

POSTCOLONIAL YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FICTION

Laura María Lojo-Rodríguez, Jorge Sacido-Romero
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Conveniently divided into four parts, *Postcolonial Youth in Contemporary British Fiction* (2021) deals with an often neglected yet much needed area of study in postcolonial literature: the representations of the young with a postcolonial background in British contemporary literature. Innovative in its content and its form, this collection of essays, edited by Laura María Lojo-Rodríguez, Jorge Sacido-Romero and Noemí Pereira-Ares, breathes fresh air into the fields of postcolonial literature and the short story genre simultaneously. Approaching these fields from an array of perspectives, this collection is a must for both neophytes and experienced academics, who will benefit from its reading and the inspirational, thorough and well-wrought research it contains.

Part one, “Youth, Home and Belonging”, comprises three chapters whose common aim is to (re)consider the meaning of home and belonging, of the community as seen through the prism of adolescence. The three chapters in Part two, “Youth, Nation and Narration”, focus on how narrative techniques are used to reassess issues such as national identity and citizenship, still pertinent to postcolonial youths nowadays. Liminality as a link between the short story and postcolonial subjectivity is the common ground upon which the three chapters in Part three, “Youth, Dislocation and Transformation”, explore the evolution of contemporary diasporic writing from an ethnic to a post-ethnic aesthetics. Bringing the collection to a close, the three chapters in Part four, “Youth, Religion and

Global Politics”, target such recent challenges to postcolonial youths as the idea of Muslimness or post-9/11 events.

The opening chapter in the collection, “Evil Children of the Diaspora: Andrea Levy’s ‘Deborah’”, written by Laura María Lojo-Rodríguez, considers Levy’s story “Deborah” as “pivoting on the ideological and cultural implications of interstices, liminal places and hybrid identities” (2021: 28) inspired by the 1960s North London childhood of the author. Not only does Levy’s narrative portray childhood as a rite of passage into adulthood, Lojo-Rodríguez contends, but it also engages with contemporary debates “addressing children’s welfare and adult responsibility in their upbringing and actions” (38) against the writer’s background as a Jamaican descendant growing up in North London.

Gérald Préher’s “The World was a Strange Place to Be Caught Living in” focuses on Jamaica Kincaid’s short novel *Annie John* (1985) and the diverse liminal aspects present in it. Unlike much research carried out on Kincaid and exploring the mother-daughter relationship, Préher’s focuses on the relationship of the eponymous protagonist with other girls in the story as a representation of her country’s history. Analysing the narrative through its sequential formal structure as well as the protagonist’s relationship with her girlfriends, Préher asserts that *Annie John* can be read in postcolonial terms as a representation of the dichotomous colonised-coloniser relationship, where the latter “can describe the mother, and [...] Annie herself, while the powerless may evoke the colonised, Annie’s weakest friends and also Annie whenever she presents herself as the victim” (2021: 55-56).

Closing Part one, Carmen Lara-Rallo’s “The Postcolonial Adolescent in Roshi Fernando’s *Homesick*” examines three short stories from Fernando’s collection to ascertain the postcolonial experience of adolescence as a liminal transition stage. By comparing the adolescent protagonists with their adult counterparts featured in other stories in the collection, Lara-Rallo attests to the potential for exploration of the adolescent phase in identity terms, both individual and collective, thus showing postcolonial youth’s “ambiguous condition of being neither children nor adults, while finding themselves split between here and there, inside and outside, as postcolonial subjects” (2021: 76).

Opening Part two, Isabel Carrera-Suárez and Carla Rodríguez-González’s “Growing Up Multiply: British Women Write the Ampersand Experience” tackles the construction of multiple mixed-race subjectivities in Britain by considering published life stories. By examining the data provided by censuses against the fictionalised life narratives in such works as *Tangled Roots: The True Life Stories about Mixed Race Britain* (Massey 2015), the authors conclude that these narratives provide a new vision of present-day Britain, portraying “individuals who

add a transnational, cosmopolitan component to Britishness compatible with avowed locality” (2021: 98).

“Multiethnicity, Liminality and Fantasy in Jamila Gavin’s Stories for Young Learners”, written by Laura Torres-Zúñiga, provides a refreshing reassessment of Gavin’s *The Magic Orange Tree and Blackberry Blue*, by considering both their literary and social worth as tools to question established social dichotomies. As the author remarks, by deploying multiethnic protagonists and a diverse array of cultural and folkloric references, Gavin’s stories “pave the way for the development of an inclusive multicultural canon based on a new shared heritage” (2021: 119), thus aiding children and adolescents of diverse cultural backgrounds in their process of “identification, cultural awareness and self-definition” (119).

Bringing Part two to a close, Isabel M. Andrés-Cuevas’s “A Right Little Good Little Indian Girl, Are You” considers the potential of coming-of-age stories to problematise the social and biological dimensions central to the construction of adolescent female characters belonging to an ethnic minority in the United Kingdom. Focusing on her stories “India” and “Time Traveller” included in her collection *Dynamite* (2014), Andrés-Cuevas analyses the work of Ravinder Randhawa, asserting that her narratives call for a recognition of an “all-encompassing, multifarious and hybrid world in which received ideas of nationalism, ethnicity or cultural identity” (2021: 142) need to be gauged anew.

Jorge Sacido-Romero’s “Multicultural Adolescence and Its Identitary Vicissitudes in Contemporary British Short Stories” inaugurates Part three by analysing the specific identitary changes of the multicultural protagonists in Hanif Kureishi’s “Touched” (2002), Leila Abouela’s “The Boy from the Kebab Shop” (2001) and Diriye Osman’s “Shoga” (2013). By considering both the formal aspects of these short narratives as well as their rendition of the liminality of adolescence, Sacido-Romero contends that these stories exemplify the complex and variable experience of “acculturation, adaptation and identity formation of multicultural youngsters who are influenced by more than one culture and set of values and models” (2021: 167).

“From ‘Partial Presence’ to ‘Disruptive Impurity’: The Diasporic Adolescent in Leila Abouela’s Short Fiction”, by Karima Thomas, considers Abouela’s “Tuesday Lunch”, “Make your Own Way Home” (*Coloured Lights* 2001) and “Summer Maze” (*Elsewhere Home* 2018) as short story cycles with the potential to portray embattled and provisional identities, emphasising the liminality of its protagonists. Reading them as a story cycle, Thomas asserts, allows for the three stories to show how Nadia (the protagonist) inhabits a space in between her two cultures. This heterotopia, a “transnational dynamic set in motion, where each culture is impacted by the other” (2021: 191), showcases the concept of liminality as home.

Bettina Jansen's "I'm the Only One: Transgressing Notions of Postcolonial Adolescence in the Contemporary Black British Short Story", brings a sense of closure to Part three. Jansen's objective, to explore the ways in which short fiction offers alternative notions of postcolonial adolescence, is brought to fruition by a careful consideration of Zadie Smith's short story "I'm the Only One" (2000). After considering the concepts of adolescence and its links to the postcolonial and to the short story genre, Jansen analyses Smith's story, concluding that the figure of the adolescent is used to "challenge the easy binaries between self and other, white and black, Anglo-British and postcolonial, man and woman" (2021: 211).

Claire Chambers and Indrani Karmakar's "The Virgin's Consent: British Muslim Identity, Cultural Heritage and Gender in Young Adult Fiction" is the opening chapter of the last part of this collection. A careful selection of two short stories (Sufiya Ahmed's "Tears and Tantrums" and Nazneen Ahmed's "Ghazal") and two novels (Sufiya Ahmed's *Secrets of the Henna Girl*, published in 2002, and Muhammad Khan's *I am Thunder*, published in 2018) written by Muslim-heritage authors in Britain and focusing on young women protagonists allows Chambers and Karmakar to dissect some of the most contentious and urgent topics in multicultural Britain, such as the triangulation between culture, gender and identity. These narratives, the authors argue, show that in South Asian Muslim society, "culture and religion often intersect in such a way that it becomes difficult to separate them from each other" (2021: 232), profoundly impacting women.

"Reading for Resilience", written by Blanka Grzegorzczuk, explores the formal aspects of twenty-first-century postcolonial children's fiction about terror. By analysing a wide range of children's novelists and considering how different modes of terror can transmit the experience of trauma and reliance, Grzegorzczuk asserts that these narratives refashion the ties binding "young readers to their cultural environments, opening their critical understanding and moral imagination to new possibilities of cross-cultural connection and interpretation" (2021: 250).

Noemí Pereira-Ares's "'Growing Up with Anxiety(ies)': from Islamophobia to Brexit in *A Change is Gonna Come*" brings Part four—and thus this collection—to a close. Basing her analysis on socio- and psychological research on young identities as well as on liminal approaches to the short story, Pereira-Ares examines Nikesh Shukla's "We Who?" and Yasmin Rahman's "Fortune Favours the Bold" to ascertain the different social, psychological and identitary anxieties which affect the young protagonists. Her insightful consideration of these stories allows Pereira-Ares to conclude that, despite their differences in terms of themes and structural elements, these narratives show "the irresoluteness and openendedness characteristic of the short story genre to adumbrate change and transformation" (2021: 274), simultaneously interrogating the past and reassessing the present.

Reviews

Postcolonial Youth in Contemporary British Fiction (2021) is a formidable scholarly achievement. Combining the academic expertise of the various contributors with an elegance in format, presentation and style, this collection of essays manages to bring new, ground-breaking research to the fields of postcolonialism and the short story. By contributing insightful explorations, such as that of the construction of the adolescent female from a minority background, *Postcolonial Youth in Contemporary British Fiction* (2021) opens up a relatively novel and unexplored area for other researchers to follow suit. This collection is definitely an exemplary masterpiece of academic performance.

Works Cited

LOJO-RODRÍGUEZ, Laura María, Jorge SACIDO-ROMERO and Noemí PEREIRA-ARES. (eds.) 2021. *Postcolonial Youth in Contemporary British Fiction*. Leiden: Brill