widest definition seems to provide a convenient genre to embrace the

> crossroad cultures from East and West and to launch an emancipatory political and cultural program." (1-3)

The second essay is by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak points to the distinction between traditional and postcolonialist understanding of autobiography. She maintains that postcolonialist autobiography is a kind of testimony. For Spivak the difference between the two forms of autobiography, traditional and postcolonialist, lies in the intention of their players. The intention of the traditional autobiographer is to objectify itself without loss of subjecthood. The postcolonialist, the testifier, however, is under responsibility to tell the truth and as such s/he "assumes the role of the editorial or critical subject 'de-centered,' in rather an empirical way" (8). Spivak insists that this kind of responsibility is indeed not given to the subaltern; therefore, "the subaltern often cannot accede to testimony." In postcoloniality, testimonies, like old anthropological accounts and psychoanalytic case studies, tell us the truths of those who cannot speak for themselves. Hence, their stories are always undersigned by writers representing them. Spivak finds that "this deliberate and powerful play of the individual and representativity is the impossible signature of the ghostly witness in all autobiography"(9). Consequently, such a situation leads to, among other problems, a certain symbolic and distanced hybridism of identity.

The three parts that follow the introductory essays carry the names of the writers whose works are discussed extensively: Michelle Cliff, David Dabydeen, Opal Palmer Adisa. Each part begins by giving at least one excerpt from the "postcolonialist autobiographical writings" of these authors and are followed by essays that discuss the various problems of identity that arise in the texts. The essays in the last part also study the autobiographical fiction of other postcolonialist writers, namely George Lamming, Wilson Harris and Jamaica Kincaid.

Because the book is basically a volume of conference proceedings, the essays do not complement one another. They are neither thematically nor structurally connected or consistent. On the other hand, postcolonial experience and concepts affiliated with it such as homeland, exile, the experience of migration and hybridity are explored extensively throughout the book. The incorporation of excerpts from the writers' works allow the readers to hold an interactive dialogue with the critics. Readers interested in postcolonial studies, historiography and auto/biography would enjoy reading this book.

Notes

1 The volume will be reviewed in the next issue. Editor's note.

Journal of American Studies of Turkey
10 (1999) : 93-95.

Book Review

Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture, by Ziauddin Sardar. (1988) 1998, 346 pages. U.S. $ 21.95 plus postage and handling. Available from: Pluto Press, 345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA, United Kingdom; and 22883 Quicksilver Drive, Sterling, VA 20166-2012, USA.

Dilek Doltaş

Postmodernism is generally viewed as a critique of modernism, elitism, and imperialism. It is considered to have a liberating influence on the oppressed and marginalized peoples of the non-west or Other cultures. Ziauddin Sardar strongly opposes this view. He maintains that although postmodernism at first appears to present to the Other legitimate forms of protest against the excesses of "suffocating modernity, instrumental rationality and authoritarian traditionalism" (13-14), it in fact does nothing other than appropriate "the history and identity of non-western cultures as an integral facet of itself, colonizing their future and occupying their being" (13).

The book consists of an introduction and eight chapters. In the introduction, Sardar writes that the postmodern world is being built by the mass media, and the glue that binds this so-called "pluralistic," "impersonal," equalitarian, liberal, and global world is the postmodern economy (8-15). Yet in the chapters that follow he discusses postmodernism not as a new state or condition of being, associated with contemporary information technologies and economy, but as another Western method and project which seeks to justify the continued exploitation, oppression and annihilation of non-western cultures, of the Other.

"The main thesis of this book," he writes, "is that far from being a new theory of liberation, postmodernism, particularly from the perspective of the Other, the non-western cultures, is simply a new wave of domination riding on the crest of colonialism and modernity" (13). Quoting postmodern scholars and critics such as Walter Anderson, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Feyerabend, Charles Jencks, and Jean-François Lyotard, Sardar points to those features of postmodernism that are said to bring about a transition from modernity to postmodernity. These features are: the breakdown of old ways of belief, "the birth of global culture," the emergence of a conflict about the nature of reality and social truth, and the ultimate freedom of choice that these bring about. As the old foundationalist, authoritarian forms of belief are deconstructed, humankind is set free from all prejudices, categorizations, and therefore "othering," and is thus presented with an almost infinite array of realities. In the new, pluralistic, global culture "we are all equal . . . all realities are on a par with each other, all truth is relative, and all objectivity is but a charade"

(23). Human experience, then, is also ahistorical, regulated not by reality but by simulations, models, pure images or representations; and from a postmodern perspective, the pain, suffering and the death of the Other is unreal. Furthermore, the postmodern "we" is not a pluralistic, global we: it applies to those in North America and Europe who are genuinely confronted by choices about lifestyles, and "realities." Those enslaved by poverty and trapped in an oppressive modernity do not have the luxury of postmodern freedom of choice: circumstances dictate their lifestyles and reality. According to Sardar, contrary to general belief, "postmodernism is ravenously monolithic. . . . Its language, logic, analytical grammar, are intrinsically Eurocentric and shamelessly cannibalistic of Others" (20).

Sardar maintains that the cultural resistance to postmodernism can come only from non-western traditions. In the last chapter of the book he draws a distinction between tradition and traditionalism. He asserts that "Tradition is the summation of the absolute frame of reference provided by the values and axioms of a civilisation . . . : patterns of organization, ideas, lifeways, techniques and products" (273). Traditionalism, on the other hand is a response to external pressure. It is passive but retains at least the formalistic aspects of tradition. It can "become ossified, oppressive and backward-looking . . . by offering the past as the ultimate answer to contemporary problems" (274). In other words, "tradition is a way of knowing; traditionalism deals only with the imperishable content of what is known" (274). Sardar states that the urge of every culture is to be true to its Self. After explaining how the Islamic tradition, for example, can provide a way out from postmodern effacement for Muslim "Others," the book ends with the assertion that "it is this unfathomable urge . . . that will lead to the return of dynamic tradition" in the non-western societies, saving them from "the invincible, life-denying forces of postmodernism" (291).

There are many flaws and contradictions in Sardar's arguments but three in particular need to be pointed out. First, while discussing in the main body of the book the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in postmodernism, Sardar presupposes that the postmodern condition is the outcome of postmodern thought. In the first chapter, however, he states that the postmodern condition is built by mass media and glued together by postmodern economy. Second, in his insistance on the salvaging role played by tradition for non-western societies, he seems to overlook the powerfully effective role played by western information technologies and the inevitable change they bring about in the perception of tradition and the self for non-westerners. Finally, Sardar's apology for Islam, and his description of "the Islamic tradition" is based on his own understanding of the Islamic dogma. He maintains, for example, that the classical Muslim scholar is humble and tolerant because the scholar admits that all human knowledge is limited, that no one person, group or institution possesses the absolute truth, and that "any individual opinion is always open to re-examination" (290). The views of the many contemporary Muslim scholars and the "Islamic traditions" currently observed in Muslim

societies such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afganistan and Pakistan, however, bespeak a different story. In short, although Sardar's critique of postmodernism is interesting and thought-provoking his proposal to the peoples of the non-west to counter the assaults of postmodernism is at best impractical and misleading.

Readers interested in postmodernism, colonialism, postcolonialism, and contemporary culture may find the book interesting to read.