

Jahan Ramazani. *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001. Pp. vii, 223. \$60.00 US cloth; \$21.00 US paper.

The field of postcolonial scholarship extends from anthropology and history to fiction and essay, but it hardly ever examines poetry. Jahan Ramazani makes a superb case for mending this serious lacuna in postcolonial studies. As one reads his discussion of the poetry of postcolonial poets from W.B. Yeats to A.K. Ramanujan, Derek Walcott, Louise Bennett, and Okot p'Bitek, one comes away not only with the richness of postcolonial scholarship but also with the wealth of poetry that produces a nuanced rendering of history and the hybrid self. Why is there a lack of critical discussion of postcolonial poetry? Ramazani answers his own question in his introduction to *The Hybrid Muse*: the realm of poetry is probably seen as too subtle, nuanced, and oblique as compared to the transparency of fiction or the essay. But in looking at poetry, which highlights the intricacies of culture, postcolonial scholarship can only gain in volume and texture.

Firmly grounded in modern American and contemporary poetics, as evidenced in his *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, volumes 1 and 2, as well as in postcolonial and deconstruction theories, Ramazani moves between poetry and theory and between cultures with the ease of a trapeze artist. We wonder with him why he regards Yeats as a postcolonial poet, if he isn't giving into having a "white male" figure from the first world open the discussion. But we quickly realize that Yeats writes out of an Ireland besieged for more than 700 years by British imperialism, and this gives way to several ambiguities between colonizer and colonized, between local power and victimization, and between indigenizing and anglicizing of language in poetry. Ramazani throws open a window into Yeats' poetry, the remarkable variety and depth of Yeats' thoughts about history, language, and his "ironic nationalism" that balances his critique of imperialism. By reciting Irish place names, remaking English forms, and using global mythologies to create his mythic syncretism, Yeats answers the Empire back.

Poetry has the uncanny ability to present the complexity of a culture that has been colonized. At the level of language, all the poets discussed in *The Hybrid Muse* use metaphor, borrow western classical heroes and give them lines from creole or Indian English, and use irony to expose western and local hypocrisies. Reading about Walcott's *Omeros*, we realize how much Western poetry became both the subject and the catalyst for novel techniques in postcolonial poetry. Walcott achieves in poetry a theoretical transference of ideas between colonial power and the colonized by the indigenization of canoni-

Book Reviews

cal Western characters and the use of metaphor as a device that encompasses movement and transference that mirrors the dislocation inherent in postcoloniality. For example, Walcott's use of the wound motif in his development of Philoctete's character is a case in point. As Ramazani points out, "The wound motif exemplifies the slipperiness and polyvalence of poetic discourse that circulates between races, crossing lines of class and community, bridging differences between West Indian fisherman and Greek warrior. With its resonance and punning, imagistic doubling and metaphoric webbing, Walcott's poetry demonstrates the kinds of imaginative connections and transgressions that have ironically made poetry a minor field in postcolonial literary studies." This last statement is provocative and challenges mainstream American poetry in its ignorance of postcolonial poetry and poetics as well as postcolonial literary studies that have failed to tap into the richness of poetry to expand its scope.

Ramazani's leading question about the origin of Philoctete's wound forms the basis for his analysis of the succeeding chapters. While the West Indian's wound is a combination of the Afro-Caribbean negritude and the European vegetation figure which was originally borrowed from the East, Louise Bennett's experience of colonial exploitation drives her to use the local trope of Anancy to suggest "the playful and polymorphous, all-ironizing folk wit" of Jamaican creole. And herein lies the cure! Through the use of irony and metaphor in a language that pushes to invent ever-newer hybrid elements born of its cultural hybridity, the postcolonial poet represents the process of decolonization. "Philoctete's wound like his cure tends to be transcultural," cultural borrowings that only enrich local literary production, explains Ramazani.

Irony and metaphor share with postcoloniality the notion of sameness and difference, "of double vision, meaning and perception." Through the stereoscopic vision of metaphor A.K. Ramanujan brings us close to a precolonial past and at the same time mocks the notion of "revivalist nostalgia." For example, Ramazani quotes from Ramanujan's *Second Sight*: when the speaker examines "copies with displaced originals" and copies without originals, which is ironic—the result is "the experience of linguistic and cultural displacement, disinheritance, and expatriation." Ramanujan's own realization that the anglicized Indian is and is not Indian or Anglo-American links all postcolonial poets; the human family is a "weave of alterities."

Both Okot p'Bitek and Louise Bennett show how the local language can help the poet to deepen irony and metaphor, the mainstays of postcoloniality. Ramazani's wonderful discussion of their poems brings us face to face with a poetics that is innovative, spurred by its postcolonial context and its juxtapo-

Book Reviews

sition with Standard English. For example, in the following lines by Bennett, Rainazani sees the problem of reverse colonization:

Two pounds a week fi seek a job—Dat suit her dignity—Me seh
Jane will never fine work
At de rate how she dah look
For all day she stay pon Aunt Fan couch
An read love-story book.

Ramazani draws our attention to Bennett's brilliant tongue-in-cheek critique of both imperial power and the dole dependents.

Irony is a trope that shares with postcoloniality the notion of doubleness or "two-fold vision," Ramazani explains, quoting Linda Hutcheon. As a "tool of subversion," and in its ability to excite laughter, irony, if used effectively, heightens the perception of both poet and reader, as we see in Ramazani's analysis of Bennett's poems. Through her use of dialect together with the sly mocking irony of the folk figure Anancy, Bennett is able to create performance poetry at its best that pokes fun at society and herself.

Ramazani discusses Okot's popular *Song of Lawino* to draw attention to Okot's talent in going beyond anthropology. In fact all of the poets Ramazani discusses in *The Hybrid Muse* give us something unique and rare, beyond the "evidence" of anthropology: they reveal worlds that cannot be categorized. Okot's *Lawino* draws our attention to the dialectic between the western and the indigenous but finally leaves us with the irony of postcolonials who realize they can never go back to a pure, original culture. Ramazani reiterates in his discussions of Okot, Bennett, Ramanujan, Yeats, and Walcott that culture is hybrid, that language is hybrid and the nature of postcolonial experience gives richness to the poetry that ultimately colors local American or English poetry, or the poetry of any imperial power. Thus, Ramazani asks provocatively, "What happens if we hybridize our canons of modern and contemporary poetry in English, giving due space in our courses, personal libraries, and anthologies to Third World poets? If we place them cheek by jowl alongside confessional poets and poets of the Movement, neoformalists and experimentalists?" In shaking up the canon of anglophone poetry by drawing our attention to the prolific outpouring of the hybrid muse that has "traversed an astonishing geographic range," Ramazani has made an invaluable contribution.

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