

*Narratives of Inequality: Postcolonial Literary Economics*

By Melissa Kennedy. Palgrave, New York, 2018.

RRP: €99.99 ISBN: 978-3-3195995-7-1

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Whereas postcolonial criticism might have been entrapped into culturalism and identity politics, the novel, at least its best specimens, continues to address the more fundamental question of economic inequality whose relevance has been rediscovered since the 2008 financial crisis – or so Melissa Kennedy asserts in her latest book, *Narratives of Inequality*. The book offers an extensive survey of postcolonial fiction across different historical times and locations. Convinced that literary studies should play an important role in the critique of global capitalism along the lines of Thomas Piketty and Amartya Sen, Kennedy selects novels that explicitly handle economic vocabulary and subject-matter. According to her, these works register the same or similar structures of inequality regardless of their specific local, historical, and cultural contexts.

Kennedy's coverage of a range of postcolonial fiction is impressive. The three main chapters focus on the periods of colonialism, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism respectively, and each chapter discloses similarities among novels widely different from one another. As a specialist in New Zealand literature, she emphasizes the fundamental connectedness between the colonial past and the neocolonial and neoliberal present, between British India and New Zealand, between African and white-settler colonies, and between London immigrants and urban Māori. Surely, the fact that most of these texts are written in English serves as evidence that they are products of the global economic system. Although Kennedy does not pay much attention to the question of language as well as to "cultural difference," it may not be entirely futile to ask if colonial and postcolonial experience written in imperialist languages other than English, such as *Zainichi* literature (ethnic Korean literature written in Japanese), could fit in the same list of narratives of inequality.

Kennedy's approach to literary work is generalizing rather than scrutinizing. Novels are often reduced into their storylines stripped of textual and linguistic complexities. The book seems to invest more words and pages in explaining economic theories than in reading novels, to the extent that we may wonder why we need to read novels instead of economic monographs (Kennedy suggests that the former are accessible to wider audience because they are easier to read). Literary critics may be disconcerted by sweeping statements like this one: "These novels, which are not only stylistically different but are also set in divergent historical periods, political regimes, and in developed (Australia), middle-income (India, South Africa), and developing (Kenya, Nigeria) nations, nonetheless all convey similar structures of investment and labour and the means by which they are enforced" (104). The late Edward Said might have criticized her for "a quick, superficial reading" that moves quickly "into general or even concrete statements about vast structures of power or into vaguely therapeutic structures of salutary redemption". Yet Kennedy is deliberate in her method of reading. According to her, literary texts can be valued as sources of information about material lives. She insists that literary critics have been focusing too much on formal, textual, and aesthetic aspects of literature, and thereby fail to discuss worldly contents which are what "lay readers" enjoy reading. She claims to have been inspired by Rita Felski's *Use of Literature* (2008), although it may remain doubtful whether she is a faithful practitioner of Felski's ethical reading. Felski's anti-theoretical and non-ideological posture has an obvious undertone of Levinas and Derrida, which is missing in Kennedy's utilitarian criticism.

More questionable may be her assumptions that postcolonial criticism celebrates difference and rejects universalism, and that it overlooks the common economic structures portrayed by postcolonial fiction. Yet, needless to say, postcolonial criticism in its best form has always retained a firm grip on material lives and infrastructural issues. Kennedy repeats clichéd generalizations such as “the postcolonial emphasis on cultural difference as a rejection of universalism and Eurocentrism” (13), but rejecting Eurocentrism is not the same thing as rejecting universalism even if the two are often confused and conflated. Aijaz Ahmad stood on his solid Marxist ground when he criticized Fredric Jameson’s “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” (1986), and his criticism was based on the proposition that there should be only one world of global capitalism, the first and third worlds operating under the same world system, the second world existing as a resistance force within the capitalist regime. Chandra Mohanty rebuts the prevailing criticism that her epoch-making essay (“Under Western Eyes”) called for anti-universalism. Indeed, her 1984 essay does not uniformly criticize so-called “western feminism,” and refers positively to Maria Mies’ materialist analysis of Indian lace makers (*The Lace Makers in Narsapur*, 1982) in which the economic precarity of “housewives” in India is analysed as a structural problem caused, exploited, and reinforced by global capitalism complicit with local patriarchy.

Kennedy and these materialist-postcolonialists are significantly different in that the former embraces Walter Benn Michaels’s single-determination model in which political inequalities in gender and “race” relations are considered subordinate to economic inequality. Intersectionality is rarely a question for Kennedy, who repeatedly points out that discriminated ethnic minorities suffer from poverty and exploitation (which is often the case), suggesting that the relationship between “races” parallel that between rich and poor. If so, the category of “race” would not be particularly useful for analytical purposes: class might be just sufficient. And, to be sure, skin colours are irrelevant for the “modern thieves” who do not hesitate to exploit their own people. A memorable passage is quoted from the English translation of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on the Cross* to illustrate the continuity between colonial and neocolonial regimes: “how can you allow the imperialists to milk their country and yours! Don’t we have people of our own who can milk the masses?” (125). It should be noted, however, that the novel was originally written in Gikuyu and was primarily addressed to Kenyan readers, for whom the “race” question did not have the same relevance as for metropolitan minorities. Postcolonialists have been vigilant against macroscopic generalizations precisely because the questions of power and economy are intertwined differently depending on the specific social context, and economic inequalities often result from the combination and complicity of global and local power structures. Since the 2008 meltdown we have seen the world reduced into the abstract opposition between rich and poor, ignoring the valuable insights on actual complexity offered by postcolonial studies of the previous generation.