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Theoretical reflections and academic practices originating in degrees of discontent with the term “postcolonial” as well as with the post-structuralist tradition thus labelled have become rather common in recent years (Slemon, Spivak, Hodge and Mishra, Parry). This line of critical investigation is picked up in innovative ways by Nivedita Majumdar, who voices a certain frustration in front of texts which, under a “cosmopolitan patina” (15), are, according to her, merely expressing objectionable forms of “neoliberal universalism” (ibid.). Examples are analysed in the first part of the volume and include such texts as Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Tagore’s The Home and the World, Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost, Lahiri’s The Lowland – Ondaatje’s novel being analysed as carrying forms of “neo-orientalism,” for instance. The crucial aim of Majumdar’s intervention is to tackle the notion of universalism and to negotiate a way between the specious use of the notion by Eurocentric thought after the Enlightenment, on the one hand, and an embracing of geographical and cultural particularities, on the other. The author recognizes in certain novelistic and autobiographical texts “a radical universalism, embedded in the local and experiential but connected to the wider human condition” (17). The project seems to stem from her situated knowledge of Indian literature and an apparent unease in the face of how “(m)ost of the post-Rushdie generation of Indian Anglophone writers – freed of the colonial compulsion to hone into cultural particularities that constitute the logic of the exotic – have chosen instead to explore universalist themes” (107). This very trend is
criticized for having been overly circulated and even canonized to the point of occupying the whole field of “postcolonial” literature while more bona fide literature might have been unduly overlooked.

2 The volume is divided into two parts which present opposing but complementary points of view – and unexpectedly, given the scope of the project, draw their titles from William Blake’s writings. The first part (“A Grain of Sand”) examines novels which, according to Majumdar, an Associate Professor of English at John Jay College (USA), betray the ongoing exoticisation of the Global South and are still keenly studied and foregrounded by main tendencies in the (vast) field of “postcolonial” literature. The second part (“The World in the Grain”) makes a case for another category of texts which the scholar identifies as belonging to “radical universalism.” Surprisingly, and perhaps also slightly problematically from a methodological point of view, the first part is longer by one chapter than the second, so that reasons for not reading certain texts exceed in length discussions of other texts that are signposted as particularly worthy of the reader’s attention.

3 The introduction situates the monograph in the wake of such authors as Timothy Brennan, Arif Dirlik, Neil Lazarus, Benita Parry, Simon Gikandi or Aijaz Ahmad (whose In Theory is declared to be “perhaps the closest predecessor in approach and substance,” 9). It opposes “texts and interpretations that remain mired in categories of essentialized difference” (6) and texts which Majumdar sees as illustrating “radical universalism,” defined as an intellectual positionality springing from rootedness and ideological clarity. The distinction is not necessarily easy to grasp – especially since such categories as authenticity are, with very good reasons, avoided – and the distinction is mostly apparent through the examples selected, for each group of texts. While the first part takes issue with texts that are seen as insufficiently anchored to the context of their plots, the second part makes a vibrant case for reading Mahasweta Devi’s Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha (which was written in Bengali and translated into English by Gayatri Spivak), Mourid Barghouti’s I Saw Ramallah (written in Arabic and then translated into English), or A. Sivanandan’s When Memory Dies.

4 Beyond the specific content of the chapters, this critical angle raises the issue of the reasons why we read, and of the categories that must be used in order to assess fiction (and non-fiction, in the case of autobiographical works). It has long been assumed that postcolonial studies will introduce such questions as the ethical accountability of authors and the responsibility of readers. Academics in the field have manifested sound activism and necessary biases. To accompany Majumdar in these pages is to interrogate how interpretations can – and perhaps must, since the take in the volume is resolutely preceptive – be formulated. The volume, therefore, does not dialogue at all with African authors, either writing in English or in other languages.

5 The World in a Grain of Sand makes for a thought-provoking, challenging, and occasionally vertiginous read. Beyond opinions, sensitivities and literary tastes, it begs the question of the value of texts – a difficult but recurring question in a field which has challenged canonization but found itself mired in unavoidable practices of evaluation. It also lays bare the possible configurations in which works of art can be co-opted within the multi-culturalist, corporatist frame of neoliberalism. The author certainly takes risks, and will hardly leave the reader indifferent or even distant. One can still regret that the debate does not include critiques of the world of publishing: although the works of Sarah Brouillette duly figure in a footnote (but unfortunately not
in the index), the volume does not go into why Jhumpa Lahiri or Michael Ondaatje’s novels are widely circulated and therefore, read at all. All the texts mentioned are caught within a neo-liberal circuit of capitalistic logic whose unpacking would have largely fed the debate and explained away a few of the author’s critiques – starting with a careful distinction between the various languages in which texts are first written. The volume places side by side novels and memoirs written in English and others written in other, less “global” languages, and this asymmetry is problematically silenced.

Yet, *The World in a Grain of Sand* appears as a necessary read for scholars and students of “postcolonial” literature as it engages with methodological and ethical choices which we all must make as we read, teach and engage with the choices and combinations we make or do not make; one might not go for the same texts as those suggested here, but one will benefit from Majumdar’s articulated, and indeed radical, statements. Bearing in mind, however, that, as Salman Rushdie phrases it, “Authenticity is the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism” (67).

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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Kerry-Jane Wallart is a Professor of Postcolonial Studies at the University of Orléans. Her research focuses on the literatures and arts of the Caribbean and the Caribbean diasporas in the United States, Canada and Great Britain. She has co-edited a volume on Jamaica Kincaid (Wagadu, 2018) and two volumes on Jean Rhys (Bloomsbury, 2020 and Routledge, 2023). She has published extensively on a range of postcolonial and/or diasporic texts with a particular interest in unconventional generic forms and performative interventions. She has also guest-edited three issues of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, which is becoming *Postcolonial Literatures and Arts* with the present issue.