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Louise Yelin, *From the Margins of the Empire: Christina Stead, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998

The aim of the book is to present the writers' different strategies for negotiating between "the margins" they were or are in different ways associated with and the metropolis, as well as to show the consequences of adopting a national identity in the postcolonial context. Yelin also attempts to outline the way and the circumstances in which this conscious process is practicable. The author's choice of the three utterly distinct examples of national identities, such as the unsettled one in the case of Stead, Lessing's emigration from Southern Rhodesia to England, and Gordimer's remaining in South Africa despite her opposition to the regime of apartheid, gives quite a broad spectrum for the chronological presentation of the problems. The attitude towards their national identities was not, however, the only criterion for the selection of the authors. The other principle behind this choice is the authors' contribution to the genres of political novel and the novel of ideas, and, as such, their being the continuation of the male European tradition of writers such as Conrad or Dostoevsky, rather than being part of "women's writing" or "feminist fiction."

The method selected is that of eclectic critical approach, combining the discussion of feminist criticism with colonial and postcolonial theories of nationalism and national identity. The author quotes a selection of theorists, critics and psychologists such as Homi Bhabha, Michail Bakhtin, Edward Said, Michel Foucault, Jean-Françoise Lyotard, Elaine Showalter, Sigmund Freud, and many others. Moreover, numerous cross-references to the issues of minor concern to the discussion of national identity are given in the extremely informative footnotes. What deserves recognition is the fact that the author finds many intertextual relations between the novels she discusses, and not only various literary works, for example those of Shakespeare,

Conrad, James, Austen, Forster, Dickens, Joyce, Melville, Dostoevsky, Woolf or Schreiner, but also films such as *Brief Encounter* or *Rif Raf*.

Another advantage of the book is its structure clearly specified in the introductory chapter, which makes this study easy to follow. The three parts are each devoted to one of the three female writers, and further subdivided into chapters dealing with particular novels; the conclusion outlines the parallels between the oeuvres of the three writers in terms of national identity, as well as their contribution to the genre of national family romance.

The first part, "Christina Stead: Buffoon Odyssey," consists of two chapters. The first one discusses *The Man Who Loved Children* as a national family romance in which its author adopted her Australian experience into the American context, where "Australia" stands for the "forgotten maternal origin," while "America" symbolises the paternal dominant order. This binary opposition is also present at the level of characters in the book, as the protagonist wavers between the two spheres of her step-mother/mother and father, who also represent the above-mentioned cultures. Furthermore, in the depiction of the patriarchal family of the Pollits the critic finds parallels between the patriarchal, colonial and social dominations. The novel's preoccupation with the American culture is placed in juxtaposition with such texts as *Moby Dick*, considered to be misogynist, and *Gone with the Wind*, regarded as racist. In the chapter devoted to the novel *For Love Alone* Louise Yelin raises the question of the nature of writing from exile as an attempt to overcome colonial and provincial limitations and to create a new identity that conquers them – the issue which concerns the main character of the novel, as well as its author. Furthermore, the critic draws attention to the fact that *For Love Alone* rewrites the Odysseus myth and in the main character's quest for self-identification, Stead defies the female constraints associated with Penelope and thus, once again, confronts patriarchy.

Part II of the book entitled "Doris Lessing: In Pursuit of the English" starts with the chapter on *In Pursuit of the English: A Documentary*, the text in which Lessing categorises herself as an English writer. The critic emphasises the idea that in the text the narratives of race, class and gender interact. Consecutively, she focuses on the construction of identity in the *The Golden Notebook*, beginning with the discussion of two essays by Lessing, namely "The Small Personal Voice" (1956–1957) and the 1971 preface to *The Golden Notebook*, both of which comment on the shortcomings of the British post-war culture and set the stage for the novel's criticism of the emerging postcolonial order that mirrors the previous one. One of the issues raised is the location of women on the political scene. However, the critic treats the novel as the text focusing in the construction

of the main character on gender problems, while omitting those of race and class, and therefore creating the novel's reality as the reflection of the social relations it condemns. Subsequently, Yelin proceeds to discuss *The Fifth Child* and *The Good Terrorist*, both of which belong to the genre of condition-of-England novel and analyse the Britain and its culture of the Thatcherite period. Here the critic accuses Doris Lessing of being incoherent and of ignoring certain relevant aspects, such as, for example, the omission of the factors which caused the opposition of the leftists presented in *The Good Terrorist*. The last argument is questionable as the choice of material and themes is usually arbitrary and difficult, if not impossible, to assess.

The last part, "Nadine Gordimer: Literature and Politics in South Africa", opens with the mention of the writer's two essays "Where Do Whites Fit In?" and "Literature and Politics in South Africa," which gives the background for the discussion of *Burger's Daughter*, the novel exploring the implications of white people's determination to stay in South Africa, whose apartheid order they oppose; their South African identity and the query if they can play any role in this order. Moreover, the book rewrites the opposition between the Forsterian idea of "connection" and the Conradian view of its impossibility, two versions of the British novel of empire, into the postcolonial South African context. Thus, the novel inquires about the possibility of connection between the whites and the blacks. What deserves attention, however, is the critic's objectivity. For example, unlike feminist scholars, she does not accuse Gordimer of being too preoccupied with racial matters at the expense of gender. In the discussion of *Burger's Daughter* Yelin underlines instances in which Gordimer tackles both issues or even emphasises the latter. Similarly to the chapter that has just been discussed, the consecutive one commences with the presentation of two essays "Living in the Interregnum" and "The Essential Gesture," which illustrate the political and cultural circumstances in which *A Sport of Nature* was written, and leads to the analysis of this book, which forwards the issue of the role of the whites in the South African order and changes it into the question of the nature of this role. Moreover, Yelin finds in *A Sport of Nature* a generic hybrid, combining among others the decolonisation of female novel of sensibility, utopian pastiche, as well as another rewriting of the picaresque and national family romance, which is Kipling's *Kim*. Finally, *My Son's Story* is depicted as the book whose aim is to create a non-racial South African identity by presenting an interracial relationship, as well as the family of "coloureds," which, as it is argued, distorts racial categories. In addition, the critic studies how the relations within the family in the novel reflect those depicted in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

This critical work provides not only a very informative and enriching discussion of particular novels, supported by their authors' essayistic oeuvre,

but it also emphasises multi-level parallels between them, as well as their connection with numerous texts of the European literary canon, which they rewrite into the postcolonial context. Moreover, it offers a diachronic account of how the issue of national identity is reflected in the novels discussed. Critical, discerning and objective, this publication is, therefore, undoubtedly one of the major contributions to the study of the three writers, and cannot be omitted by anyone interested in postcolonial literature.

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