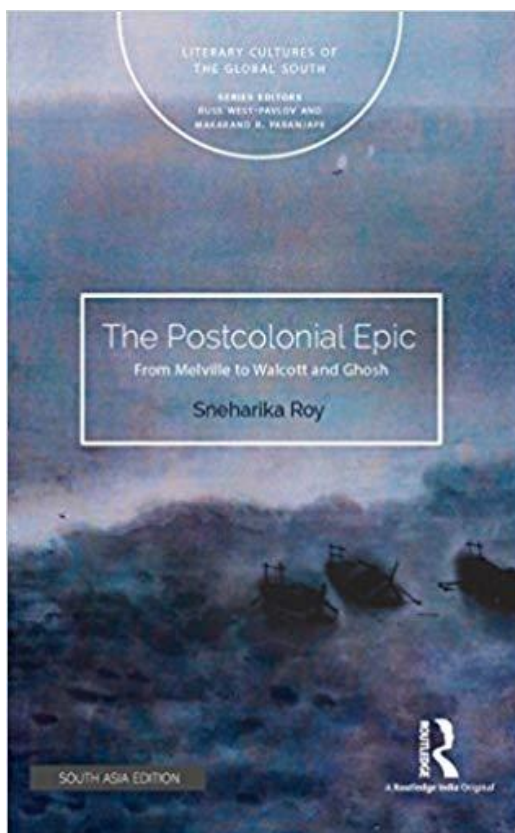


Sneharika Roy, *The Postcolonial Epic: From Melville to Walcott and Ghosh*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018. 208 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1138063631.



As the author states at the beginning of her masterful study of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* and Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy – *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* – “the absence of a sustained investigation of the genre of the epic in postcolonial theory” is obviously owed to, on the one hand, the fact that it has been deemed too compatible with the overall postcolonial concern with history, territory and identity while, on the other, it has been deemed incompatible with the postcolonial agenda since it represents the “genre of imperial authority *par excellence*” (1). In contrast, Roy suggests that the question as to the status of the epic “in a post-imperial age across the literary cultures of the Global North and South” can and should be raised and investigated (2), not however, by perceiving of it as a literary representation of a centred nation state (like Virgil’s *Aeneid* or Camões’s *Lusiads*) but as one of

decentred, transnational communities. Here, *Moby Dick* represents the foundational postcolonial epic, a text, Roy hypothesises, that deserves scrutiny not the least because of its impact on the postcolonial profile of Walcott's epic poem and Ghosh's narrative trilogy.

Each of the three main chapters of her book focuses on one classical rhetorical device of the epic genre: epic simile, genealogy and ekphrasis. Their detailed analyses are directed at understanding the texts under purview as postcolonial revisions of the political epic or as traditional narrative of empire. Additionally, the juxtaposition of the "paradigmatic paradox at work in European epic: *the importance of mobile, migrating traditions to the rooted, nation-centred epic genre*" (as exemplified in the *Aeneid* and other traditional epics that "employ a hybrid poetics of migration to express a monocultural politics of nation" [18]), with the important status accorded to travel/voyage/migration in *Moby Dick*, *Omeros* and the *Ibis* trilogy, signals a "poetics of migration [that articulates] a politics of migrating identities *irreducible to a single national norm*" (19; my emphasis). In other words, in these postcolonial epics the poetics of migration is not directed at an assertion of nation, national history and culture as do the European epics cited, but foregrounds the ambivalence between the local and the cosmopolita - an ambivalence given variously expression in Ishmael's first-person 19th century narrative, the end-of-the 20th century Saint Lucian poet-persona's poem and Ghosh's omniscient narrator's 19th century epic on Indian migration and the first Opium War at the end of the 1830s.

The Postcolonial Epic represents an impressive, highly relevant and complementary contribution to the postcolonial discourse and is grounded in the critic's profound understanding and apposite citation of poststructuralist and postcolonial theorems and in the display of her impressive familiarity with the history, the generic nature and the reception of the European, Indian and partly also the African epic. It thus presents a real challenge to any reviewer, especially when s/he is compelled to compress two hundred pages of Roy's magnificently detailed reading of the epics, combined with her concise presentation of arguments, into the ordinary length of a review of about 1500 words. I set my task then, after neglecting her claim of defining *Moby Dick* as a postcolonial epic – which would require a meticulous response – and the "Introduction" with its discussion of "*Which kind of epic? Whose epic?*" (3) that brackets detailed references to the epic genre's critical reception, migrating epic practices and recent scholarship on the author's texts, to illustrate selected examples of the critic's procedure of assigning simile, genealogy and ekphrasis to the postcolonial and to ask to what extent they represent postcolonial epic narratives "in a post-imperial age across the literary cultures of the Global North and South." (2).

"Rallying Tropes: The Language of Violence and the Violence of Language" concludes on the note that postcolonial similes destabilise "hegemonic systems of signification" (81), as does for example wood imagery like a tree, a heterotropic

simile regarding Ahab's character, actions and fate. In *Omeros*, the Caribbean fishermen's act of felling St. Lucia's cedars stands metaphorically for "felling" the Arawaks to build their boats. The wooden schooner *Ibis* does not merely transport Indian migrants away from their oppressive living conditions at home to new diasporic homes and identities, but by inserting the hypothetical simile "as if": the *Ibis* journey takes the *girmitiya* to their rebirth in a new community, a rhetorical device that implicitly questions the Indian/Brahmanical philosophical/religious concept of life as *maya* and rebirth as *moksha*/liberation. Finally, a negative simile like Melville calling the *Pequod* crew, its whalers, "raw recruit(s)" (55); or Walcott's negative and subversive metaphor of the "dismissal of martial combat" (57) by foregrounding the peacefulness of the fishermen's lives on St. Lucia: all these similes testify to the postcolonial shift from action to figuration, from pedagogy to performance. Whaling is superior to epic battle and the fishermen's peaceful struggle to martial epic. In sum, similes in the postcolonial epic reject "the genre of Western epic" (55), tropes that revise Eurocentric paradigms of colonialism and imperialism.

These selected postcolonial epic similes, augmented in the first chapter, are also read, respectively, against the background of the interethnic make-up of the *Pequod* crew, the bardic continuum signified by "Omeros" and the multi-regional, multi-faith *girmitiya* on the *Ibis*: tropes contributing to and constructive of the textual process of creating transnational allegories with their focus on cultural hybridity. Though Roy does not omit pointing at the danger of overloading figuration vis-à-vis diegesis in the face of enduring tension in the postcolonial world between utopian aspirations and the reality of oppression, the occurrence of these rhetorical devices nonetheless affirms her view that postcolonial epic similes "etch alternative histories... in miniaturised form" (82). Alternative histories, furthermore, that manifest themselves through an employment of genealogy and prophecy, both macro-narrative structures of the epic genre, are discussed from a postcolonial angle in "History in the Future Tense: Genealogy and Prophecy."

Genealogy (also manifested in the genealogical catalogue), an epic convention Roy illustrates inter alia in her excursion to the *Aeneid* as one of its structural elements, is problematised and resisted, she proposes, in *Moby Dick*, *Omeros* and the *Ibis* trilogy for its intimate conjunction with prophecy that in the classical epic proleptically claims the legitimacy of empire. The postcolonial epic exposes such teleological formulation of history-making as contrived by questioning the linearity of time as constitutive of history projected into the future. Thus, by relating back to the 1637 massacre of the Pequot, a Native American tribe, the *Pequod*'s name prophecies the ship's sinking, as does its captain's name Ahab prophecies his fate by calling to mind the fate of king Ahaba in the Old Testament. Similarly, in *Omeros* Plunkett's "Homeric flights of fancy... represent a form of historical rigging" that cannot conceal his status as "an

armchair admiral in old age” (94) and Britain’s rule of St. Lucia long since gone. In contrast, the *Sea of Poppies* simile/example mentioned above stands for an optimistic prophecy – death is overcome by rebirth – and thus appears to contradict Roy’s argument. Interestingly, it does not, once we remember that this prophecy is uttered by a late 20th century omniscient narrator whose story is not emblematic of a disjunction between narrator and narrative (like Melville’s and Walcott’s) but, as Roy puts it, “rejects both the voluble, unstable narrative voice [Ishmael] and the confessional mode of the alienated third-world poet-intellectual [Walcott’s persona]... to give centre stage to the subaltern’s story” (131) – to which I shall return.

In addition to the important role the genealogy-prophecy conjunction plays, genealogy is also mediated through the individual’s need for “genealogical and cultural continuity” memorized and recorded in “ancestral tapestries” (98) in the political epic, yet again revised in its postcolonial counterpart. With *Moby Dick*’s crew we face blanks, a “genealogical vacuum [that] remains largely enigmatic” (103), while Walcott’s characters’ genealogy is rooted in the extermination of the Arawaks and the deracination of their ancestors transported as slaves to the Caribbean.

Again in contrast, the first-generation Mauritian community’s claim of continuity grounded in its genealogy results from Ghosh’s choice of an omniscient narrator’s disposition of a time frame that permits him to tell of their ancestors’ experience of leave-taking and voyaging in a specifically epic manner: by ekphrasis, the third epic convention Roy interrogates in her exploration of the postcolonial epic in her, to my mind, most erudite chapter, “The Artifice of Eternity – Ekphrasis as ‘an-other’ epic.”

Deeti’s memorial (or memory) temple visually commemorates genealogy (as by comparison does the doubloon, “the clearest metonym of ekphrastic otherness in” *Moby Dick* (161) and is praised as “a master stroke of ekphrastic otherness... the site of the trilogy’s most sophisticated figurative mechanisms” (171). The assembly of “objects” Deeti has placed in it – such as statues of Hindu gods, relics of family, individuals depicted metonymically, images she has drawn or an ornamental cartouche referencing the history of a person’s name (173) – commemorates Deeti’s origin, displacement and new life and, importantly, visually represents her, an illiterate person’s, genealogy – “an ingenious way,” Roy convincingly argues, “out of the representational dilemma articulated by Gayatri Spivak in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’” (174). One cannot but agree with her conclusion that “[v]isual self-representation both in individual and collective terms can represent the cathartic ‘therapy of self-representation’ that has been traditionally ‘denied to diasporic peoples,’” as Vijay Mishra had put it.

For lack of space I must refrain from adding further illustrations – among them of the “furious trope of madness” and epic comedy, mimicry and “Third Space,” the elegiac in postcolonial ekphrasis or “postcolonial ekphrasis [as] utopia

disguised as elegy” (17), staging of the past, and finally, invoking “romance of navigation” or “colonial entrepreneurship,” the latter to be traced in the political epic. Instead, I strongly recommend reading the book and discovering a host of further detailed analyses that eventually prompt Roy to conclude that in contrast to the political epic, the postcolonial is reluctant to offer counter models to the nation state for the future but manifests “a sense of utopian opacity” (184).

Rounded off by an extensive bibliography of carefully referenced studies, Roy’s scholarly achievement is to be highly lauded – and tested as to its relevance to epic writing from the Global South generally. It will be left to future explorations where narratives of an epic, of an historical dimension can be placed – texts authored for example by A.K. Armah, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Masizi Kunene from Africa, of the Caribbean writers V.S. Naipaul and Kamau Brathwaite or Vikram Seth and Mulk Raj Anand’s *Lalu* trilogy from India, not to leave out Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Would similes, genealogy and ekphrasis, would the whole arsenal of epic conventions explored here substantiate Roy’s thesis? These are questions hopefully to be tackled in the future by scholars taking up the (metonymical) glove from *The Postcolonial Epic*.

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