



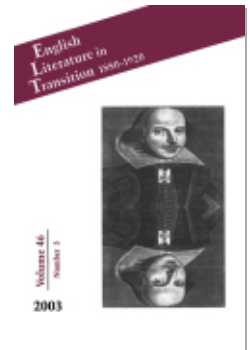
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Intersecting Nationalisms

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Intersecting Nationalisms

Elleke Boehmer. *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. viii + 239 pp. \$65.00

IN HER INTRODUCTORY study *Colonialism / Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba notes that the epithet “postcolonial” can now be attached to almost any object from home furnishings to novels, having acquired something of the range of “ethnic” in popular vocabulary. In this light, a book covering the years 1890–1920 which presents its subject matter as “postcolonial” might be the cause for some alarm. Elleke Boehmer’s *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial* is in fact a timely work, and indeed part of a growing and welcome movement towards historicization in postcolonial literary studies. Commencing as a challenge to categorizations such as “New Literatures in English” or “Commonwealth Literature” in the 1980s, postcolonial studies from its inception attempted to make connections across diverse geographical areas and between different literary genres. Much early postcolonial criticism, however, tended to impose its own binary logic: it either celebrated contemporary texts as emancipatory examples of postcolonial literatures in English, or deconstructed canonical European texts written under colonialism as representative of the prison house of colonial discourse.

Boehmer’s study, in parallel with recent publications such as Robert Young’s *Postcolonialism* or Simon Gikandi’s work on Jomo Kenyatta, attempts to engage with the complexity of resistance and nascent nationalism in the colonial world, and their expression in textual form. Her study thus elaborates an early phase of “cross-nationalist” connections between various actors who imagined—and indeed laid the foundations for—national communities, utilising an “interdiscursive” methodology that emphasizes both historical actions and their mediation through a variety of literary and non-literary texts.

After a brisk and competent survey of relevant work in the field, Boehmer’s introductory chapter concludes with a discussion of Irish nationalist opposition to enlistment in the Boer War, and the parallels drawn in the pages of the weekly review *United Irishman* between two very different anti-colonial struggles. The following two chapters of *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial* illustrate connections between Bengali and Irish nationalism through a detailed exploration of the relationship between Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble) and Aurobindo Ghose. Chapter 4 then turns to Sol Plaatje, the South African writer and

political activist, his engagement with thinkers as diverse as W. E. Du Bois and Mohandas Gandhi, and his resultant production of “polyphonic” writing in both his novel, *Mhudi* (1930) and his nonfictional work *Native Life in South Africa* (1916). In a final chapter, Boehmer is more discursive, drawing together two discussions that address the relationship of modernism to anti-colonial nationalism. In the first of these, she explores the influence of Rabindranath Tagore on W. B. Yeats, while in the second she examines how the writing of Leonard Woolf on colonial Ceylon, especially his novel *The Village in the Jungle*, recognizes, albeit obliquely, “the claims of native self-representation” and produces a form of “symbolic decolonization.”

As this summary indicates, Boehmer makes no attempt at comprehensiveness—in the manner, for example, of Robert Young’s recent volume—but rather proceeds with a series of case studies. This allows at times for considerable depth of analysis, but the paucity of the studies themselves, and the considerable variation in the detail in which they are presented, do tend to leave some of Boehmer’s larger claims unproven. The weakest of the studies is also the longest—the discussion of the relationship between Nivedita and Aurobindo, which constitutes almost one half of the length of the book. Somewhat recursive in structure, Boehmer’s account never quite pins down the nature or the significance of the “cross-cultural interaction” between her two political and social activists. She largely uses secondary sources, admitting that connections between the two are “difficult to trace, being either deliberately obscured or, very often, unreliably recorded.” Her exploration raises many more questions than it answers. Boehmer rightly notes that Nivedita’s relationship to Irish nationalism, as an English-identified Protestant, was tenuous, but the result of this revelation is to direct discussion away from “cross-nationalist” connections to the manner in which anti-colonial nationalism in Bengal mobilized and rewrote Orientalist stereotypes in order to produce a distinctively Indian modernity. Unfortunately, this is ground already picked over by seminal writings in the postcolonial studies canon: the influential historical and theoretical work of Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance. Lacking the ability to work with Bengali language sources, and indeed relying substantially on secondary sources such as biographies, Boehmer tends at times to move away from analysis to description. Two possible strategies which serve her well later in her book—the use of archival material, or the close analysis of a single text using the methodologies of

literary criticism—are not applied here. The reader waits for detailed analysis of how Nivedita's and Aurobindo's texts work as cultural artifacts, but most of Boehmer's close reading, when it does occur, is concerned merely to show mutual influence. Many fascinating topics are raised in passing—Nivedita's identification with Kali, for instance, or the production of an aggressively masculine Hinduism to oppose the feminisation of Indian cultures under colonialism. However, Boehmer never moves far enough away from summary to explore in detail the manner in which these strategies become embedded in individual texts: "interdiscursive" methodology here has neither the rigor of history's attention to primary sources, nor the depth of rhetorical and semiotic analysis associated with literary and cultural studies.

Boehmer's chapter on Plaatje suffers none of the limitations of its two predecessors. It focuses, initially at least, upon a single text, *Native Life in South Africa*, and applies close literary analysis to its "multitextured, tessellated style," exploring parallels with contemporary metropolitan writing while simultaneously registering the limitations of those comparisons. From this initial discussion Boehmer moves to examine pan-Africanist connections in other writing by Plaatje, and the manner in which the particular inflection of his nationalism prevented him from making what might, with the benefit of hindsight, seem an obvious political alliance with Gandhi and the Natal Indian Congress. Her emphasis is on tracing back the complexities of Plaatje's ideological beliefs from the "heteroglossic eloquence" of the surface of his writings, and she does this skillfully, pointing out Plaatje's complex negotiation between complicity with and resistance to colonial power—his "often openly contradictory, ambivalent, and restlessly shifting allegiance."

The discussion of Plaatje also provides a useful bridge from political writings to anti-colonial politics embedded in more overtly literary production. Boehmer's final chapter commences with a discussion of the interconnection of modernism and anti-colonial nationalism at a time of perceived imperial decline. Of her two case studies here, that of Leonard Woolf seems closest to conventional colonial discourse analysis. Boehmer's reading of Woolf's novel, and his short story "Pearls and Swine," is usefully informed by study of his letters home from Ceylon, which map out a growing awareness of the moral contradictions and absurdity of colonial administration. Woolf's growing awareness of other cultural world-views, Boehmer argues, results in a text which recognizes the limits of its own efforts to represent Ceylon, and also leads less directly to

both the author's anti-imperial political and economic writings and to his wife Virginia Woolf's modernist critique of British middle-class society. In her second case study, Boehmer focuses on Yeats' introduction to Tagore's 1912 translated volume of his own Bengali poems, *Gitanjali*. If Yeats indulges in an Orientalist production of Tagore as a representative of an Asia marked by a "fuller, vibrant, and more unselfconscious life," he also discovers in *Gitanjali* "Ireland's dream self," an ability to retrieve a past uncontaminated by colonialism that can fortify the nation as it awaits independence.

Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial is certainly more ambitious than its author's earlier, excellent introductory text, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, but it lacks the coherence of the latter work. Boehmer's study is valuable in the way it foregrounds neglected texts, and suggests new possibilities for reading and novel critical perspectives on late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century literatures in English. Yet one wishes for more, and more precisely focused case studies. The book maps out a huge canvas and then works in detail—and with mixed results—on a few areas of it only, leaving the rest unfinished: one would wish for at least a series of complementary, congruent images, if not for a full picture.

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