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THE POSTCOLONIAL EXOTIC

Salman Rushdie and the Booker of Bookers

Graham Huggan

Last year's suspiciously self-congratulatory decision to award Salman Rushdie the 25-year commemorative “Booker of Bookers” for his 1981 novel Midnight’s Children affords a useful opportunity to reflect upon the glamorous world of literary prizes. The media hoopla that surrounds the annual award of Britain’s most prestigious literary prize—scandalous stories leaked in the press about the not-so-worthy winners, TV cameras trained on the expectant finalists as they sit in their Sunday best at the Booker ceremonial dinner—issues a sad, if accurate, statement on the power of corporate publishing. The writers grit their teeth and bear it, knowing that victory will put them temporarily in the limelight (a celebrity status many of them might not want), but will also, almost certainly, bring them vastly increased sales (a profit many of them may well need).

The Booker’s pomp and circumstance might seem peculiarly British: the Anglo literati’s “superior” answer to the Academy Awards. Yet despite the smugness of the ceremony, with its complacent inside jokes and specious literary camaraderie, the Booker stakes a powerful claim to being an international award. Writers from across the British Commonwealth (Ireland and Pakistan currently enjoy honorary membership) are eligible to compete for the prize. In the Booker’s 26-year history, writers from outside Britain, or with non-British cultural backgrounds, have been by far the most successful. As Pico Iyer quips in a 1993 article in Time, the prize since Rushdie won it has gone to two Australians, a part Maori, a South African, a woman of Polish descent, a Nigerian and an exile from Japan. Runners-up have featured such redoubtably English names as Mo and Mistry and Achebe; when a traditional English name takes the prize—A. S. Byatt, say, or Kingsley Amis—it seems almost anomalous.

Iyer attributes this eclecticism to the internationalization of English literature. A new “frontierless” writing has emerged
Recipient of the Booker of Bookers, Salman Rushdie

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“wherever cultures jangle.” “Postcolonial” has become the codeword for these transnational productions. The Booker McConnell company has evolved into a postcolonial patron: through its sponsorship it celebrates the hybrid status of an increasingly global culture. English literature is no longer English: it speaks in many tongues, from many different points of view. The Booker Prize acknowledges and embraces this plurality; it rewards its far-flung writers for “writing back” to the former Empire.

The problem with Iyer’s argument—a problem of which he, a successful writer, is surely well aware—is that it overlooks the commercial basis of the multicultural vitality it applauds. The pliability of the term “postcolonial”—its ready availability as a market strategy—suggests that it functions not merely as a marker of anti-imperial resistance, but as a sales tag for the international commodity culture of late (twentieth-century) capitalism. Postcoloniality, says Anthony Appiah, is best understood as a condition. It is the condition, first and foremost, of a “comprador intelligentsia”: “of a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery.” (Needless to say, these writers and thinkers need not be stationed at the “periphery”: some of them, like Rushdie, are very much at the “center.”) In negotiating their condition, and turning it to their own advantage, postcolonial writers are adept at manipulating the commercial codes of the international open market. They recognize that the value of their writing as an international commodity depends, to a large extent, on the exotic appeal it holds to an unfamiliar metropolitan audience. They thus risk becoming complicit with the cultural imperialism they denounce. Contradictions inevitably emerge: writers wish to strike back against the center, yet they also write and are marketed for it; they wish to speak from the margins, yet they are assimilated into the mainstream; they wish to undo the opposition between a European Self and its designated Others, yet they are pressed into the service of manufacturing cultural Otherness (Appiah).

This is not to accuse the writers of bad faith or of blatant opportunism; it is merely to insist that postcolonial writing be seen in its requisite material context, as part of a wider process in which the writers’ anti-imperial sentiments must contend with imperial market forces. Postcolonial writing beguiles the line between resistance and collusion; the best-known writers are those like Rushdie—or, from a different perspective, Naipaul—who understand how to manage the realpolitik of metropolitan dominance. It is no surprise to find, then, that both writers are former Booker winners. (Naipaul won in 1973 with his novella sequence *In a Free State.*) For Naipaul, the Booker confirmed an already well-established reputation; for Rushdie, it was instrumental in bringing him to the public eye, where he has remained ever since, acquiring the dubious status of a “canonical” postcolonial writer. The Booker helped both writers; did it also compromise them? Some explanation is needed here of Booker’s checkered history.

Booker McConnell today is a large multinational food and agribusiness company; it employs twenty thousand people in thirty countries, with annual sales in
excess of 5 billion dollars. The company traces its origins back to the early nineteenth century, when it began providing distributional services on the sugar estates of Demerara. The company grew and prospered, until the onset of independence. Demerara became Guyana, and Booker was forced to relocate to Britain.

Commonwealth Literature, like the Commonwealth itself, is a diplomatic dodo; it represents, as Ahmad says, a “cultural hangover from the Empire”

which has since remained the center of its lucrative worldwide enterprise.

The ironies behind the company’s past have not been lost on former Booker Prize winners. John Berger, awarded the prize in 1972 for his outrageous experimental novel G, proceeded to outrage the sponsors further by donating half of his winnings to the militant Black Panther movement, on the grounds—as he explained in his acceptance speech, another in the list of Booker Prize scandals—that “they resist, both as black people and workers, the further exploitation of the oppressed; and because they have links with the struggle in Guyana, the seat of Booker McConnell’s wealth—the struggle whose aim is to appropriate all such enterprises.”

The following year winner J. G. Farrell, similarly critical of the company, leavened his acceptance speech with a note of ironic sympathy: “Every year the Booker brothers see their prize wash up a monster more horrible than the last.”

The ambivalence of the situation is instructive. The Booker Prize may reward its writers for speaking out against the Empire, but this doesn’t stop it from affiliating itself with the British Commonwealth, that aging guardian of unshared values whose ward, Commonwealth Literature, has been memorably dismissed by Rushdie as a figment of the imperial imagination, and, more memorably still, by Ajaz Ahmad as “a British Council construct, limited largely to its clients.”

The Commonwealth’s paternalistic rhetoric smacks of colonial condescension; so too does Booker’s promotional push, which arrogates to itself the rights of patronage. In early Commonwealth literary criticism, amid much empty talk of happy families, there was an implicit assumption of Britain’s arbitral cultural role; the “filial” literatures of the former colonies were urged to refer for guidance to the “parent stock.” This mantle is now assumed by the Booker and its panel of “disinterested” (white male) judges: these mostly establishment figures are to determine what carries “intrinsic” literary value. They are to confer legitimacy, from the “center,” on the literature of the “periphery.”

If the Booker, in this sense, continues to be stolidly unregenerate, in another it has proved itself to be very much up-to-date. Commonwealth Literature, like the Commonwealth itself, is a diplomatic dodo; it represents, as Ahmad says, a “cultural hangover from the Empire.” Yet the Empire, if not the Commonwealth, is obviously in vogue. The recent Raj revival, fueled by Thatcherite nostalgia, is showing few signs of waning; books and films on Africa and other former tropical colonies pour out; and travel writing, that
ever-reliable vehicle of outdated imperial heroism, continues to stock booksellers’ shelves with its vicarious thrills and spills. So it is not at all surprising that, of the twenty-seven Booker Prize winners to date (in 1974 the prize was shared), no fewer than seventeen deal with Empire. Fight with Empire might be better; for many of these books set out to attack imperialistic cultural attitudes, subverting or transforming the imperial literary/historical record.

The critical agendas of the writers need not coincide, of course, with the way their books are marketed. The mismatch is often striking. Exoticist myths and stereotypes, apparently dismantled by the writers, reappear with a vengeance in the commercial packaging of their books. Take the “Booker of Bookers,” Rushdie’s novel Midnight’s Children. The 1981 Picador edition is largely unexceptionable—except, that is, for the blurb emblazoned across the book’s front cover. “At last a literary continent has found its voice,” proclaims an undoubtedly enthusiastic, if suspiciously anonymous, reviewer. One can imagine the wry amusement with which Rushdie must have greeted this astonishing news—just elide several thousand years of Indian literary history and presto, the “representative” Indian voice! A sleight of hand well worthy of Rushdie’s “magic-realist” novel.

Various exoticist maneuvers—the construction of the representative foreign writer; the appeal to local color; the search for, or assertion of, an “authenticity” not normally ascribed to one’s own culture—can be traced in the metropolitan marketing of postcolonial literature. What say do postcolonial writers have in the commercial packaging of their books? Is it possible to speak of a “postcolonial exotic,” and if so, to what extent do postcolonial writers collaborate in these exoticist productions? Clearly, individual cases vary; one constant, however, is the impact of metropolitan mediation. (Booker’s involvement, though important, is arguably indirect. More significant are the publishers: Heinemann, for example, whose popular African Writers Series, now running to several hundred titles with excellent worldwide distribution, has its marketing control room in the heart of darkest Oxford.) Though publishers’ agendas differ widely, they all know exoticism sells. African or Indian writing offers a window onto a different, exciting world. This world produces wonder: it rejuvenates the sensibilities of a readership tired of provincial navel-gazing; tired also of a literature that reflects the realities of a society from which they badly need release. Not that postcolonial literature offers harmless escapism: on the contrary, it repoliticizes the act of reading, providing an opportunity for focused rage or an outlet for indefinite liberal guilt. The discourse of exoticism allows for multicultural celebration; it also provides a basis for considered self-critique.

Exoticism relieves its practitioners, however, from the burdensome task of actually learning about “other” cultures. As Tzvetan Todorov says,

"The best candidates for the exotic label are the peoples and cultures that are most remote from us and least known to us... Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others; yet praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be. This is its constitutive paradox."

Exoticists, adds Todorov, “cherish the
remote because of its remoteness.” There is a further paradox here; for in the “global” cultural environment of the late twentieth century, exoticism becomes a function not of remoteness but, on the contrary, of proximity. Exotic artifacts from other cultures circulate as commodities within the global economy—it is precisely their availability that renders them exotic.

Postcolonial literature participates despite itself in this mediating process. “Other” cultures are made available for consumption by a metropolitan readership. Books by African and Indian writers acquire an almost totemic value: they are wrapped in the exotic aura of the cultural commodity fetish. In the imperialistic logic of the universal market, the distinction between the global economy and global culture can be conveniently collapsed. Cultural differences devolve into the stuff of tourist spectacle: “otherness emerges everywhere”; the world becomes a theme-park. The ubiquity of exoticism doesn’t make it less exotic—but it does help to convey the illusion of cross-cultural reciprocity. (Multiculturalism is the latest of these exoticist panaceas. The appeal to cultural diversity disguises a reluctance for social change: pre-existing hierarchies can be maintained through commodified gestures toward bilateral convergence.) The blatant hypocrisies of exoticism—complacency masked as appreciation; novelty mediated through cliché; the creation of a cultural distance that the discourse claims to be narrow—are inimical to the objectives of anticolonial writers such as Rushdie. Exoticism remains integral, nonetheless, to the reading and writing of postcolonial literature: it reflects the writing’s market value as a cultural commodity. (Exoticism is arguably central, also, to the teaching and study of postcolonial writing. The obsession of many postcolonial critics with theories of “otherness” is by no means incompatible with exoticist predilections. Smorgasbord university courses on postcolonial literatures run the risk of encouraging a kind of licensed intellectual tourism. Meanwhile, in scholarly books and journals, postcolonial writing is co-opted into self-marginalizing discussions on the function of “minority discourse,” or grafted onto totalizing paradigms of transcultural resistance. The institutionalization of postcolonial studies is another effect of “postcoloniality”: the “postcolonial” is as much an intellectual as a cultural commodity.)

What options are open to writers of, say, African or Indian background who wish to translate their complex cultural realities for an unaccustomed metropolitan audience? The task is made more difficult when those realities have been shaped, for centuries, according to others’ dictates: tailored to the requirements of a European exoticist imaginary. Clearly, the writers’ choice is not to discover a language—an alternative kind of English—that is somehow uncontaminated by exoticist mythologies. A viable option instead is to lay bare the process by which those mythologies are constructed. The commercial success of Midnight’s Children owes much to the canniness with which its author displays this seductive process. Rushdie’s novel exhibits—and hawks—the wares of Western literary exoticism. Most of the familiar semiotic markers of Orientalism are there—snakecharmers, genies, fakirs, and the like—along with some less likely but still readily identifiable totems: the spittoon, for instance. These totems advertise their status as culturally “othered” artifacts. The novel’s
narrator, Saleem Sinai, points out their value as commodities; for Rushdie’s master of ceremonies is also a skillful merchant. Swallow me, says Saleem Sinai, and you swallow the lives of countless others. This implicit parody of the reader as consumer is reinforced through the use of gastronomic metaphors. India, like Saleem, transforms itself into an edible; even its history is converted—into chutney, to be precise. The novel reveals to its Western readers their hunger to consume: it feeds their desire for entertainment; satiates their keen exoticist appetites; but it never fails to mock them for their complicitous enjoyment.

If Rushdie belongs to a new generation of “frontierless” writers, for whom then is he writing? For a public as uprooted, but also as privileged, as himself?

A South Asian reader of Rushdie’s novel might of course be likely to view this process rather differently. Indeed an obvious discrepancy exists between Western metropolitan reviews of Midnight’s Children—generally depoliticized, and almost uniformly favorable—and the more politically-concerned responses of subcontinental critics, some of whom take Rushdie to task for his “trivialization” of their culture. Not surprisingly, the Booker judgments fall into the former category. The novel, says Malcolm Bradbury, with admirable imprecision, is a “rich expression of the contemporary fictional imagination, a flamboyant, experimental celebration of the power and potential of human narrative.” W. L. Webb and David Holloway are equally enthusiastic, offering the further “insight” that the novel mixes in “a magical element echoing the work of South American novelists.” A double commodification is at work here, Rushdie’s novel being identified with the tradition of the (translated) South American novel—a tradition equated with, and marketed by, the aesthetic practice of magic realism. (Magic realism clearly has its profits: the term reemerges frequently in reviews of a more recent Booker winner, Ben Okri’s The Famished Road.) Midnight’s Children amply satisfies the Booker’s glossy multicultural criteria. Its foreignness is appealing: it can easily be co-opted into an exoticist “aesthetics of diversity” (Segalen). Yet it is not so foreign that it can’t be assimilated to a European tradition of literary excellence. (Rushdie emerges here as a latter-day Cervantes, an Indian Gogol.) As a multicultural writer, Rushdie switches labels with facility; he also reserves the right to switch his national allegiance. The literary continent of India may have finally “found its voice,” but Rushdie can still be seen as a bona fide British writer. (This juggling of literary and ethnic labels has acquired greater political significance since the publication of The Satanic Verses. But it is also there, implicitly, in the reception of Midnight’s Children, where a Rushdie of the Left, “Third World” opponent of the Empire, rubs shoulders with a Rushdie of the Center/Right, upholder of “Western” liberal humanism.) Rushdie himself has protested, rightly, against such critical expediency. The prophetic quality of the earlier novel, in this context, is nothing short of startling: its McLuhanesque injunctions about the
power of the media seem cruelly ironic in the author's present circumstance. Rushdie's positioning of himself as an international "migrant writer" nevertheless seems rather suspect. There is a frequent slippage, in Rushdie's rhetoric, between the disadvantage of displacement and the privilege of mobility. If Rushdie belongs, as Iyer claims, to a new generation of "frontierless" writers, for whom then is he writing? For a public as uprooted, but also as privileged, as himself? Rushdie is evasive on the issue:

*I have never had a reader in mind. I have ideas, people, events, shapes, and I write "for" those things, and hope that the completed work will be of interest to others. But which others? In the case of Midnight's Children I certainly felt that if its subcontinental readers had rejected the work, I should have thought it a failure, no matter what the reaction in the West. So I would say that I write "for" people who feel part of the things I write "about," but also for everyone else whom I can reach.*

Anxious to disaffiliate himself from the "ghetto mentality" of those writers who would "confine [themselves] within narrowly defined cultural frontiers," Rushdie proudly proclaims his status as an international writer. "Cross-pollination is everywhere. . . . It is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents." And also, with luck, his publishers; but if Rushdie seems well-fitted for the part of the "Western-style comprador intellectual"—if, like his narrator Saleem Sinai, he knows how to sell his cultural product—then who benefits from the trade? Does Rushdie run the risk of pandering to a Western reading public, or of playing right into the hands of the multinational corporate publishers? "The Booker of Bookers," in this context, performs a normalizing function: it helps to market Rushdie's status as an establishment subversive. Other postcolonial critics suffer from the same backhanded compliment. Postcolonial intellectuals, in Said's phrase, are "cultural amphibians": less rebellious than resilient, they are well-attuned to the shifting climate of today's unstable world. They are often adaptable, though, to the extent that they are socially advantaged: a fine line divides the displaced postcolonial intelligentsia from the highly mobile cosmopolitan elite. Not that Booker McConnell and its corporate minions are concerned by such distinctions. Their uncritical internationalism depends on obscuring socio-economic differences—the very differences on which their global enterprise is founded and sustained. Said and Rushdie, to defend them, wish no part of Booker's bargain. Like most postcolonial writers/thinkers, they are critical of the conditions under which capitalism produces social inequality. Yet their work is also a product of these divisive market forces. Emancipatory intellectual work, in a selfish corporate environment, is always liable to carry with it certain undesirable trade-offs. So though Midnight's Children, and novels like it, continue to "write back to the center," challenging the imperial (commercial and institutional) processes that govern their own production, their capacity to resist is also a function of their complicity. For every aspiring writer at the "periphery," there is a publisher at the "center," eager to seize upon their work as a source of marketable "otherness." Ask the Booker brothers, retailers of the postcolonial exotic.