



Review: *The Postcolonial Low Countries: Literature, Colonialism, Multiculturalism*, ed. by Elleke Boehmer and Sarah de Mul (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012)

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The editors of this collection of essays in postcolonialism in the Netherlands and Belgium claim that the volume is a timely intervention given the recent controversies in the Low Countries over 'national citizenship, identity, religion, and immigration'.¹ The introductory discussion, and Chapters 2 and 3, which focus on theoretical development, show that this is not so simple to enact because of academic and public resistance to the suggestion that the Low Countries are 'postcolonial' at all. However, as the contributors make clear, there is a need to engage with the postcolonial in the Low Countries, and this volume brings together various pockets of scholarship on the subject into a dialogue. The twelve chapters are divided into three sections: the first section considers how literature and culture in the Low Countries respond to postcolonial readings; the second focuses on how memory can connect the colonial past to the present with chapters that cover South African and Turkish links as well as looking at the local context of the Holocaust; the third section considers issues of migration and the multicultural.

One idea that runs through these chapters is that postcolonialism is a theory that has come either too late or too early: academics in local universities cite the constant claims that the discipline of postcolonialism is dead, or argue that it is too late to jump onto the postcolonial bandwagon. Simultaneously with this claim, they also discount it as an irrelevant import from Anglo-American scholarship. The tendency of postcolonialism to embrace cultural studies seems also to arouse suspicion in the minds of some academics. More broadly, in the Netherlands specifically, the public perception both inside the country and externally to it, of the Netherlands as a 'progressive and proactive country in relation to migration policies'² allows for the argument that there is no need for the resistance to neocolonial practices necessary in the other countries who are ex-colonial powers. It is clear from the chapters in this volume that this is not the case, as well as from recent high profile incidents such as the assassination of

¹ *The Postcolonial Low Countries: Literature, Colonialism, Multiculturalism*, ed. by Elleke Boehmer and Sarah de Mul (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012), p. 10.

² *Ibidem*, p. 4.

anti-immigration politician Pim Fortuyn in May 2002, and the murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November 2004. Yet, some persist in considering that 'the time for postcolonial analysis may not yet have come'.³

Such cognitive dissonance, the authors suggest, promotes excuses within the academy to overlook the relevance of postcoloniality in the Low Countries, despite experiential evidence to the contrary. This has to be resisted and in order to do this, the volume draws together a wide variety of available scholarship which might be incorporated into this newly constituted field. The volume covers analysis of literature and film as well as texts which combine the literary with non-fictional forms such as autobiography; it includes consideration of cultural and religious debate; incorporates diasporas from the colonial East Indies, more contemporary migration from Morocco, and includes one chapter on Afrikaans writing; and it considers the type of theoretical positions that neerlandophone postcolonialism might take. In response to critics who claim that 'postcolonial concepts and perspectives are often transferred and reproduced without attention to how postcolonial frameworks might be produced from within',⁴ the editors call for specifically Dutch and Belgian postcolonial criticism which rearticulates ideas such as hybridity, the coloniser and accommodation,⁵ and recognises the connections between past and present in terms of Dutch and Belgian colonial history (as discussed by Elleke Boehmer and Frances Gouda in Chapter 2).

The desirability to 'generate [postcolonial] perspectives from within'⁶ whilst recognising that there will be some exchange with pre-existing theory from other contexts does present the contributors to the volume with some challenges. Many of the chapters are explicit about the Low Countries specifics of their postcolonial analyses. For example, Isabel Hoving's chapter on 'Polderpoko: Why It Cannot Exist' is clearly focused on the Dutch context using cultural case studies. Her discussions of the discourses around the 'Jewish' Amsterdam football team Ajax, and several environmental projects, ground her application of Said, Bhabha and Hallward in ways that explore their relevance to the Netherlands. Likewise, chapter 7: 'Transnational Contact-Narratives: Dutch Postcoloniality from a Turkish-German Viewpoint' focuses on the operation of memory work in a narrative where the three cultures of the title meet. The chapter's author, Liesbeth Minnaard, connects language (how the non-Dutch-speaking Turkish-German protagonist visiting Amsterdam communicates in both German and French) to the Holocaust (two Jewish people the protagonist converses with ask not to communicate in German) in a way that clearly demonstrates how postcolonial theory can operate to explore migration and the past in a distinctly Dutch context. In some chapters, though, the balance between external theory and internal context skews to the former at the expense of the latter, and an explicit discussion of the Low Countries context is obscured. For example, chapter 4, by Theo D'haen entitled 'The "Ends" of Postcolonialism', is, in itself, an enlightening discussion of multiculturalism based on David Scott's contribution to Loomba et al's *Post-colonial Studies*

³ Ibidem, p. 45.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 5.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 6.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 9.

and Beyond (2005).⁷ Implicitly this picks up on comments in the introduction regarding Dutch pride in its erstwhile peaceful multicultural society, but I would have been interested to understand more explicitly the potential adaptations of those general ideas about multiculturalism into that specifically Dutch context. Chapter 5 similarly fails to be explicit about its Belgian context which would have been a useful counter to the more commonly known French situation. The authors suggest that they will discuss 'how postcolonial critical insights on gender religion and agency can be effectively translated into a cultural critique of the headscarf ban in Belgium',⁸ but whilst it delivers an insightful analysis of how arguments - pro and con - the headscarf are bound into the same troublesome hegemonic discourses, the explicit discussion of how this relates to (or fails to relate to) specific circumstances in Belgium is missing. This is not to suggest that these chapters are inadequate as pieces of postcolonial critique - all the chapters in the volume stand individually as valid and interesting contributions to the field of postcolonial enquiry - but sometimes the neerlandophone context is buried under the general. However, this particular sort of unevenness when taking the volume as a whole, serves to underscore the importance of this volume in calling for cultural critique of the legacy of Dutch and Belgian colonialism, to develop the particular within the general.

Key ideas very specific to the Low Countries context do emerge strongly across the chapters. For example, ideas of memory and history (often in relation to the Holocaust) in connection to the countries' colonial histories are strongly developed. Ideas around language are also shown to be very pertinent in a context where the majority of the population are multi-lingual in both immigrant communities and non-immigrant communities. One unspoken issue is that this volume is, of course, published in English; an irony not lost on Boehmer and Gouda who suggest that one problematic is 'the multiply translated condition of postcolonial writing [...] in that postcolonial critical discourse is largely undertaken, and conceived of, through the medium first and foremost of the English language and must therefore be translated'.⁹ The editors could have, perhaps, grasped that particular bull more firmly by the horns. However, their volume clearly indicates that the 'Low Countries is not only ripe for lively postcolonial critique and debate [...] it is also potentially rich in generating innovative postcolonial critique'.¹⁰ It is successful in its stated objectives, to develop 'postcolonial concepts that are pertinent for a critical understanding of the relations between literature, colonialism and multicultural contexts in the Low Countries'¹¹ and to reflect 'on historical and contemporary shifts' within neerlandophone cultures using a postcolonial framework.¹² Possibly the latter is more successfully achieved being grounded in text and events, however, it is in the nature of any publication that proposes to outline a new critical field that it is in development, and this sense of a process will only serve to prompt the debate and argument that will extend this important new field in postcolonial studies.

⁷ *Post-colonial Studies and Beyond*, ed. by A. Loomba, S. Kaul, M. Bunzl, A. Burton and J. Esty (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹² *Ibidem*.

Author's Biography

Helen Cousins is a Reader in Postcolonial Literature at Newman University, Birmingham. Her research interests cover African and African Diaspora literature. Her current research focuses Black British writers exploring the nature of belonging in form and genre. Some of the early outcomes from this work are published in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (2012) and also in *Postcolonial Text* (2012). She retains an interest in African literature and has published a co-edited collection of essays on the Zimbabwean writer, Yvonne Vera, *Emerging Perspectives on Yvonne Vera* (2011). Her interest in the circulation and reception of texts lead to a further co-edited volume, *The Richard and Judy Book Club Reader: popular texts and the practices of reading* (2011). She continues with some ongoing research in this area exploring the reception of postcolonial texts in English and African contexts. Helen has served on the executive committee of the Postcolonial Studies Association and is a member of the Black British Women Writer's Network.