

On Shakespeare and Postcolonial Thinking

AMRITA DHAR

REVIEW:

Jyotsna Singh, *Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

Jyotsna Singh's meditative monograph *Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory* surveys the development of the postcolonial turn in Shakespeare studies from the second half of the twentieth century onwards and reminds readers of the stakes of a postcolonial lens in contemporary engagements with Shakespeare in scholarship, performance and pedagogy. To an early-career scholar such as myself, the recompenses of this work seem simultaneously old, precisely *because* of the success of excellent scholarship produced by postcolonialist early-modernists of Singh's generation (of which I am a direct beneficiary), and newly urgent, because of my own moment's investment in critical race studies, studies of the Global South and studies of adaptation and global circulation. This is a book that should engage all early modernists, postcolonialists and scholars of Shakespeare who are interested in the global Renaissance or in global Shakespeares. Without postcolonial Shakespeares, there would be no global Shakespeares.

Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory has a three-part structure, with the first discussing early colonial history (focused on early modern England), the second discussing the first critical moves towards decolonial thinking and writing in various post-colonies (focused on postcolonial writings from the twentieth century) and the third discussing multifaceted postcolonial conversations with and in the matter of Shakespeare (bringing the story up to our current day). In this structure inheres one of Singh's book's greatest gifts: a coherent and soundly historical connection of contemporary postcoloniality in its many forms to the proto-colonial imaginary of Shakespeare's early modern England. There is a through-line connecting the colonial thinking that was part of the air that Shakespeare breathed in London with the present-day, globe-spanning talking-back that is a key component of the postcolonial; Singh's book goes to some length to establish this through-line, thus usefully aligning her work with scholarship that rightly resists the fluffy 'universalism' that a white and depoliticised Shakespeare academy has long been wont to teach and talk about. A postcolonial regard allows us to see that Shakespeare's position as one of the greatest poetic and dramatic voices of all time, the world over, is neither miraculous nor some kind of 'objective' assessment of his achievements. Shakespeare's pre-eminence – a pre-eminence that persists to this day – is a function of empire, and a matter of centuries-old colonial design. Singh's case studies allow us to register that it is in how Shakespeare has held up in diverse worldwide engagements, and in how his work has 'rung true' for people in widely disparate parts of the globe, that Shakespeare remains of value, even very great value, in the twenty-first century.

This relates to the other significant gift of Singh's book: that it returns to the word "global" (Singh uses it often) a degree of sharpness, political urgency and geographical focus. Within the powerful UK-US academy, 'global' Shakespeares are generally seen as either distinct from or add-ons to the 'real' (white, English, British) Shakespeare; Singh's corrective to this geographical bias is both refreshing and welcome. Throughout, too, Singh attends to the capaciousness and power of what postcoloniality is: "a

state and condition – a mode of apprehending alterity, difference, and inequities – more than simply a politically inflected theoretical approach”.¹

Singh situates the nationalistic enterprises of travellers and authors such as Walter Raleigh, Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas within the empire-building imaginary of early modern England, thus connecting English eagerness in trading goods to English enthusiasm for trading human beings – and to English zeal for settlement and colonisation of lands and continents.² “What we find in both dramatic and cultural texts such as travel accounts”, writes Singh,

is not a distinct ideological agenda of England’s imperial role. We can nonetheless discern an early modern colonizing imagination at work – one that is global in scope, permeating tropes, fantasies, rhetorical structures, and visual images – often defining cultural ‘others’ in terms of binaries: civilization versus barbarism, white versus black, pious restraint versus uncontrolled eroticism, Christianity (the true religion) versus (blasphemous) Islam, among numerous others.³

In tracing the evolution of full-blown colonialism from the originary imaginings of empire, Singh uses the postcolonial critical vocabularies enabled by the ground-making work of Edward Said, as well as the frame-shifting scholarship of early modernist critics such as Paul Brown and Kim Hall.⁴ Said, indeed, remains a kind of informing muse for the whole project. As Singh’s book proceeds into historical-context based comments on three of Shakespeare’s most often-evoked ‘race’ plays – *The Tempest*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* – these critical framings clarify the Shakespearean texts’ radial indebtedness to early modern genres as diverse as slave captivity narratives, accounts of trade and commerce, tracts of ‘ethnography’ and ‘history’, and ‘encounter’ chronicles. This, in turn, generatively establishes the global energies of Shakespeare’s London and its theatre – energies that were accessed and refined by Shakespeare’s colonial-subject and postcolonial readers in and following the high days of English empire.

Singh’s examination of early and many-genred postcolonial writing-back – in the works of Aimé Césaire, George Lamming, Roberto Fernandez Retamar, Kamau Brathwaite, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, for instance – provide a compelling recollection of how much the current fields of postcolonial Shakespeares, adaptation/translation studies, critical race studies and global Renaissance studies owe to these twentieth-century giants of decolonial political thought, writing and activism. The deeply studied, yet inevitably non-reverent treatment that Shakespeare received of writers such as Césaire, Lamming, Retamar, Brathwaite and wa Thiong’o, for example, remain the less-than-deservedly-sung foundations for what Shakespeare continues to mean today across the world; they are the real precursors to more recent compositions such as Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* (1997), Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* (2012), Lolita Chakrabarti’s *Red Velvet* (2014) and Keith Hamilton Cobb’s *American Moor* (2020). While Singh does not take up any of these recent Shakespearean afterlives for discussion in her book, I hope that her moving and evocative discussions of the poems, novels and plays of the twentieth-century postcolonials paves the way for future scholarship connecting the later and twenty-first century adaptations with the earlier works of profound daring and imagination.

The eclectic yet focused attention that Singh brings to the early decolonial thinkers serves her well as she next turns to three plays with “no obvious postcolonial affiliations” – *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Cymbeline* – to study the affordances opened within them through a postcolonial scrutiny.⁵ Through Singh’s collation of a range of critical postcolonial readings by scholars such as

1 Singh, *Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory*, p.4.

2 *Ibid.*, pp.36–41 and pp.62–65.

3 *Ibid.*, p.25.

4 See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Paul Brown, “‘This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine’: *The Tempest* and the discourse of colonialism” in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (eds), *Political Shakespeare: New essays in cultural materialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp.48-71; and Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

5 Singh, p.105.

Nicholas Visser, Martin Orkin, Joyce MacDonald and Willy Maley, the plays grow newly illuminated: *Lear* with an examination of what it means to hold and work and divide land into private property (Singh names the example of the Dutch East India Company's forced enclosure of land in South Africa); *Antony and Cleopatra* through examining the critical reception of Josette Simon as Cleopatra in 2017 (Singh highlights the difference between Simon's own understanding of Cleopatra as a political player on the world stage versus many white critics' reading of her Cleopatra as delightfully yet orientally whimsical and mercurial); *Cymbeline* through a study of Britain's colonial subjugation to Rome turning into its own foundation for empire-building (Singh especially attends to the images of hypermasculinity and rape that permeate the play and conjure a sense of colonisation and plunder of land).

The book's final section first considers a range of powerful inter-cultural Shakespeares from several post-colonies. The focus is largely on non-traditional, extra-canonical uses to which Shakespeare is put – such as in Ong Keng Sen's 1997 *LEAR* (which plays various Asian identities off one another), Salim Ghouse's 1992 *Hamlet* (which uses the Bengali folk *jatra* tradition to brilliant effect in an otherwise 'familiar' play for an English-language-comfortable metropolitan audience) and Sulayman Al-Bassam's 2006 *Richard III* (which refuses easy identification or simple alienation to either its Arab or Western audiences). Next, turning to the British stage, Singh contends that the energies of present-day postcolonial-cosmopolitan creatives in the UK are "shaped by an ethos, a practice that rejects binaries such as 'colonial/postcolonial', invoking instead contemporary experiences of migration, diaspora, and multiracial and intercultural exchanges, in both popular and high culture".⁶ Such a rejection of binaries is itself arguably a function of some privilege – that of operating from within the heart of empire (or once-empire) – but Singh's case studies make a point of the usefulness in attending to various shades of race-thinking, intercultural passing/non-passing and migrant knowledge. Iqbal Khan's 2015 *Othello*, featuring the first Black Iago on the Royal Shakespeare Company stage, for example, explores the ugliness of racist thought and action that cannot be mapped into binaries along lines of ethnicity or phenotype. Singh then examines three very different 'Indias' brought to life on the British stage – in Tim Supple's 2007 *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Emma Rice's 2016 *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Khan's 2012 *Much Ado About Nothing* – for the generative pluralities the productions rightly draw on and highlight about a subcontinent that is today in genuine danger of nationalistic, fascist remaking.

A rumination on Vishal Bhardwaj's 2014 *Haider* closes the book. In this last chapter's analytical weave of Bhardwaj's visionary film with the various works of memoir (Basharat Peer), poetry (Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Agha Shahid Ali), documentary (Abir Bazaz and Meenu Gaur) and art (Nilima Sheikh) that came before it, Singh finds a fitting conclusion for this volume that is also an opening out into crucial questions of postcoloniality/neocoloniality, belonging and exile, estrangement and allegiance. Set in one of the most vexed "postcolonial" geographies in the world, Kashmir, Bhardwaj's film unstintingly and with great compassion portrays the "prison" of the *Hamlet*-world here as a geography of physical beauty as much as of military occupation and collective anguish. "Kashmiri identity as a collective is at stake throughout the film", thus allowing Shakespeare's seminal play of one man's personal angst to become *Haider*'s story of an entire people of an entire land enmeshed in a heartbreaking postcolonial (or "post"-colonial) inheritance.⁷ Singh is right to end where she does, pulling her readers back into what should be reason forever to resist the lasting inequities of the colonial.

Amrita Dhar (dhar.24@osu.edu) is Assistant Professor of English at Ohio State University. Her main research interests are in early modern studies and disability studies. She is completing her first monograph, *Milton's Blind Language*, which examines the workings of blindness towards the making of Milton's last long poetry. Her next project, *Regarding Sight and Blindness in Early Modern Literature: Crossings of Disability, Race, and Empire*, examines the relationship between the cultural production of disability and the intertwined phenomena of early modern global contact, race-making and belonging. She is also an active climber and mountaineer and writes on world mountaineering literatures.

6 *Ibid.*, p.152.

7 *Ibid.*, p.188.