Three Women Writing the Postcolonial Experience


Abstract

Substantial controversy concerning authorial intentions surrounds many popular memoirs. Still more problematic is the issue of historical events as represented in the memoir; often, the account of a well-known event in a memoir may differ from the "objective" historical version of that same event. With the increasing number of postcolonial memoirs making bestseller lists in the US, many well-meaning readers often oversimplify, essentialize, and fetishize a gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, or society, making the author’s experience and views decidedly “other.” Instead of applying postcolonial theory to each memoir, which can lead to unintentionally essentializing and fetishizing a race, ethnicity, religion, society, or culture, the reader concentrates on three different types of memoir: the trauma memoir, the coming of age memoir, and the academic memoir. Chapter One examines Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings as a trauma memoir, illustrating the steps she takes to recovery after childhood abuse. Chapter Two focuses on coming of age in Marie Arana’s American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood, showing that human connections help bridge cultural divides and develop identity. Chapter Three studies Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books, examining how this academic memoir draws parallels between the fiction in literature and the reality of life in Iran. By revisiting what the genre of memoir and the work memoir entails and promises, readers can see that memoir authors are not promising a historically accurate, unbiased, or representative view of a culture, race, ethnicity, gender, society, or religion. Rather, these writers are re-experiencing their own lives through memory and showing how the fine line between fiction and non-fiction offers a multiplicity of realities, and in this multiplicity, the reality of the “objective” historical events and the reality of the author’s experience can exist in the same space. By focusing on the genre of memoir, its purpose, and its responsibilities, readers can glean not just from the accurate relation of events but from their own experience in reading memoir.

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The term postcolonial in the phrase "postcolonial women" turns out to be just as problematic as the metaphoric uses of other words related to colonialism. "The coupling of postcolonial with woman," as Sara Suleri points out, almost "invariably leads to the simplicities that underline unthinking celebrations of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for 'the good.' Such metaphoricity cannot be called exactly essentialist, but it certainly functions as an impediment to a reading that attempts to look beyond obvious questions of good and Collectively, the essays suggest that women's writing and women's experiences from diverse cultures go beyond any straightforward notion of a threefold structure of separation, transition, and incorporation. Contributors seek ways of linking writing on rites of passage to feminist, postcolonial, and psychoanalytic theories which foreground margins, borders, and the outsider. The three opening essays explore the work of the Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera, whose groundbreaking work explored taboo subjects such as infanticide and incest. A wide range of other essays focus on writers from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia, and Europe, including Jean Rhys, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Jean Arasanayagam, Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, and Eva Sallis. By definition, postcolonialism is a period of time after colonialism, and postcolonial literature is typically characterized by its opposition to the colonial. However, some critics have argued that any literature that expresses an opposition to colonialism, even if it is produced during a colonial period, may be defined as postcolonial, primarily due to its oppositional nature. Postcolonial literature often focuses on race relations and the effects of racism and usually indicted white and/or colonial societies. In her introduction to Post-Colonial and African American Women's Writing, published in 2000, Gina Wisker notes that the indictment present in many postcolonial texts tends to produce guilt or feelings of inherited complicity in many readers.