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## Postmodernist writing and contemporary British fiction: Are contemporary British novelists writing about contemporary Britain?

'Postmodernism' is a hotly disputed literary-critical and cultural term and notoriously difficult to define: the refrain of many undergraduate Arts students remains 'But what *is* postmodernism... really?' and in a 1992 survey conducted by *The Independent* figures as different as Jean Baudrillard and Ken Livingstone dismissed the term in sceptical frustration.<sup>1</sup> But for readers, writers and students of the contemporary, postmodernism persists as an intellectual concept and as a catchword for a range of contemporary literary styles. It persists too in discussions of the extent to which novels about contemporary Britain are inevitably or predominantly socio-realist reflections on the contemporary scene or are themselves postmodernist inquiries into what Britain is or what Britishness may mean.

The prefix 'post-' would seem to align the term 'postmodernism' with other problematic ones like post-industrial or anomalous or anachronistic ones like post-feminism, but it generally implies that a socio-historical period has given way to a new era, or phase, that involves a revised set of codes and practices. Postmodernism does define itself in relation to modernism, in response and reaction to those writers like Eliot and Pound, Joyce and Woolf, H.D. and Dorothy Richardson, in the Anglo-American tradition, who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, interrogated ideas of identity and experimented with new ways of conveying reality. They considered epistemological and linguistic uncertainties. They questioned the significance of myth and history against the backdrop of World War I which marked the disintegration of many cultural certainties, geographical boundaries and psycho-social continuities. In Virginia Woolf's novel *To The Lighthouse* (1927), the War explodes through the centre of the text, devastating the lives of its characters and Freud and Bergson's deliberations on the working of the human mind are drawn into fictional form. Psychoanalytical ideas impacted upon writers, as did the rift with representational art, with Cubists Braque and Picasso investigating effective ways in which to articulate modernity. Woolf takes up this idea too in *To The Lighthouse* where Lily Briscoe's painting expresses the 'wedge of darkness losing personality' that is her subject, Mrs. Ramsay.

<sup>1</sup> 'Teach Yourself Postmodernism' *The Independent on Sunday*, 15 November 1992.

For all its enquiring qualities, the modernist aesthetic has been generally understood as elitist; Schoenberg's attempts to transpose the period's uncertainties into atonal music are not easy to listen to and works strewn with literary and mythical allusions like Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) and Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922) require a kind of literary excavation on the part of the conscientious reader. Frequently modernist writers placed their own artistic quandaries and experiences to the fore, making the *Kunstslerroman* or 'portrait of the artist' novel their own, as in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and Gide's *The Counterfeiters* (1926) or H.D.'s *Her* (written in 1927 but not published until 1981). Ultimately, the potential of the artist was not doubted nor the reality to be conveyed; it was the perspective and the interiority of that reality and the ambivalent nature of language with which the writers concerned themselves.

Postmodernist fictions are often distinguishable by a self-conscious playfulness and by metafictional techniques whereby the narrator questions the nature of fiction *and* of reality, is conscious of the methods of fiction-making and of the dubious 'authority' the teller of the tale may employ and exploit. It is ontological uncertainty — uncertainty as to whether there may be a 'reality' to express — that tends to preoccupy the postmodernist writers, as Brian McHale has explored in detail in *Postmodernist Fiction*.<sup>2</sup> Students of English often discover that it is arguably not so important what postmodernism *is* but rather how it may be characterised; how a reader (or writer) recognises the signs, styles, principles and texts that may be described as postmodern — the literary terrain of postmodernity, if you like. This is not to say that all features of the terrain are necessarily new. Sterne's eighteenth century novel *Tristram Shandy* (1760) fulfils many of the criteria we might construe as 'postmodernist'. Tristram is attempting to tell his own life but the self-consciousness with which he does so retards the telling, so that after a year of 'writing' he finds he is still recording the first day of his life, following numerous digressions on the nature of autobiography, fiction and the hermeneutics of reading. For, as the novelist B. S. Johnson discerned in *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs* (1973):

Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily. Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification. Telling stories is really telling lies...<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987). See also Marguerite Alexander, *Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> B.S. Johnson from the Introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs*, reproduced in Malcolm Bradbury, ed., *The Novel Today* (London: Fontana, 1977), 151-168.

Laurence Sterne deliberately subverts the 'strict, close selection' that chronological narratives require and proves as interested in the possible falsifications inherent in the narrative act of storytelling as Salman Rushdie's Saleem and Padma in *Midnight's Children* (1981). But both cannot be described as postmodernist British writers.

Postmodernism is an attempt to create a literary aesthetic for those texts, usually produced after World War II, which respond to a more complex technological and televisual age and that often seek to counter the cultural elitism of modernism. The term 'postmodernist', however, is rarely used in its undiluted or unqualified form to describe any writer's work. Walter Benjamin asserted that criticism must speak the language of artists but the difficulties of creating a commonly encoded critical terminology are similar to those of creating a critical consensus. Do we really want to still debate or stem disagreement? If we define terms with uniform precision and overlay our interpretations on those already in existence in palimpsestic fashion, will we define ourselves out of a job? Fundamental to literature and literary criticism is the need and the desire to re-view and to re-interpret in order to create different and new patterns of meaning and to elicit argument and debate. Nevertheless, whenever a critic refers to a novel as employing 'a collage of styles' or 'competing genres' they are interrogating the novel's incorporation of literary strategies that reflect cultural postmodernism. Postmodern novels endeavour to be 'open', in that they play on a number of meanings so that a search for a single unified meaning is rendered impossible. This is clever and somewhat disturbing because, as Susan Sontag has often argued, it is interpretation that makes art manageable and comfortable and postmodernist texts very often prove to be discomfiting and challenging reads, philosophically as well as critically, since postmodernism maintains that everything is a fiction. As one critic has encapsulated:

Postmodernists say that there is no such thing as reality, only versions of reality. History is fiction, science is fiction, psychology is fiction.<sup>4</sup>

So, although writers may not tend to refer to their work as 'postmodernist', literary critics and university lecturers may confer the mantle of postmodernism upon whomsoever 'merits' it. Of those most usually deemed postmodernist, Jeanette Winterson has been described as a fabulist and her work compared with that arch-postmodern fabulist Italo Calvino writer of *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller* (1979). Her early novels were described by avid reviewers as 'rich and beguiling stuff, complex and exquisitely written and full of useful manipulations of history'.<sup>5</sup> So is it the fabula and magically

<sup>4</sup> Colin Green, 'In My View', *The Sunday Times*, 10 September 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Rosellen Brown, 'Fertile Imagination' *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. VII, No. 12, September 1990, pp. 9-10.

realistic, as in the work of Rushdie also, that make a novel postmodern, or its historiographical metafictional play? Certainly, Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) would seem to address similar preoccupations; in his novel history is the stuff of local legend and it is 'that cumbersome but precious bag of clues' that Swift scatters liberally throughout a text that refuses to settle comfortably into a single generic category; it is a history of the Fens, autobiography and fairy tale. Caryl Phillips also pastiches a number of literary genres in novels like *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993) and retains a politicised perspective, reconfiguring slave narratives, the colonial romance of empire and the travelogue, together with historical perspectives in order to create fictions that reflect the complexities of the African diaspora. Phillips has professed himself, and his contemporary Swift, to be 'interested in history, in memory, in time, and in the failure of these three things', a pertinent exemplification of the dominant concerns of many contemporary postmodernist writers.<sup>6</sup>

Joan Riley and Pat Barker, two contemporary British novelists whose fictions are often deemed to stand outside of postmodernist concerns, each pursue overtly politicised social agendas in their fictions; Riley is at the forefront of a developing literary tradition of Black British writing, charting as she does in novels like *Waiting in the Twilight* (1987) the experiences of African Caribbean women in a Britain that discriminates against them. Barker's first three novels uncompromisingly explored and exposed the 'condition of England' in the North East, focusing on women's experiences of the de-industrialisation of working class communities, and her recently acclaimed trilogy investigates the myths surrounding predominantly male communities during the Great War, in the trenches and in Craiglockhart War Hospital. Her re-evaluations of issues of sexuality and psychology in the trilogy have led critics to re-assess her work and to draw her into their discussions of postmodernism. At times it has been assumed that those writers who draw on realist techniques in any form do so in order to oppose the dominance of postmodernist ideas in contemporary fiction. This is not necessarily the case since one of the tendencies noted of postmodernism is its propensity to look back to neglected styles or marginalised genres and to rework them. The misunderstanding seems to lie rather with the extent to which fiction extrapolates upon political agendas, an area of some ambivalence in postmodernist thought.

Postmodernist principles include the destabilisation of what Jean-Francois Lyotard has called the 'grand narratives' of Western culture and civilisation, the tendency for ideology to cohere around the significance of the Enlightenment, of science as progress (ideas taken up by modernists) and patriarchal practices, for example. Postmodernism emphasises plurality, heterogeneity but, as a number of feminist and Black cultural critics would

<sup>6</sup> Caryl Phillips Interviewed by Graham Swift *Kunapipi* 13:3, 96-103.

argue, often at the expense of group politicisation. Josephine Donovan puts the case succinctly:

Since political assertion depends upon the cohesion of a group identity, such as women, and upon the articulation of an agenda of needs by that group, this aspect of postmodernism seems problematic from a feminist point of view because it negates the possibility of political action.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to imply that fiction is abstruse in the political arena but if a 'de-centred subject' continues to feature so prominently [as in Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992), perhaps, where the gender of the narrator is deliberately undisclosed in a love story] then a subject, individuated or as a member of a group, who already feels far from the centre of dominant discourses of power, remains marginalised. It is a discussion that continues and dominant discourses like psychoanalytical criticism and deconstruction are scrutinised in order to push them to the limits of engagement with materialist feminism and socialist agendas.

A number of African American writers and critics, for example, have argued that postmodernism is exclusive in terms of its critical language<sup>8</sup> but it is frequently contemporary American writers who succeed in combining social agendas with postmodern fictional strategies to produce spiritual and empowering fictions that are infinitely accessible, as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Native American Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984). If some of the examples of postmodernism sound as elitist as the modernist principles writers sought to subvert, this is evidence of eclecticism but there are novels that succeed in interpolating popular cultural references, of the 1970s and 1980s respectively, for example, in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and Iain Banks' *The Crow Road* (1992). Here the contemporary is dramatised as *bricolage*, a melding of forms and styles to distil two fictional worlds.

Worries about the state of fiction, the end of the novel, a crisis in publishing, and complaints that the English novel was less innovatory or experimental than its European and American counterparts, dominated the discussions of literary critics and publishers at the beginning of the 1980s. The fiction industry began to look inside its own workings and began to see that the nature of the novel was in a process of change and, after the panic had died down somewhat, that the change might actually be for the better.<sup>9</sup> To

<sup>7</sup> Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* (Frederick Unger, 1992), 203.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Barbara Christian, 'The Race for Theory' *Cultural Critique* 6 (1987), 51-63 and bell hooks, 'Postmodern Blackness' in *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics* (London: Turnaround, 1991), 23-31.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Granta 3: The End of the English Novel* (1980 and reprinted 1989).

my mind, the 1980s signalled the end of the *English* novel and the beginnings of contemporary *British* fiction.

When contemporary British writing focuses on Britain it puts into question images of Englishness and the notion of Britain as a United Kingdom. Geographically, demographically and creatively areas of Britain that had until the early eighties traditionally constituted the margins, far away from metropolitan London at the literary centre, began to receive a great deal of readerly and critical attention. In novels of the 1950s characters like Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) and Billy Fisher the hero of Keith Waterhouse's *Billy Liar* (1959) had their sights firmly fixed on London. By the 1960s Northern lads and lasses seemed to have become a sort of literary vogue but only in so far as stories of life north of Watford signalled a temporary nationwide fascination with working-class lives in industrial towns, in film as well as fiction. The seventies was, in many ways, the decade in which women writers spoke most loudly and resonantly about life in Britain: Fay Weldon, Angela Carter, Beryl Bainbridge, Doris Lessing. But, by and large, they still spoke mainly about London and the South East. By the eighties, times and fictional imperatives had begun to change and, as one critic and reviewer noted, one was as likely to find British fiction alive and well and telling a story of Huddersfield or Birmingham or Glasgow or Cornwall as London.<sup>10</sup>

England has long been mythologised via a carefully coded set of images: we are hard put to reel off a list of typically *British* tropes, yet images of Englishness still roll off the tongue: a green and pleasant land replete with country houses, the sounds of a cricket match (leather on willow) floating across an English rural scene, bowler-hatted gents with stiff upper lips commuting daily to the City. The myth of 'Englishness' may, of course, attract as well as repel: attract because it shapes an image that may be richly satirised with much comic brio by writers like Gordon Burn and Hanif Kureishi but it is repellent when the myth is presented as a cultural norm, and a paragon of excellence. The writer Roy Heath has lived for forty years in Britain, longer than in his native Guyana, but in his 1991 autobiography *Shadows Round the Moon* he remembers how England was represented to him at the time of his arrival and how enduring and debilitating he found the myth to be:

Like other Guyanese I had been force-fed a diet proclaiming that the English were the best in the world in this and the best in the world in that. Good manners, football, sportsmanship, science fiction, the police, newspapers... the list is endless.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> D.J. Taylor 'The New Literary Map of Britain' *The Sunday Times* 8 May 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Roy Heath, *Shadows Round the Moon* (London, Methuen, 1991), 11.

He might well have added best at securing and perpetuating a literary tradition and a reputation that it hasn't been easy to penetrate and change. It has taken time to prise open the fiction industry's doors to welcome those whose ideas and fictions challenge established visions of British society but, in fact, the idea of Britain, it is now generally agreed, is made up of a wide range of cultural accents, or slants on Britishness. To fall back to London as an example of British society for a moment: in London today, 1 in 5 according to the 1991 census identify themselves as members of an ethnic minority group and, in what may well be the most cosmopolitan of the world's capitals, 130 languages are known to be spoken.<sup>12</sup>

I disagree with those like D.J. Taylor and Nicci Gerrard who fear that British fiction may have lost something in recent decades; a firm literary tradition, a sense of the indubitability of British culture; these elements were but fictional constructs in the first place and their 'loss' is sooner or later made to correspond with a nostalgia for empire, with imperial memories, or associated with a vilification of any and all American popular cultural influences. British fiction like Pat Barker's trilogy and Sebastian Faulks's much acclaimed novel of the First World War *Birdsong* (1993) do look back in English history but neither writer exhibits an unproblematised nostalgia for the pre-1914 society for which the War was fought. Barker especially deploys images of the past in order to scrutinise the present, philosophically and speculatively. In this she joins many other contemporary British writers in their interests and concerns. Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar have written black people back into the British landscape from which they had been erased in what was traditionally known as modern English fiction. So, if there is a quantifiable contemporary British fiction, can we begin to critically distil the terrain it covers whilst recognising its heterogeneity and hybridity, the plurality of its voices and its forms?

In the 1980s Britain found itself in trouble. With the rise of the New Right, Margaret Thatcher declared that there was no such thing as society; Britain had finally, and incontrovertibly, lost its place on the world stage yet the Thatcher government led the country into armed conflict in the Falklands and in the Gulf. Racial and urban violence on the home front led poet Linton Kwesi Johnson to the conclusion that 'Inglan is a bitch/ There's no escapin' it'. The welfare state was being dismantled and the 1982 Nationality Act conferred British citizenship on some whilst denying it to others who had made Britain their home for decades. Postmodernist ideas of a de-centred subject positions seemed to deny political agency to individuals and groups who were just finding their voices in politics as well as fiction. Nevertheless, the negative propensities of the decade were challenged in the writing of those feminists, socialists, black and working-class writers who valued community, imagined and otherwise, in Britain.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Alan Travis, 'London top capital for ethnic mix' *The Guardian* 16 July 1994.

It has been noted that novels about the home landscape are quite rare in modern British fiction. In 1988 Terry Eagleton commented on 'The striking number of contemporary novels written in England but set in some non-English locale...'<sup>13</sup> He wondered whether an industrially declining, post-imperial nation was simply not a conducive backdrop for novelists' literary endeavours; in short, no spur to their creative energies. Having raised an important question, Eagleton, as Lorna Sage did in 1980<sup>14</sup>, asserts that it is the importation of literary 'outsiders' or visitors with their 'exotic' perspectives that would revive fiction. He fails to recognise that by 1988 a solid body of fiction already existed written by Britons themselves, insiders though often considered outsiders, whose work is rooted in British cultural conditions. Arguably, some of the most elucidatory and incisive depictions of contemporary Britain come from the pens (or the wordprocessors) of those who bring to their descriptions an experience of elsewhere – of life outside Britain or of hearing ancestral stories located in other parts of the world – but whose primary subject remains Britain. For example, Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* (1982) is a novel about the Chinese community in South London; Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987) tells a story of British Asians; in Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging* (1985) a young girl from the Caribbean adjusts to school and home in Britain and *Waiting in the Twilight* (1987) is an exploration of an undervalued and ageing Caribbean immigrant whose children carry her hopes for success in Britain in the future. In the very year Eagleton was writing, Rushdie published *The Satanic Verses*, a novel in which Indian immigrants fall out of the sky and land on an English beach. Such writers had opened out the boundaries that guarded what was provincial about English writing.

In fact, novels about Britain through the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties are frequently *first* novels, frequently semi-autobiographical fictions, frequently *Bildungsromans* in which the formative years of a young protagonist reflect, refract and imaginatively interrogate life in Britain in particular decades. The novels are usually naturalistic, although the trials and tribulations of growing up in Britain sometimes give rise to magical or supernatural forays into the wilds of the imagination as in Jeanette Winterson's bestselling *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* (1985) or Livi Michael's *Under A Thin Moon* (1991). Winterson's novel is a fine example of a rites of passage narrative that combines humour with a sharp sense of what it was like to grow up in the North of England in the 1960s and which draws even the most homophobic reader into sympathy with the young protagonist Jeanette as she learns that she is a lesbian. In Michael's novel postmodernist stylising is politically determined: the young women protagonists existing on a Manchester council estate fantasise to escape their monotonous

<sup>13</sup> Terry Eagleton, *New Left Review* 172, Nov-Dec, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Lorna Sage, 'Invasion from Outsiders' in *Granata* 3, 131-136.

lives but fail to connect with one another in any meaningful socially motivated way in 1980s' Britain.

Novels that take growing up in Britain as their primary theme range around the country taking in landscapes as different as the Scottish Highlands, Belfast, and inner city London. In Iain Banks' *The Crow Road* (1992) one of the few novels of the genre that is not the writer's first published work, a young man comes of age in the 1980s in the North of Scotland. Young Prentice's reality is mediated through the mass media, what was in the news, in the charts and on the television, in a postmodernist family saga as accessible as a soap opera. In Andrea Levy's *Never Far From Nowhere* (1996) two sisters grow up on a council estate in London in the 1970s, their lives influenced less by their parents' memories of the Caribbean and much more by British popular culture, radio, TV and music and in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996) a young British Asian girl grows up in the Midlands. Writers like Banks, Kureishi, Levy and Syal re-negotiate aspects of Britishness, recognising the hybridity inherent in the word, and indeed its slipperiness.

So, if the English novel was flagging, I believe that what has revived it in the last two decades of the twentieth century is the rise of the postcolonial novel which is cross-cultural, diasporic, and in which many forms of English can be heard. The voices who tell stories from all corners of Britain do so with considerable confidence and panache. The British novel has become an international phenomenon: it draws on British characters with histories that encompass India, Africa and the Caribbean especially and it confronts the legacies of slavery and of colonialism in particular. Blackness and Britishness, for example, have long been deemed mutually exclusive states of being, as if to be black and British were inherently contradictory. Where George Orwell once talked about the hole in the centre of English writing as the space in which working-class lives should be described and imagined, Hanif Kureishi has talked about a hole in the centre of contemporary English writing, a gap, a silence about the lives of black Britons in fiction. Kureishi noted this omission in the early 1980s and the gap is closing, filling up with writers and novels like his superbly comical *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) in which an 'Englishman born and bred, well almost' negotiates a place for his dreams and aspirations in suburban England in the 1970s.

Certain very specific worries accompanied the efforts black British writers made in recent decades when seeking publication in Britain, however. As articulated by Barbara Burford, the worry involved the expectation that black writers would inevitably write books that testified to the *problems* of being black in a nation where the majority are white and *prioritised* such problems over other subjects for fiction. Burford uses the poet Grace Nichols's phrase 'a little black pain undressed' to begin to express what she detects was almost a *condition* of black writers getting published in the early 1980s

and writers such as Farrukh Dhondy have discussed the expectation that culture and clashes between cultures will be seen as a black writer's central thematic material. Burford sets her 1986 novella *The Threshing Floor* in Canterbury, that most English of towns where Chaucer's pilgrims began their tales, and she simply and confidently creates black characters who are British and whose presence is a fact, established even in this very small, largely academic and largely rural community, as in the cities.

The critic Nicci Gerrard expresses an idea which might pull most of us up short as we try to map a specifically contemporary British terrain with regard to fiction: 'The best novelists make their own countries which we critics then colonise into a map, the better not to get lost.'<sup>15</sup> The landscape is uneven and with approximately 8,000 novels published every year a critic can only push so far into the territory. Deciding how British contemporary British fiction is simply one of the signposts we have created in order to find our way, and coining terms like postmodernist is another. The fictional space in contemporary novels has got wider and wider. Even novels that pursue images of British society as closely as Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Martin Amis' *Money* (1984) have protagonists who go to America (New York in both cases) for at least a third of the book. Ian McKewan has set novels in Berlin as well as in Britain and Julian Barnes in France. Barnes goes so far as to admit that he is attracted by the English language but not by the place itself: he prefers to look outside Britain rather than concentrate his literary efforts on delineating the devil he already knows. What may entice critically acclaimed postmodernist writers like Barnes and Barry Unsworth back to Britain as a literary subject is the recognition that what it is to be British is constantly in flux, as are the ways of writing about it, and this is one of the most interesting and engaging subjects a British writer can hope to write about.

<sup>15</sup> Nicci Gerrard, *The Observer*, 2 May 1993.

### GENUSASPEKTER – GENDER ASPECTS

Till hösten 1998 planeras ett temanummer om genusaspekter i språk och litteratur. Korta recensioner av lämpliga böcker i ämnet mottages tacksamt.

For the autumn of 1998, we plan to have a special issue on gender aspects of language and literature. The editors invite therefore short reviews for suitable new books on this theme.