

Resistance in the Affirmative

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David Jefferess. *Postcolonial Resistance: Culture, Liberation, and Transformation*. University of Toronto Press, 2008. 224 pp.

In his first book, *Postcolonial Resistance: Culture, Liberation, and Transformation*, David Jefferess surveys the meaning of resistance in postcolonialism and attempts to develop a working definition of the term which, while still narrow enough to be effective, can lend itself broadly against interlocking systems of oppression. This project is necessary, he rightly argues, for while “resistance” is a common referent in postcolonial thought, it has not been fully theorized (3). Further, Jefferess states that the popular conceptions of resistance that do circulate in postcolonial thought are inadequate and unsuited to the task of transformation. Resistance in Bhabha, for example, is overly reliant on colonial subjects to reflect the failure of the colonial system through processes of subversion (7). As for Fanon, his idea of resistance is based on a Manichean notion of power which leads to the demand for violence (5). Jefferess does, however, admire and echo Fanon’s vision of liberation as an assertion of humanity (49). Jefferess invites postcolonial theorists and critics alike to re-imagine the concept of resistance as something akin to liberation.

Although Jefferess does not deny the power of resistance through negation, he is more interested in “forms of social and cultural ‘resistance’ that are performed as an animation of an alternative to the direct and structural violence of colonialism rather than merely a refusal or manipulation of, or protest against, colonial power” (21). He calls for a concept of resistance which accounts “for the way in which other forms of domination and exploitation (patriarchy, capitalism, caste, etc.) are inter-related with colonial power” (180). Jefferess turns to Gandhian thought and the idea of reconciliation in South Africa as examples of “alternative narratives of resistance” that offer the promise of liberation without reverting to a fundamentally flawed oppositional politics (144). To explore these examples, he deliberately combines literary studies with the study of non-literary political and social writing and action.

Jefferess engages at length with the question of whether, as critics say, “postcolonial theory has seemingly reduced colonialism to a cultural project” and shifted away from material concerns (57). Jefferess intervenes at the point of tension between literary postcolonial scholars and non-literary ones. It is a tension that those working

in postcolonial studies are familiar with: despite the purported interdisciplinarity of the field at this moment, social scientists and cultural theorists often object to what they perceive to be a prejudice towards literary studies in the field. At the heart of this critique is an anxiety about failing to address the on-the-ground, daily lived experiences of material inequalities such as hunger, poverty and dispossession. Instead of succumbing to one position over another, however, Jefferess chooses both.

In an epigraph to his book Jefferess draws on the words of Ben Okri to articulate this position: “[s]tories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations.” As an example of this type of synergy between the story, the self, and the nation, Jefferess’ book provides a persuasive model. His literary analysis is not meant merely to illuminate the examples from the more “political” work that he studies, although at times his reading of Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* is, as he admits, little more than a review of Gandhian thought as manifested in the early Indian village novel. By contrast, his work on Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* does an excellent job of dealing simultaneously with politics, theory, criticism and literature in a productive manner. Jefferess works towards this equilibrium in the belief that “the discourse of colonialism and its material structures enable one another” (28).

Although the book is divided into four chapters, the first two dealing with the theorization of resistance in the works of Fanon, Bhabha and Said, and the final two focused specifically on the case studies of Indian independence and post-apartheid South Africa, it is perhaps more useful here to read across the chapters rather than within them. In the first chapter, Jefferess’ explorations of Gandhi’s early career in South Africa and his lifework in India serve as an excellent introduction to Gandhian thought framed within a postcolonial context and furthermore confirm Jefferess’ later claim that Gandhi has been underserved and underrepresented by postcolonial studies (98). Later, in chapter three that Jefferess, while addressing the work of Partha Chatterjee and Ashis Nandy, argues

for the way in which what Gandhi called his ‘experiments with truth’ and particularly concepts of *swaraj* (‘self-government’), *sardoya* (‘the welfare of all’), *ahimsa* (‘nonviolence’), and *satyagraha* (‘truth-force’), which guided and were the subject of those experiments – provide insight into ways in which resistance can be imagined and articulated alternatively to the dominant theories of resistance within postcolonial studies (96).

It is these “alternative narratives of resistance” (140) that Jefferess is most concerned with in this book. Jefferess highlights the way Gandhi’s vision of *swaraj*, for example, differs from Nehru’s dominant, statist vision of a competitive, independent India

insofar as it targets modernity and capitalism alongside the history and legacy of colonialism.

That said, however, Jefferess is quick to note that Gandhi is not focused on these structures of power so much as he is on the subjects of power; in Gandhi, he writes, “power is theorized at the level of the experience of oppression” (123). Jefferess’ careful dual emphasis on recognizing oppression, while at the same time forwarding a Foucauldian concept of power and the subject is a strong attempt to overcome the poststructuralist bind that risks paralyzing resistance in postcolonial studies. Gandhi’s *ahimsa* (non-violence) is the suitable solution to this bind because, by focusing on non-violence, it circumvents the oppositional posturing that reduces resistance to a form of negation. Jefferess concludes that “*ahimsa* constitutes not simply an alternative to the physical ‘battle’ of war but the ideological and discursive assumptions that construct battle as a means of achieving liberation” (121).

Likewise, in the idea of reconciliation, Jefferess finds the potential to go beyond the metaphor of resistance as battle. If, as he writes, the “apartheid imagination” is limited by its roots in oppositional politics, then it follows that any notion of resistance as struggle against an identifiable, locatable opponent forecloses the possibility of creating a genuinely different cultural, social and political future. He refers to Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* and its inability to imagine outside the master/slave dynamic as an example of these limitations. Similarly, concerning the Truth and Reconciliation Commission project, Jefferess argues that although at an official level the proceedings more or less preserved, and in some senses strictly enforced this binary of victim/oppressor, through the process of post-TRC dialogue at the level of community groups, the concept of reconciliation eventually came to mean more (147). Jefferess traces the ways in which by focusing on the idea of reconciliation, resistance was transformed into something beyond “*opposition* to apartheid” and towards “the *production* of a non-racial, democratic, participatory, and just South Africa” (147). It is in this way, Jefferess argues, that “reconciliation functions as that ‘great leap’ from resistance to liberation” (141).

In his conclusion, Jefferess offers a new idea that he hopes will help orient his work towards something more affirmative. He focuses on the idea and practice of love as a way to enact the vision of interdependence and connectivity that he stressed in his explorations of *ahimsa* and reconciliation. In this move, Jefferess consciously places his work in conversation with one of the more optimistic trends in the humanities. When bell hooks wrote about love through feminism, she was seeking to articulate something similar to Jefferess—a way to stress commonality and to eschew separatism. There is a tradition of alluding to this politics of love in postcolonial writing as well, as Jefferess demonstrates with reference to Spivak, Fanon, Gilroy and Sand-

oval. In explaining his arrival at the concept, he writes that “the idea of love may be one way of contending with that disjunctive, and seemingly indescribable ‘how’ and ‘somehow’ that Spivak and Said identify, a caesura in postcolonial thought” (184). He hopes that love can figure as the mechanism that connects a “politics of resistance with a dream of liberation” (184).

Again, Jefferess is trying to emphasize not only the idea of resistance in the traditional sense of saying “no,” but also as a way of saying “yes.” Jefferess forwards the idea of a form of resistance that imagines a *freedom to* rather than a *freedom from*. My only critique of this turn in Jefferess’ argument is that this concept appears belatedly in the course of the book. Mirroring his own musings on the invocation of “resistance” in postcolonial studies, it feels as if “love” is a common referent that never gets fully theorized. Of course, this is not as much a fault of *Postcolonial Resistance* as it is an opening for future work.

Works Cited

Hooks, Bell. “Feminism: A Transformational Politic.” *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989. Print.

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