

Hedwig BOCK and Albert WERTHEIM, eds., *Essays on Contemporary Post-Colonial Fiction*, Max Hueber Verlag (Munich, 1986), DM. 48.

As the editors of this volume rightly point out in their introduction, "some of the most vital and moving literature of modern times has emerged from former colonial areas." It can be added that this literature is not just vital and moving but offers one of the most interesting and original developments in contemporary fiction. In this respect, the title of Helen Tiffin's essay on Lamming provides an

adequate subtitle for the collection as a whole: "Finding a Language for Post-Colonial Fiction".

This immediately raises a number of issues about the nature of the book. If we are not mistaken, it was originally conceived as a collection of essays on major *Commonwealth* writers. Owing to difficulties with the publication, the book came out much later than originally planned. In the meantime and for reasons which those dealing with the new literatures will understand, "Commonwealth" had become "post-colonial". "Commonwealth" was a portmanteau word with which few people were satisfied in spite of its positive connotation (the "Common Wealth" first pinpointed by Anna Rutherford's pioneer volume), but it was generally accepted as a convenient term to cover all literatures in English outside the U.K. and the U.S.A., partly out of helplessness in the face of the great political variety and the fluctuating limits of the territory it covered. The political and cultural implications in "post-colonial" are inescapably precise and arouse corresponding expectations about the material dealt with and the new departure and directions *post-colonialism* suggests, even if in cultural matters colonial and post-colonial periods inevitably overlap. As the editors indirectly suggest, no literature grows out in the void, least of all in a language with a long cultural history like English, and "the impact of one culture upon another" is both inescapable and long-standing. This is illustrated by Horst Prissnitz's emphasis on Randolph Stow's inheritance of, and contribution to, the English tradition. On the other hand, some of the essays clearly show that new potentialities and post-colonial developments were already a distinctive feature of pre-independence fiction. Bernth Lindfors' chapter on Tutuola is a case in point.

If one keeps this perspective in mind, the choice of the authors dealt with is largely representative, though the inclusion of Mordecai Richler (a critic of his own Jewish community and, in the essayist's own terms, a disappointing writer) makes the absence of significant contemporary Canadian novelists more striking, just as the inclusion of Peter Abrahams, whose topicality has dwindled with the hardening of South African politics, makes one regret the absence of J.M. Coetzee. Similarly, although John Barnes's essay on Christina Stead is excellent *per se*, his comments on her expatriate writing make the label "post-colonial" very questionable. Moreover, can the three South African writers discussed be called post-colonial since, in historical terms at least, their work is inspired by the need to reach that condition? This question is too complex and tricky to be answered succinctly and perhaps cannot be answered at this stage except by keeping to neat and narrow classifications. A majority of the writers included had begun to write and in some cases reached maturity (Anand and Narayan, for example) in pre-independence days, and if one theme emerges as a basis for comparison or unity, it is the need for freedom from colonialism or neo-colonialism in all their guises.

A related subject, sometimes more prominent, is the quality of life and the specific nature of society, the lasting and pervading consequences of the colonial encounter. As a matter of fact, an overall view of this collection does convey a sense of all the major crises and conflicts in colonial and post-colonial societies in this century, as well as the individual's search for fulfilment in these societies, the need to assert oneself in one's own terms as a community or a person.

It can therefore be said that a majority of essays deal directly or indirectly with

the representation in literature of colonialism and its aftermath either as a political or social phenomenon or as pressure on the individual to make him submit or conform, which thus emerges as a universal plight. But the crucial question of what drives post-colonial writing in new directions is seldom tackled as a specific issue. Not surprisingly, the one essay which deliberately approaches post-colonial writing in critical terms evolved from the subject under scrutiny is Helen Tiffin's on Lamming. She has long been preoccupied with the creation of a new post-colonial critical idiom. Konrad Gross's essay on Margaret Laurence clearly shows in what way her awareness of the deeper effects of colonialism in Africa determined her exploration of the Canadian situation. In some of the essays it is often subject and point of view in the works analysed, rather than the critic's discussion of new modes of writing, which point to a new departure from traditional writing in English. This is largely true of the South Pacific (Albert Wendt) and African writers, Achebe, Ekwensi, Armah, Ngugi and his decision to make Gikuyu the primary language for his creative writing - temporarily at least. Perhaps unexpectedly, Cecil Abraham's emphasis on community in Armah's work calls for a comparison with Lamming. More significantly, other essays convey the idiosyncrasy of a specific mode of writing through a combined analysis of form and content. In a brilliant and thorough analysis of her work, Michael Wade traces Nadine Gordimer's development as a writer. Jean-Pierre Durix's synthesis of the major aspects of Wilson Harris's fiction, particularly the effects of his use of language, is remarkable, as is Jeanne Delbaere's demonstration of why Janet Frame rejects traditional realism and in what way her "magic realism" transcends the duality between reality and the world of art or the "worlds of words". Perhaps unexpectedly, Ken Ramchand's perceptive discussion of Naipaul's later fiction concentrates more on the writer's general philosophy of life and on the limitations of his rationalism than on his interpretation of the Third-World situations which inspired that philosophy. Diane Bessai alludes several times to Margaret Atwood's use of pre-colonial myths and imagery without mentioning their significance in a post-colonial outlook. Nor does she in any way suggest that Atwood's criticism of "Americanization" can be read as an attack against a new form of colonization.

As a collection of essays on separate writers, this book is extremely useful and in many cases an indispensable tool to the reader who wants to become aware of the individual writer's development and the general significance of their work up to the time when the essays were written. Another, probably unintentional, use is to make the critic aware of the need for a more clearly defined critical terminology and for a comparatist approach.

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