

Annika McPherson

White – Female – Postcolonial?

Towards a ‘Trans-cultural’ Reading of Marina Warner’s *Indigo*
and Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*

INPUTS

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zum postkolonialen und transkulturellen Diskurs

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1. Medi(t)ation: Authors, Critics, Texts

In 2001, during a stopover at London Gatwick, I went into the airport bookstore to peruse the fiction section and picked up Barbara Kingsolver's bestseller *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), the blurb of which seemed promising:

Told by the wife and four daughters of Nathan Price, a fierce evangelical Baptist who takes his family and mission to the Belgian Congo in 1959, *The Poisonwood Bible* is the story of one family's tragic undoing and remarkable reconstruction over the course of three decades in postcolonial Africa. They carry with them all they believe they will need from home, but soon find that all of it – from garden seeds to Scripture – is calamitously transformed on African soil.¹

It was not so much the supposedly temporal use of the term 'postcolonial' in this blurb that caught my attention, but the following one in the quote from an *Independent on Sunday* review:

The Poisonwood Bible shows what happens when one of the most talented writers of our generation comes to maturity... [It] ranks with the most ambitious works of postcolonial literature and it should at least establish Kingsolver's reputation in Europe as one of America's most gifted novelists.

Not having heard of this writer before, I was intrigued by the invocation of the elusive (yet apparently highly marketable) term 'postcolonial' in the context of an American novelist writing about the Congo.

At first I was disturbed by the novel's ethnocentric representations and could not make up my mind about how to evaluate it in relation to the categories and concepts of 'postcolonial' studies. After the first fifty pages, however, the characters and Kingsolver's writing style slowly began to captivate me. Reading on I realized that this novel was not necessarily the stereotypical description of life in rural 'Africa' that it had initially appeared to be. When read as a portrayal of a Southern Baptist family from Bethlehem, Georgia, trying to come to terms with themselves in an unfamiliar surrounding, the novel's strategic ethnocentrism appeared in a very different light. I began to wonder how other readers and critics had responded to Kingsolver's writing style and representational strategy.

Similar questions had already preoccupied me during a seminar on 'postcolonial' re-writings of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. One of the novels under discussion had been Marina Warner's *Indigo, or Mapping the Waters* (1992), which craftily writes the voices of Sycorax and Ariel into the void left by Shakespeare's play. First published in the year of the quincentenary of the Columbiad, the blurb presents the novel in its relation to *The Tempest*:

Inspired by *The Tempest*, *INDIGO* traces the scars of colonialism across continents, family blood-lines and three centuries. Rich, sensual and magical in its use of myths and

1 Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998). All subsequent quotes from the novel refer to the paperback edition (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) and will be referenced with *PWB*.

fairytale *INDIGO* explores the intertwined histories of the Everard family and the imaginary Caribbean island where Ariel, Caliban, and his mother, the healer and dyer of indigo, Sycorax, once lived.²

My initial sentiment while reading this novel had also been a considerable unease. As a ‘white western metropolitan writer,’ Warner’s representation of the colonial ‘other’ seemed potentially problematic, even though at first sight her novel depicts both sides of the colonial divide with a fair amount of post-*Orientalism* awareness.³ As opposed to the celebrated, often subversive and empowering ‘postcolonial’ appropriation of the canon by those commonly positioned on the ‘colonized’ side of the colonial divide, this novel’s arguable ‘reverse’ appropriation troubled me. Yet, I was undecided as to how far the literary text actually substantiated such a concern, or whether my unease had been based on my recent exposure and ambivalent reaction to Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”⁴ What was provided as an ‘authorizing’ piece of information in the seminar, namely that Warner’s ancestors on her father’s side had played an active role in the colonization of the West Indies, did little but to further my general unease regarding the pitfalls of representing and narrating the cultural ‘other’ in this manner.

In order to evaluate Warner’s approach, it seemed necessary to closely examine and contextualize the novel’s representational strategies, especially concerning those characters placed in ambiguous positions in the colonizer/colonized dichotomy. Trying to comprehend these imaginary subject positions and the authors’ representational choices, I began to find the ‘postcolonial’ discourse that I had been exposed to wanting. Declarations of white women’s complicity in colonialist structures generally seemed to be the conclusion rather than the starting point of inquiries into their depictions of colonial pasts.

Literary texts, however, have a way of getting beyond theoretical dead-ends. Their fictionalization of what we often fail to fully grasp in theoretical terms creates a ‘surplus’ that offers ways of (re-)imagining the world beyond the scope of our individual experiences. Yet they appeal differently to our cultural sensitivities and personal experiences, emotions, desires and visions of society, as well as to our critical and political agendas. These thoughts led me to address similar questions to both *Indigo* and *The Poisonwood Bible*: What are the novels’ discursive choices and representational

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- 2 Marina Warner, *Indigo or, Mapping the Waters* (London: Vintage, 1993). All subsequent quotes refer to the hardcover edition (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992) and will be referenced with *IND*.
 - 3 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; New York: Vintage, 1994). Marina Warner’s familiarity with *Orientalism* predates her personal acquaintance and friendship with Edward Said following their delivery of the BBC Reith Lectures in successive years. Cf. her obituary “A Life for Freedom” on *openDemocracy* (29.09.2003), also published as “A Tribute to Edward Said” in the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (November 2003): 8-12.
 - 4 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” reprinted in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1994), 66-111.