NARRATIVES OF EMPIRE: Masked Fictions

Literature; Editor’s introduction to dissertation; interview, lesson plan

AUGUST 29, 2011

Editor’s Introduction

Smart people like Edward Said, Harold Bloom and, here, Nalini Iyer, see elements of imperial narratives in novels like Robinson Crusoe and Lord of the Flies. The same elements can be identified in contemporary stories movies like Avatar. As empires change, so do the stories we tell to make sense of the machineries and processes that support them.

What is an “imperial narrative”? Who cares? While her concern in this dissertation is women and their masked or coded narratives, Prof. Iyer gives us some clear answers to these basic questions in her interview and in the excerpt here. If you read her entire dissertation, you will see the in-depth scholarship which supports her arguments with specific and detailed examples of masked literature.

When she discusses historiography in the second paragraph of the excerpt, she means the process of writing history.

My students always enjoy writing like this. It seems at first to be hopelessly obscure – but we quickly see that their favorite books, movies and television shows carry many of these same elements (particularly encounters with the Other, whether ET: The Extraterrestrial or Harry Potter, a vampire in Twilight or a warrior in Last of the Mohicans). A topic like this one can propel a study unit on the Other that lasts for weeks, and one that dovetails as easily with sociology as it does with literature.
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Masked Fictions: English Women Writers and the Narrative of Empire

by Nalini Iyer, Ph.D.

Interview with Nalini Iyer 07/2011

I should preface the responses to the questions below by noting that this dissertation was begun in 1991 and defended in 1993. As with any dissertation, it was an apprentice work of a novice scholar. After more scholarly experience and, hopefully, a more nuanced understanding of the field, I think that some of my thinking is likely to be more complex than it was 20 years ago. Also, when this dissertation was written, the field of colonial discourse studies/postcolonial studies was still new. Graduate and undergraduate courses in postcolonial theories and literatures, journals and conferences dedicated to the field, and the numbers of scholarly works were relatively fewer than they are today. So, this dissertation needs to be read and discussed within these parameters.

–Nalini Iyer

You mention works such as Robinson Crusoe and Lord of the Flies as examples of classic “empire narratives.” What does that mean? What are the elements of an empire narrative?

Narratives of empire such as Robinson Crusoe, Lord of the Flies, Heart of Darkness have some of the following elements: the arrival of a European male in a new land populated by “savage” others or unpopulated, the ingenuity of the European male in surviving in a hostile environment, the taming of the landscape, encounters with the other and occasional glimpses into his humanity, and the establishment of European civilization as normative. Of course, narratives of Empire also betray European anxiety about the imperial process occasionally and then stage that with concerns about “going native” and the corruption of the European’s soul. I think Achebe’s essay “An Image of Africa”, Jenny Sharpe’s Allegories of Empire, and Anne McClintock’s Imperial Leather colonial discourse in English literature and culture quite well.

How can a domestic story like Jane Eyre be a narrative about empire?

The argument in my dissertation was that imperial adventures, administration of the colonies, and exploration were usually the prerogative of men. While there were some women who did travel and explore, the majority of women who did go to the colonies were wives of soldiers and administrators or missionaries. For women writers who were struggling against patriarchy at home, the colonial experience had to be domesticated in terms that were familiar to them and to stage their own narrative of empowerment. Again Gayatri Spivak, Jenny Sharpe have made strong cases for Jane Eyre and colonial discourse embedded in that narrative.

Why did women need to mask their narratives, or write in code? Do they still do this today?

The prevailing attitude was that the colonies were no place for women. Marlowe in “Heart of Darkness” remarks that women had no understanding of that world, Virginia Woolf notes in Mrs Dalloway about Lady Bruton that she could have commanded armies and empires and
yet her character was unable to write a letter without Richard Dalloway’s help. In narratives about the colonial enterprise in India, the memsahib was a reviled figure and we see this in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and in George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*. Of the three writers, Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, and Doris Lessing, that I focus on in the dissertation only Doris Lessing had actual experience in a colony as the child of emigrant farmers. These women writers’ primary focus was the struggles of women with domesticity and patriarchy and they felt an empathy with the colonized other and also struggled with their complicity as English women in the colonial enterprise. The colonial experience is cast in terms that the women knew in a domestic narrative and is coded as a feminist narrative. The struggle between complicity and resistance raises complex questions about celebrated feminist narratives and their problematic politics.

**Has the narrative of empire changed over time? Is it different in different nationalities?**

Since empires evolved with time and each imperial nation had its specific history, narratives of empire are historically and culturally contingent. My study focused on British narratives.

**Harold Bloom wrote that Iago did to Othello what Europe did to Africa: that the characters captured the same dynamics as that between the empires. Are there narratives of empire in Shakespeare’s works?**

I think that Shakespeare’s plays reflect England’s thinking about the other at that time. For me, the narrative of empire emerges in British literature in the 18th century.

**Are there classic and masked narratives of empire today? Would *Avatar* or *The Color Purple* or *Bend It Like Beckham* or *Harry Potter* be narratives of empire? Why or why not?**

*Avatar* definitely can be read in the same way that Achebe reads “Heart of Darkness”. It is a narrative that tells us more about American anxieties about its imperial ambitions and also, I think, demonstrates fear about declining economic and military power of the United States. For me *The Color Purple* is a classic womanist narrative and not a narrative of Empire. *Bend It Like Beckham* is a film that I read in the context of Asian experience with immigration to Britain. While that immigration is a product of the British empire in India and Indians in the UK still struggle with racist attitudes that evolved during the Raj, that film is much more a feminist text about a young immigrant girl coming of age and negotiating the challenges of two cultures. My problem with that film is that everything Indian is represented as oppressive and everything English as liberating. Once again, a feminist narrative whose politics are complex.

**You analyze Doris Lessing’s science fiction as rich in imperial parallels. What are the best examples?**

*Shikasta* perhaps is the best analysis of imperialism in that genre by Lessing.
Iyer’s “Masked Fictions: English Women Writers and the Narrative of Empire” can be read [here](#) via ProQuest and an excerpt viewed [here](#).

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Nalini Iyer is currently Professor of English and Director of Research at Seattle University, where she has also taught extensively. She earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Madras and her Ph.D. from Purdue University. Among her publications are Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in Indian Literature (*edited with Bonnie Zare*) and Roots and Reflections: South Asians in the Pacific Northwest (*edited with Amy Bhatt*).

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**Postsecondary Lesson Plan to Accompany *Masked Fictions: English Women Writers and the Narratives of Empire***

By Tom Durwood

1. Does your family have a “master narrative” the way a nation or empire might have one? What is it?

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2. Are there incidents or episodes which do not fit into your family’s narrative? What are they? Why do they not fit?

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*Figure 2. An 18th Century depiction of Robinson Crusoe, hero of Daniel Defoe’s 1719 novel.*
3. How does the author say these two authors are similar? What do they share that T.S. Eliot does not share?

4. What is the author’s thesis?

5. Which books and authors does the author use as proof or support for her argument?
6. In what ways is *Robinson Crusoe* a narrative of empire?

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7. Do women “mask” their fiction today? Can you provide three examples of such stories?

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9. BONUS QUESTION

What is the “empire theory of literature” outlined in the article “Melville and Orwell: Two Sides of Empire”? Do you agree with it?

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