

Boutique Postcolonialism:¹ Literary Awards, Cultural Value and the Canon

Sandra Ponzanesi

Merchandising Postcolonial Literature

Ever since Rushdie won the Booker Prize in 1980 with his *Midnight's Children*, postcolonial literature has become a much sought-after commodity. Due to his flamboyant personality and cross-cultural *élite* upbringing Rushdie managed to quickly reach a star allure. Long before the nefarious effect of the *fatwa*, which catapulted him from just a talented new author in the English language into the most haunted world writer, Rushdie had skilfully played the game of the cultural industry. By carving out for himself the role of the migrant author hovering between two cultures, Rushdie managed to become the leading spokesperson in literary and personal terms of a whole new generation of diasporic writers from former European colonies, especially India.

In 1997 when Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for her *God of Small Things*, an entire already primed commercial network which extends around the globe was simply activated. This ranged from an advance of one million dollars, unheard of for a debut novel, a comprehensive campaign to launch her book at the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence, a fully blown mediatic offensive which advertised Roy as the new jewel in the crown from India. Roy travelled the whole world to present her book, matching full-size posters of her photogenic exotic face with a provocative personality and a sales-conscious spirit.

The transition between these two moments in the history of the Booker Prize is exemplary of the extremely deep changes in the literary industry in recent years. Whereas Rushdie formally emerged as a fantastic new writer, praised and raved about by literary critics, Roy was slashed as a superficial writer who achieved quick fame just by playing the game of the cultural industry. The media hype around Roy pushed the translation of her book into all the languages possible, and her sales to the sky. But this saturation exhausted the critics, who snobbishly thought that commercial success could not equal critical value. So whereas in the first case the marketing followed and thus functioned to augment the celebration of a worthy author, in the second case the marketing preceded and superimposed the evaluation of the author, at the detriment of her literary worth.

My interest in these two authors is only in part due to the fact of their being emblematic of the new book fair and the success story of the postcolonial literature, with all its controversy, but as well and in the main with the analysis of the cultural industry that has created them. The scope is not to prove that these specific authors exist and survive only because of their commercial packaging, but rather to highlight how the cultural *industry* has become more global than ever before and thus ever more dependent on perfecting the mechanisms of capital distribution. To acknowledge that the world has become exponentially more intertwined and market economies more interdependent due to the acceleration of communication and advanced technologies is not to make a new claim. Scholars of world systems have observed that this increasingly integrated system of conjunctures and disjunctures has existed for centuries (Wallerstein; Appadurai; Harvey).² The advent of colonialism not only created the first ground for the global exchange of goods (though asymmetrical in commercial revenues) and people (slavery and indented labour) but also the first forms of ideological homogenization, through a hegemonic imposition of systems of values and ideas, accomplished by the introduction of European forms of administration, education and language in the colonies (Said; Viswanathan).³

However, what makes globalisation specific to our times is the recognition that, although its local manifestations can be heterogeneous and particularised, these are an intrinsic part of a much wider, complex economy which is homogenizing in its operation and effects (Appadurai). This also applies to the cultural industry, which in an age of late capitalism, creates space for local marginal manifestations, such as postcolonial literature, and turns them into a commodity of global exchange. Emerging markets such as the Third World, and the role of diasporic migrants in fashioning cartographies of home and abroad, testify to the indisputable link between local taste with global reach. What in the past was part of exoticising representations of the other, such as spicy food, luxurious textiles and home decorations, spiritual inclination or quests, has been turned into commodified exotica. The Orient becomes a fetish, a series of objects to be desired in order to inflect the anonymity of the global style with a *couleur locale*. The list of what is now available is not properly exhausted by such obvious examples as the worldwide poliferation of ethnic food, clothing, world music or the so called new-age industry, all commercial and global responses to local traditions and heritages. These instances of the local have been obviously filtered and claimed as part of the global (glocal entities), otherwise they could not have had the visibility, viability and exchange value that they do. It appears at first that the local is merely manufactured for satisfying authentic

global needs and projections, that what is at work are the push and pull factors of the new world order. The truth is, however, that such an account too easily wraps up everything in vague simplistic generalizations, while a correct analysis of what happened in the closing years of the last century must examine the actual complex mechanisms at work.

Within an interconnected economy, mainly characterised by unevenly distributed resources, such as access to communication and technology, financial infrastructures, mobility of labour and people, there are always locations of resistance. These entail the appropriation and manipulation of global forces for the benefit of local communities, agencies, and identities. This location of resistance still presumes a structure of negotiation between the local and the global but the regulation of power is organised differently, for example, allowing a micro-economy to survive within a bigger global exchange. Thus, even though the exotic otherness is cannibalised by the global market, this does not mean that the other does not exist outside of the paradigm of consumption. Similarly, even though postcolonial literature is integrated into the global culture industry as a cultural commodity, this does not mean that it has lost its critical edge and that it will necessarily comply with the grand narrative of neo-capitalism. It is exactly this tension that makes the merchandising of transnational literature interesting. Skilfully promoted postcolonial texts can become simple disposable goods or be representative of micro-histories, alternative narrative modes and genres that must be cherished against the obliteration of an increasing homologation. The two aspects do not necessarily exclude each other, since the moment of distribution and consumption does not necessarily differ from that of evaluation and interpretation.

This contradiction is inherent in the double function that refers to postcolonial literature. As Graham Huggan shows in his book *The Postcolonial Exotic*, the postcolonial field of production occupies a site of struggle between contending regimes of values. His argument is drawn from the distinction between the terms *postcolonialism* and *postcoloniality*. Postcolonialism must be seen as a critique of the global condition of postcoloniality, and refers to a series of oppositional practices that undermine colonial hegemonies and cultural homogenization. In that sense it can be aligned with several basic preoccupations shared by the postmodern predicament: the critique of the Western unitary subject, interrogations of systems of significations, and the foregrounding of alternative standpoints. Unlike postmodernism, however, postcolonialism has a history and tradition of embattlement, and while many of the practices seem to coincide with those of postmodernism, in fact the goals lie clearly

elsewhere, namely in the political arena. In short, postcolonialism's deconstructive strategies aim at undermining not only the constructivist aspect of the linguistic systems and subjectification, but also the material contexts and realities that go with it. In other words, it is the study of texts in the largest sense; texts that participate in hegemonizing other cultures *and* the study of texts that write back to correct or undo Western hegemony. The overt emphasis is bound to be on political and ideological rather than aesthetic issues, but it still manages to link definitions of aesthetics with the ideology of aesthetics and with hegemony, and questions the genesis of the Western canon with sincere demands for a multicultural curriculum. On this point postcolonialism also enters the realm of postcoloniality, itself understood as a function of postmodernity. This dynamic is incisively captured in Huggan's description of postcoloniality whose own regime of value pertains to a system of symbolic, as well as material, exchange in which language of resistance may be manipulated and consumed. [...] Postcoloniality, put another way, is a value-regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange. Value is constructed through global market operations involving the exchange of cultural commodities and, particularly, culturally 'othered' goods. Postcoloniality's regime of value is implicitly assimilative and market-driven: it regulates the value-equivalence of putatively marginal products in the global market place. Postcolonialism, by contrast, implies a politics of value that stands in obvious opposition to global processes of commodification.⁴

This explains the sudden hypervisibility acquired by postcolonial authors on the international scene. This involves not only the critical acclaim of authors such as Rushdie who are quickly included in the academic curriculum and in a sense become 'canonised', but also their commercial success and quick riches within the late capitalist system. As explained above, this does not narrowly mean that postcolonialism's emancipatory agenda is compromised by the commercial appeal of the text, which functions as a commodity in the regime of postcoloniality. Rather, in a broader sense, it can also imply that postcolonialism and its politics of resistance and alternative standpoint have become in themselves objects of consumption.

Cultural Value: Art, Taste and the Cultural Industry

From antiquity to the Renaissance court to current pop stars ordering their portraits,⁵ artists of all kinds have worked under the tutelage of religious and public institutions or other wealthy maecenas and cultural patrons, their products testifying to their sponsors' cultural wealth and economic prestige. As David Throsby writes, "cultural production and consumption can be situated within an industrial

framework, and [...] the goods and services produced and consumed can be regarded as commodities in the same terms as any other commodities produced within the economic system.”⁶ Since there has been art, there has been evaluation, in both aesthetic and commercial terms. The economics of art is a field which has tried to establish how, for example, a work by Rembrandt should be valued in order to determine its sale price, or value among the asset of a museum. While art critics focus more on the aspects of production and the form of art, the economists of art focus on all the added values that make a work of art exceed its material costs of production and become a commodity within different realms. Along with the aesthetic aspect Throsby identifies several aspects within the theory of value which account for the incommensurable aspects that determine the worth of a work of art including spiritual value, social value, historical value, symbolic value and authenticity value.⁷ He also briefly points to the different intellectual critiques of art and its commodification – particularly the coining of the term ‘cultural industry’ by Horkheimer and Adorno of the Frankfurt School in their attack on the devastating effects of mass culture and the destruction of culture by capitalism. More recently, poststructuralist critics such as Baudrillard have not only erased the barriers between high and low cultures but also shown how ideology and culture can never be disengaged from its social and economic manifestations. Throsby closes his survey by urging a focus on the purely economic processes of cultural production and distribution, offering a few analytical tools for a more systematic evaluation of the commodification of culture. This has created a shift in terminology from Economics of the Arts (usually associated with high art) to cultural economics⁸ (pertaining to cultural exchanges in the broadest sense, from the analysis of pop star⁹ to the mechanism of the award industry).

Bourdieu claimed that cultural capital is always unevenly distributed. According to the French critic, several institutions are responsible for consecrating and preserving symbolic goods and creating people able to reproduce such goods. Museums determine and consecrate ‘great art’. Educational institutions, i.e. universities, are responsible for teaching the qualities of great art. Great art is thus taught, preserved, consecrated (libraries, foundations, literary award systems). Bourdieu’s ideas have extended to a number of neighbouring fields, such as literary criticism, especially after Bourdieu’s translation into English and the rise of cultural studies. His concept of cultural capital has been invoked in the identification of the literary ‘canon’.¹⁰ Also, from a Marxist perspective it offers a reading of transnational corporations as creating capital from culture. From a postcolonial perspective it is interesting because there is a new

intensified commodification and valuation of what at the height of modernism was seen as 'primitive art' and within the current global market as 'cultural otherness / diversity' or as I will illustrate later 'ethnic-chic'.

There is a time-lag between the moment of production and the moment of recognition and institutionalisation of what is defined as good art.¹¹ Within this construction there are several agents of legitimation that confer prestige and merit on a work of art, variously modifying its evaluation in its trajectory from production to canonisation or relative oblivion. We are talking about relatively neglected agents of literature-making including editors and publishing houses; literary agents and their firms; film producers and their backers, booksellers and book clubs; university professors and the academy; prizes and their judges, administrators, and sponsors; book reviewers, fiction editors, and the journals that employ them; and, very importantly, other authors. This complex and constantly changing background makes it extremely difficult to position the novels we read in the larger international literary terrain, gauging their particular status and cultural trajectory.

These cultural agents are not new to the cultural market. However, due to the globalization of economic structures in the last decade their influence and role in the determination of value-added aspects has exponentially increased. This means that in art theory there has been a shift away from the study of meaning toward the study of process. In Deleuzian words art is defined not by what it means but by what it does. The art object is no longer defined materially or conceptually but relationally. As Timothy Brennan has written:

The scope of the themes of globalism (as an imputed sociological reality) and of cosmopolitanism (as an ethic of proper intellectual work) brings us by their very natures to the media through which literature is disseminated and consumed. In writing about literature proper, then, one is drawn to a phenomenological understanding of literature as it is received via trends in book markets, key educational anthologies, and literary tropes adopted for use in journalism, political essay-writing, and public policy. What is valued as literature? What is understood to be literature? How does the literary, even in a media age, continue to matter?¹²

These questions about the demise of the once privileged notion of literature are crucial because they enable us to gage the limited merit of Bourdieu's analysis of the role of matters of tastes in its appreciation, which he claims reflect major social divisions like class, education, gender, and place. According to Bourdieu all our acts, including definition of worth and value, are led by social pressures. Basically what we consider today natural, such as taste, is definitely cultural. There is therefore the notion of nurture above nature. For

Bourdieu tastes are used in whole structures of judgement and whole processes of social distinction that produce substantial barriers between social groups such as provincials and cosmopolitans. He explicitly contests formal theories of culture, language, aesthetics, and literature, claiming that these discourses create and maintain hierarchies of power and domination.¹³

To follow Bourdieu – our tastes in food, drink, music, and cinema do not depend on us but on our social background. However, as already pointed out by many critics, this scheme of analysis is not only too deterministic (because it dissects consumer groups into strict and inescapable class divisions) but especially flawed when transferred to the contemporary international scene. Bourdieu's rigorous empirical analysis emerges from French bourgeois society, where the connection between taste and class works differently from the model of upward mobility that is celebrated in the United States. That is the reason for the intellectual resistance to Bourdieu's arguments in the USA.¹⁴ The same reservations could be made for the international functions of the global market place. Bourdieu reminds us that our choices and tastes are determined by social affinities. This sociological reflection could well be shifted towards the dynamics of the international cultural industries which stimulates mass consumption. In this view, desires and needs are induced and not products of free will, and the consumer is far from being capable of determining his/her taste, let us say about literature, independently from the marketing campaigns.

Literary Prizes: the Economy of Prestige

In recent years we are, in fact, experiencing an intense politics of literary merit linked as never before to its economic value.¹⁵ The establishment of prestige has become more and more subservient to the garnering of glitzy international literary prizes. The process of consecration and sanctification of certain literary texts through the awarding of prestigious international literary prizes has made the old-fashioned distinction between aesthetic and commercial value rather blurred. The new high profile reached by literary awards, such as the Nobel, Booker, Pulitzer, Commonwealth, Neustadt, Orange and many others, demonstrates that the symbolic capital is less and less tied down to well defined aesthetic principles. Yet the garnering of literary prizes immediately confers the status of literary worth and merit to the selected text/author. This strategy is exemplary of the tensions and contradictions of the new global market place where prestige is defined according to the old Western paradigm of literariness and

craftsmanship but also to new, more evasive cultural concepts ranging from cosmopolitanism to authenticity and ethnic-chic.

It is symptomatic that during the past two decades an impressive number of postcolonial authors have been awarded prestigious literary prizes. The Nobel Prize went to V. S. Naipaul (2001), Derek Walcott (1993), Wole Soyinka (1991), the Booker Prize to V. S. Naipaul (1971), Salman Rushdie (1981), Ben Okri (1991), Michael Ondaatje (1992), Arundhati Roy (1997); and a number of other celebrated cosmopolitan postcolonial authors have also entered the realm of the global market place. My interest here is to investigate the reasons that are behind the sudden recognition. If the Nobel Prize has been slow in recognising the talents and literary worth of authors coming from former European colonies and writing in the language of their previous masters, it seems that the Nobel Prize is now trying to catch up for lost time. An effect of this attempt to catch up is that, as Robert Fraser has argued in his *Lifting the Sentence*, while it gives an incredible bounce to new or at least still alive writers, it tends to overshadow and send into oblivion previous writers such as G. V. Desani (who has clearly inspired Salman Rushdie's experimental style more than García Márquez, as critics claim), who have created the path for the literary appreciation of style, modes and genres that were characteristics of other literary traditions.¹⁶

As Brennan has argued, Indian literature in English was very slow to emerge on the international platform. Within the so-called Commonwealth literature the first strand to emerge in English was certainly more African literature than Indian literature, probably because African literature had to do with the role of embattlement, of committed literature fighting back against the legacy of empire. Major representatives of these national literatures are key figures such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, and Amos Tutuola.¹⁷ And paradoxically enough, India with its rich literary traditions, its immense resources into religious epic tales and millenarian reservoir of oral story telling arrives later on the international scene due to the banning of independent literature from the former colonies. There were already major writers who had established themselves as writers, but not mainly as spokesperson of the anti-colonial struggle, names as Mulk Raj Anand (*Untouchable*, 1935; *Coolie*, 1936), the father of modernism, R. K. Narayan (Malgudi's microfictions), also Raja Rao (*The Serpent and the Rope*, 1960), who had chosen to live in France and write in Proustian style. They have been relatively neglected in comparison to the new combative authors from the Third World who on the wave of Frantz Fanon were using literature as a weapon of anti-colonial struggle (e.g. Tayeb Salih, Siphon Sepamla). Authors who through their insurgent and liberationist rhetoric come to the attention

of the international opinion often paradoxically reigniting the imperialist ideologies they were trying to accuse.¹⁸

Within these insurgent traditions the emergence of female voices who created a strong tradition of nationalism seen from the private sphere were often overshadowed. Precious national narratives remote from today's international spotlight include the novels by Kamala Markandaya, Attia Hossain, Nayantara Sahgal and Sashi Deshpande – all written much before the great resonance given to women's literature in the 1970s and 1980s by authors of the calibre of Anita Desai, Sara Suleri and Bharathi Mukherjee, and finally to the new generation of stars such as Arundhati Roy, Jumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapur. The latter have all profited from the internationalisation of the mechanism of literature, in ways that were not thinkable for the first group of writers.

In the Indian case, as Brennan states, the real breakthrough happened with the appearance of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which changed forever the course of national fictions and of fictional nations. This is because Rushdie went beyond the narratives of nationalism and of anti-colonial struggle. Rushdie and his work symbolize the rise of the Third-World literary cosmopolitans and the contradictory role they play in politicizing modernist form while diluting the combative literature of the decolonizing movements. *Midnight's Children* manages to render and intertwine several competing discourses, giving Rushdie a unique place as a theorist of writerly 'translations' encompassing geographical, stylistic and ideological levels. Rushdie's innovation was not so much in its themes, the birth of the first child after 12 o'clock at night of 15 August 1947, the moment of independence, but in its styles that managed to fuse and transform all the precedent Indian literary influences and the strategies of world literature (from Günter Grass to Gabriel García Márquez) in an unprecedented way. A great kaleidoscope of past, present and future scenarios was realized through pastiche techniques (newspaper clippings, photos, public speeches, court evidence, fairy tales and other variations of the narrative modes) which triggered the reader into the self-explanatory revelation that India is the magic place of the imagination. In thus creating a metafiction of the nation Rushdie allured the international readership, but also rendered the evanescence of that concept that is the nation.

Rushdie represents therefore the first instance of a new case of explicit 'brand' author for Indian literature. This implies that between the writer and the consumer, between the creative output and the evaluative moment there is a whole chain of mediation, promotion, and sponsoring that add value to the product. This added value is

meant not only in economic and material terms (more sales and revenues) but is also symbolic (the author comes to represent a whole nation and to symbolise the good reading taste of a diasporic and cosmopolitan audience). Through this operation of branding, of turning a book into a literary commodity, the operation of added value presumes the creation of an abstract quality that makes the product superior, different and more desirable than others. Authors and books are purposively packaged by market pundits in order to reach not only the target audience corresponding to the academic and intellectual profile required for the book, but equally a much more varied and volatile readership that has the material means to make claim to such a symbolic value.

In all this a new stratum of commercial agents picked up the role of marketing literary products not so much for their aesthetic qualities but for their market exchange value. Advertising, and heavily subsidising the sponsorship of ‘brand authors’ becomes not just a short-term form of spending for the publishing house, but a long-term investment that will not only be recouped but generate profits for the publishing company sufficient to gamble on a new upcoming author, unknown, debutant, image marketing still to be devised and launched. The thumping economic advance conferred on Roy had not only to do with the fact that a new star on the occasion of India’s fiftieth anniversary of independence (Rushdie was by then a bit worn out as an Indian icon) had to be created, but also with the fact that publishing houses by then had entered into an interconnected system. They now had to operate in terms of the modalities of multinationals, which at the end of the day meant succeeding in the task of bidding high enough to hook an author before another company did.

As the earlier transition from industrialization (focus on production) to advanced capitalism and globalization (focus on worldwide spreading of consumption based on the outsourcing of development countries), the literary industry now – with a different intensity and of course with different modalities – has shifted its focus from supplying potential audiences to planning them. Rather than merely reading submitted manuscripts and discovering new talents, they now proceed as if on a hunting campaign aiming to locate authors even before they have attempted to write, and commissioning subjects, topics, and areas to reach one major goal: to create a demand for the product, a real thirst for consumption prior to production.

What characterises consumption as a mode of signification in which commodities no longer exist in and of themselves, but circulate as signs within a system of differences: “The object is no longer referred to in relation to a specific utility, but as a collection of objects in their total meanings”.¹⁹ The commodity in question, in this case the

author or the book, gets its meaning only within a certain sign-system. Therefore, cultural artefacts come to embody and signify meanings in the course of their circulation and consumption, as Arjun Appadurai describes it, in the “social life of things”.²⁰ Of course there are other cultural commodities that structure meaning for the consumer, and/or represent the range of possibilities within which the consumer can structure meaning for him/herself. For example, the success of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and the prestige attached by the winning of the Booker Prize testify to many other signifiers beyond the aesthetic merit of a new book in English. Its meaning must blend the need to appropriate the flourishing of literatures from the former colonies to the end of still belonging to the Western tradition, what certain critics have called part of the British imperial nostalgia and Raj revivalism.

The commercial and unprecedented success of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) is symptomatic of this phenomenon. The marketing hype surrounding the novel had certainly to do with India’s newly acquired value as an exotic country to be consumed. *The God of Small Things* was launched with all the possible indexes for alterity: the story of a fascinating but downtrodden Indian woman, the subaltern subject, who succumbs to patriarchal oppression despite her overt agency demonstrated through her free sexual and personal choices. The novel pictures India suspended between the still unprocessed colonial past and the wave of modernisation that passed women by. The tale of exoticism, the luscious and magnetic Kerala, is rendered through a compelling innovative language severely downplayed by literary critics, who blamed her for being baroque, uncontrolled and too mangoish. But the book was an excellent product to quench the exotic thirst of Western and international audiences for far-off places and stories, now quickly and inexpensively reachable by charter airlines. Moreover the author herself was a perfect icon of the new commodified personality: a young, talented, good-looking rebel, and most of all one capable of manipulating the media as much as the media managed to manipulate her.

Consuming Global Exotica

Rushdie and Roy complied with the role of marketing postcolonial fiction in the West (within the academy as well as with the wider readership) by making postcolonial literature the new hot item, the new publishing scoop. As representatives of authentic voices from the Third World, they were invigorating in their innovative approach to language and genre as well as vibrant and committed in their depiction of multicultural and political issues. They, along with many others

short-listed for the Booker Prize, retained control over their own image and market value, playing the game by the rule. All this was accomplished without necessarily compromising the subversive and critical nature of their writings. Rushdie and Roy's work with language, though of different nature and impact, represents not only the reiterated postcolonial resistance to the imperial imposition of standard English, but a whole project of re-colonising and re-fashioning the realm of imagination.

Rushdie and Roy represent not only the construction of a star personality for the purpose of marketing the Other as the new literary must-have and must-read, but also the emerging of a new community of readers and consumers that originate from the same place as the authors themselves. As Saadia Toor described it in her article "Indo-Chic: The Cultural Politics of Consumption in Post-Liberalization India",²¹ India has emerged as a capitalist society coming of age, and therefore not only as the producer of oriental fetishes and exotic cultural practices ranging from sage swamis to Bollywood films to alternative healing methods, but as consumers. The key ingredient here is the emergence of a new middle class, urbanised and cosmopolitan in orientation, which reassimilates its own culture from the circulation of meanings acquired in the West. The commercialization of exotic trends, such as Bhangra music and the new ethnic rave for food, clothing and furniture, involves not only the fragmentation and decontextualized commodification of an 'original' culture but also the distorted and value-altered relocation of such a culture within its supposedly original context, i.e. India. As Toor writes: "The aspect that I find most fascinating is the importance of this New Orientalism to the identity formation of the new young urban class in India." (p. 4) These are the largest purchasers of ethnic art and artefacts, and together with the Indian community in the diaspora, which is even more sensitive to home-value nostalgia fuelled through MTV and Bollywood blockbusters, they tend to routinely define and display their own collective identity through consumption.

This is related to what Bourdieu in 1984 described as the relationship between class habitus and taste but it also involves the construction of a new aesthetics based on global trends. Commodities are consumed not just for the prestige they confer but also for their symbolic value as tools in the construction of collective and individual identities. Thus, if on the Western front we can notice what Appadurai had defined as Indofrenzy,²² referring to the cultural renaissance of the Indian subcontinent, in literature, art and film, there is also a conscious appropriation of those new Indo-chic manifestations by Indian people themselves, resident or diasporic. Both comply with the tyrant-like international global branding of fashionable ethnic-chic

products, consuming products originating from their own culture that are paid for with a clear premium for the extra symbolic value. The consequence is a kind of radical chic-ism present in the postmodern aestheticization of politics that is essentially conservative. All of this tends to prolong the imperial, and certainly contrasts with the fantasy that postcolonial critical activity be defined as what Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin termed “the de-imperialization of apparently monolithic European forms, ontologies, and epistemologies.”²³

This not only applies to products but also to writers and their work. Immigrant writers have become a commodity and, as Patrick McGee writes: “It means that the subaltern as subaltern – the subject of the oppressed constructed through the mirror of production – cannot really be thought outside the economy of the ethnocentric European subject.”²⁴ Therefore even the form of subversion must be articulated within the structure of dominations offered. As Timothy Brennan argues:

The phenomenology of a ‘Third World Literature’ not only affects the reception, but in part dictates the outcome. As the work pours forth, authors ranging from Brazil to South Asia tend to exist not as individuals but as elements in an intertextual coterie that chooses them as much as they choose it. Placed in the company of other hybrid subjects, they take their part in a collective lesson for American reader of a global pluralism. They are unable to enter the scene of letters as innovators in the way, for example, that a talented North American novelist without ethnic baggage might be packaged as the rude boy or girl of a new generation. Their ‘movement’ is based on being rather than doing, and so it is not a movement so much as a retrospective categorization. At the same time, the oppressive persistence of the role the public critic implicitly asks them to fill – and rewards them for filling – constructs a discourse that conditions the novels they set out to write.²⁵

Under the banner of internationalism the so-called Western market is interested in what is considered to be new and innovative, and therefore assimilable. However, as Gayatri Spivak warned us, what can be innovative in one arena can be oppressive or reactionary in another.²⁶ Postcolonial authors elected as spokespersons for their nation are at times disliked in their home countries, often for being part of that cosmopolitan intelligentsia that sells out to the demands of Western markets. But behind that there is a more substantial question of hybridization, of translation and transformation from local issues to global resonance. That can only be viably established through the texts being read and appreciated across cultures, with or without the assistance of academic interpretation and classifications. Yet this apparently neutral and innocent *plaisir du texte* (Barthes) hides a complex machine. The formidable problem is making sense of the relationship between the novel itself – the specific pleasures and

challenges it offers to us as readers – and the novel as a form of capital circulating through interlinked symbolic and commercial economies. To address this problem responsibly entails the reconceptualization of literary studies within a general economy of cultural practices.

So if from the side of postcolonialism we have the resilience of national literatures and the oppositional politics of subaltern voices, there is within the regime of values of postcoloniality a booming ‘otherness industry’ that thrives on the invention and admiration of exotic traditions. These can be seen as a form of cultural colonialism, the appropriation to the point of confusion and racism of exotic assets, third-world memorabilia and ornamentalism. The recent commodification and popularisation of Indian culture implies treating culture as disposable and replaceable. What this year is indo-chic may next year be Moroccan-suave and then the following year Latin-fusion. The fashionableness of a Third-World culture is a one-way boutique window, contingent upon the successive approval and metamorphisation by Western consumers. But how does this new Orientalism affect the production and consumption of postcolonial texts?

Postcolonial Adaptations: The Booker and the Film Industry-Intermediality

The institution of literary prizes has participated in the cannibalization and commercialisation of ‘otherness’ by marketing the exotic and authenticity appeal of postcolonial literatures. However, it is only when these honoured postcolonial texts are adapted into films, TV series or even musicals that the true impact and magnitude of these commercial institutions is evident. In his review of *The English Patient* by Anthony Minghella (1996) Philip French wrote:

By my reckoning, out of around 160 novels short-listed for the Booker Prize since it began in 1969, 25 have been turned into films for the cinema or television. Interestingly, the three made with sizeable budgets provided by Hollywood are all set during the Second World War and their unusual perspectives make us reconsider a conflict that still overshadows our lives. The first two, Thomas Keneally’s *Schindler’s List* (winner in 1982 as *Schindler’s Ark*) and J. G. Ballard’s *Empire of the Sun* (runner-up in 1984), are relatively straightforward chronological narratives – one biographical, the other autobiographical.

Michael Ondaatjee’s *The English Patient* (winner in 1992), however, is an immensely complex piece of storytelling, looking at the war from the viewpoint of four sharply contrasted characters living at a shattered villa in Tuscany during the months leading up to VE day in May 1945. It is a subtle

mediation on history, nationality, warfare, loyalty and love, but it is also a gripping mystery story.²⁷

French reports the difficulty of translating Ondaatjee's highly poetic language and complex storyline into effective cinematic language, and praises Minghella's successful work as director, the camera work, the exemplary photography, editing, and first-class performances which make of *The English Patient* a technical miracle. It is, however, interesting to note that Ondaatje had earlier written poems about the cinema and that his fiction is intensively cinematic, and in fact had himself made documentaries.

This popularisation of Booker Prize novels (both winners and short-listed) increases the circulation of meanings. Along with French's note on adaptations that take place in the Second World War, there is a much longer list that refers to the rise, decay and aftermath of the colonial empire always portrayed with a certain nostalgia which often come near to clear Raj revivalism and exotic revisitation of the past from a British perspective.

In *The Booker Prize and the Legacy of Empire* Luke Strongman notices two main trends within the colonial/postcolonial theme that underlie the Booker Prize.²⁸ On the one hand, there is the celebration of several novels which express nostalgia for the Raj: J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1975) and Paul Scott's *Staying On* (1978). On the other hand, he finds the critical voices that are part of 'postcolonial pessimisms' and which express the disaffection and malaise connected to migrant displacements and colonial folly: V. S. Naipaul's *In A Free State* (1971); Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974); J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983); Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (1985); Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988). To this later category of Strongman's subdivision the recent novels by the very same Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001) and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) could probably be added.

Most of these novels have indeed been adapted into film or TV series, as French states in his review. Many of the movies indeed emphasised the nostalgia for the lost empire. Along with mega-productions such as Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982) and David Lean's *A Passage to India* (1984), a series of films were clearly inspired by the success of the Booker Prize, for example James Ivory, *Heat and Dust* (1983), based on Ruth Praver Jhabvala's novel (1975) and the BBC T.V. serialisation of *The Raj Quartet* based on Paul Scott's imperial *oeuvre*. Though the cinematic plundering of literary texts is as old as the film industry itself, and institutionalized in the *dual* screenwriting Oscar category, the Booker Prize has been a remarkably consistent source of adaptations. Just to mention a few significant

cross-overs: Gillian Armstrong, *Oscar and Lucinda*, 1997 (Peter Carey, 1988); Neil LaBute, *Possession*, 2002 (A. S. Byatt, 1990); James Ivory, *The Remains of the Day*, 1993 (Kazuo Ishiguro, 1989), and Fred Schepisi's *Last Orders*, 2001 (Graham Swift, 1996).

Inside the Booker Prize: Aesthetic Merit and the Canon

It is worthwhile examining whether the eminence bestowed on winners of the Booker Prize has paid off for them – from an economic and also symbolic point of view – more than for writers who were merely short-listed. And also if, by looking at authors who never made it to the Booker Prize's list at all, we can discern those who will really make it to the long-term canon despite failing to achieve the quick commercial success assured for those with the advantage of the literary prize. For example, a great writer such as Anita Desai, of Indian origin and a resident in the United States, has been short-listed three times without even making it to the big prize: *Clear Light of the Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). The same goes for the Indian writer, Rohinton Mistry, resident in Canada, who has also been short-listed 3 times for *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1996), and *Family Matters* (2002).

Even Rushdie has been short-listed several times: *Shame* (1983), *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). Rushdie got his Booker for *Midnight's Children* in 1981, which was also judged in 1993 to be the 'Booker of Bookers', the best novel to have won the Booker Prize in its first 25 years. *Midnight's Children* also won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (for fiction), an Arts Council Writers' Award, the English-Speaking Union Award, the Austrian State Prize for European literature, and there has been a stage adaptation premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2002. Rushdie did not manage to double his Booker success, as Peter Carey and J. M. Coetzee did, but he has garnered many other prestigious prizes. *The Moor's Last Sigh* won the Whitbread Prize in 1995, and the European Union's Aristeion Literary Prize in 1996. Rushdie's third novel, *Shame* (1983), which many critics saw as an allegory of the political situation in Pakistan, won the Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger and was short-listed for the Booker Prize for Fiction. The publication in 1988 of his fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses*, led to accusations of blasphemy against Islam and demonstrations by Islamist groups in India and Pakistan. The proclamation of the *fatwa* against him is probably the biggest price an author has had to pay for their fame.²⁹

In an important article entitled "Awards, Success, and Aesthetic Quality in the Arts" the Belgian economist Victor Ginsburgh has

analysed whether the Booker Prize had a durable impact on the success and sales of the winners from 1969 to 1982. He evaluated the level of reprints ten years after a book was nominated or short-listed, and he showed that the winners' longevity is no greater than that of their short-listed peers. He concluded that awards are bad indicators of the fundamental quality of literary work or talent, since most of the choices made by judges in aesthetic competitions do not stand the test of time. Ginsburgh's analysis extends to the Oscar nominations and a famous international piano competition in Brussels. The comparative methodology serves to see whether there are different relevant factors for art forms that appeal to the different senses: the visual arts, books and the performing arts. He remarks:

One interesting difference is that prized movies are reasonably often box office successes. This pattern does not hold with prize-winning books. Between 1980 and 1989, for example, no Pulitzer-winning or nominated title made it to the list of the 15 bestsellers in the United States. Between 1969 and 1989, only Salman Rushdie's short-listed Booker in 1988, *The Satanic Verses*, made it to number six in the bestsellers list in 1989, but this is most probably due to the *fatwa* enacted against the author by Iranian mullahs, more than the Booker award.³⁰

The most disturbing result comes from his analysis of the Queen Elisabeth Piano Competition organised in Belgium and considered to be one of the most demanding in the world. There is obviously a difference to movies and books, since here the artist has to perform and is physically present for the judges. In this unique competition the finalists are given a week to study a concerto especially composed for the competition, a piece unknown also to the jury, who thus have no prior belief about an appropriate or normal interpretation. The order of appearance of the finalists is drawn at random. In his statistical analysis of the period from 1952 to 1991 Ginsburgh uncovers a troubling pattern: the players who perform last in any given evening, or late in the week-long contest, tend disproportionately to get the best marks. Ginsburgh concludes the finalists in the competition are probably not ranked according to their talent and that the randomness of the competition appears to be unfair. Ginsburgh hypothesises this may be because, while the judges are expert musicians, it may take them some time to get used to the new concerto. They might, Ginsburgh claims, thus become less severe as the competition unwinds and accepting of the latest performers of the evening. The problem of course is that winning the competition can be crucial for the further success and development of an artistic career, and that the unintended consequence of unfairly losing might be radically detrimental to this end. Despite their fallibility, critics and judges have an enormous power since "the role of gatekeepers, gurus and experts is dramatically increasing in our societies, where sorting

information about quality can become a very cumbersome task” (p. 99).

What Ginsburgh interestingly points out is that, from an economic point of view, the awards can push up the sales only in the short term, but talent and other criteria eventually come to play a role. That is why he chooses to analyse the number of editions that were reprinted between year 11 and year 20 after publication, to see whether the appreciation of the text stands the test of time. The idea here is that by then the consumers’ taste would no longer be moulded by the prize.

Ginsburgh notices a highly remarkable phenomenon in the data gathered: the number of editions available in 2002 actually decreases in time faster for winners than for the population of short-listed writers. If we reflect on what this teaches us it means that what makes, for example, a Booker Prize novel or an Oscar-winning movie enter the longer lists of best 100 novels of the century or 100 best movies of the twentieth century involves a complex dynamics combining commercial values as much as the shift in aesthetic evaluation through time. Ginsburgh quotes David Hume’s classic essay on taste and provides an insightful description of how canonization actually takes place despite the glitz and glamour of the awarding industry’s focus on shooting stars more than everlasting value:

time makes it possible to reduce at least some of the noise presenting evaluation made shortly after the work is produced and that is due to fads, fashion, envy and jealousy (Hume, 1757 [1965], p. 9), clearing the way for those works that transcend the ideal or style of a period (Savile, 1982, p. 32). Even if there is still room for fads, the judgment passed on artworks from the past is at least less influenced by the fashion that prevailed in the time of their production. This ‘test of time’ is also the expression of a tradition that ‘professionals will not devote labour or attention, generation after generation, to sustaining [artworks] whose life functions have terminated’ (Coetzee, 2002, p. 18).³¹

There is still today, despite these systematic attempts at establishing the limits of the commercial over the quality value, no easy distinction, and this is quite apart from, and not meant to call in question, Bourdieu’s famous definition of class and taste. What is here boldly put forward is the factor of time. The test of time establishes the contact zone between the perception of literary works as disposable commodities in a throwaway society and as works of enduring aesthetic quality.

However, the debate about the canon involves numerous systems of classification and is of course very intricate, since the perception of aesthetic qualities varies not only over time, but also within different cultural traditions. Moreover, within an increasingly globalised literature the time and location from which canons are

defined contributes to the outcome of the operation of inclusion and exclusion.

Let us now return from the time of Hume and examine in some detail a current version of popular canon-making in action. In April 2003 the BBC's Big Read began the search for the "nation's best-loved novel". The reader could submit their nominations and famous personalities championed for the great novels by presenting them on BBC 2 between 18 October and 13 December 2003. A host of factors influenced the selection. It was obvious that novels which had been recently adapted into major motion pictures such as *The Lord of the Ring* would garner most votes. It turned out to be the favourite book of the nation, and the four *Harry Potter's* adaptations came in respectively at positions 5, 21, 22, 23. Interestingly enough, a classic managed to reach position two, not surprisingly Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, which has certainly benefited from a long tradition as best-loved classic, but also as an often adapted novel, especially the successful mini TV series (1995) with Jennifer Ehle as Elizabeth Bennet and Colin Firth as the tenebrous Mr. Darcy. Recently the novel has been turned into two interesting movies, one of the classic sort, directed by John Wright and realised in 2005, presenting the new rising star, Keira Knightly. The other, *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), a mesmerizing Bollywood adaptation, promoted the taste for transculturation, starring Miss Universe, the Indian Aishwarya Rai as Lalita Bakshi (the Indian Elizabeth Bennet) and Martin Henderson as the American Will Darcy, by Gurinder Chadha, the director of the successful film, *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002).

Despite what we might expect from the celebratory system of recent literary prizes, the postcolonial novels score very low on the first 100 books of the BBC Big Read. Roy ends up at position 85 and Rushdie just manages to squeeze in at position 100 with *Midnight's Children*. Rohinton Mistry, an author constantly short-listed but never nominated for the Booker, ended up at position 196 for his magisterial *A Fine Balance*. Interestingly enough, the first postcolonial novel on the list is Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, a novel which has not been even nominated for the Booker Prize. Many critics were dismayed in 1993 when it was left out of the race, although in 1994 it won the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Overall Winner, Best Book) and the W. H. Smith Literary Award. Seth was given a \$375,000 advance for *A Suitable Boy* by his British publisher, Phoenix House, and \$600,000 by HarperCollins in New York. Therefore it is clear the ostentatious literary prizes such as the Booker do not necessarily make or break an author. Further testimony to this is Seth's continuing indisputable success. His most recent book, *Two Lives* (2005), a double-memoir built around the character of his great-grand uncle Shanti and his

German wife, has fetched an advance of £ 1.3 million. No work of non-fiction in India had ever commanded such a huge figure before.

So the British public is certainly not under the spell of imperial nostalgia, but even worse, they are totally immersed in their insularity. If among the novels listed few postcolonial authors emerge, the numbers of foreign authors, if we exclude Americans, is very low. If we leave out the few exceptions from the previous century such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (no. 20) and *Anna Karenina* (no. 54), Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (no. 60) and Alexander Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* (no. 44) we find very few non-English writers among the first 100 such as García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (no. 32) and *Love in a Time of Cholera* (no. 97) or Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (no. 94).

Neither Coetzee, double Booker Prize and Nobel Prize winner, nor V. S. Naipaul, Booker and Nobel winner, nor Peter Carey double Booker prize manage to break into the top 200. Even Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is missing, the fanfare around the Booker in (1992) and the film (1996) being forgotten. We might wonder what happened to poor *Madame Bovary*, or whether African Caribbean writers have been purged from this list. Interestingly enough, after the lively media hype Zadie Smith does not even get a mention for her *White Teeth* (2000).

The tradition of the leading British novels remains unscathed in this selection. Utter favorites remain Charles Dickens (*Great Expectations*, no. 17; *David Copperfield*, no. 34; *A Christmas Carol*, no. 47; *A Tale of Two Cities*, no. 63; *Bleak House*, no. 79) and Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*, no.2; *Persuasion*, no. 38; *Emma*, no. 40) along with the other great Victorians, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, and so forth.

Obviously this is a popular canon, where the classics are often automatically seen as worthy since already part of the canon (Dickens, Joyce) and more recent publications sway between the categories of popular genres (from *Gone with the Wind*, no. 21, to *Bridget Jones's Diary*, no.75), the recognition through literary awards (*The God of Small Things*, no. 85), film adaptations (*Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Ring*) and aesthetic criteria. This is not a serious, scholarly canon, but one which reflects the interest of mass consumption.³² As such, it should offer some indication of the effectiveness of the literary awards in influencing not only the sales, but also public opinion about the merit of awarded texts.

As Brennan has said:

It may be true that what matters most is how a work is read rather than what canon it represents. And there is no necessary directive for doing away with arguments over 'better' and 'worse' literature – for keeping a sense of aesthetic standard, in short – which in spite of unassailable arguments about

the arbitrariness of all value is too strongly intuitive to give up and too strong a weapon in the effort to extend the range of works that are read and discussed seriously by broad publics. The implicit message of world-historical variety in expanded lists and the type of discussion they tend to generate is decisively different from simply reading the canon critically. In that way, I think it is false to argue that the latter is alone sufficient. The ethnocentrism of an imperial culture has to be seen both from the vantage point of its victims as well as from the vantage point of the metropolitan critic unveiling ethnocentrism in the surroundings of a canonical text.³³

Emancipatory tales and postcolonial critique have aimed at correcting the canon, by including forgotten or neglected voices of women or Third-World authors on the syllabus. They have also questioned the desirability of the canons *per se*, criticising the institution of canon formation as a veritable incarnation of power and authority. This is because any concept of the canon, whether mainstream or alternative, is understood as necessarily exclusive, privileging some texts above others, recurring to selective criteria which are ideologically tainted.

According to Rakefet Sela-Sheffy the function of the canon is to regulate culture.³⁴ The canon is not a force controlling standards of taste or responsible for the circulation of practices. To the contrary, the sanctification conferred upon certain items causes their suspension from the market exchange, and hence frustrates their use as generative models in actual cultural production. The crucial point about canonicity is the sense of objectification it confers on such cultural reservoirs, thereby naturalizing them in a given socio-cultural order to the point they seem congenial, concealing the struggle that determined them in the first place. Bourdieu best elaborates the mechanism of objectification, which involves disguising the historical conditions and the efforts invested in creating the effect of naturalization.

Sela-Sheffy argues that the overemphasis usually put on canon change implies a misleading view of the canon as transitory by definition. The point the critic makes is that there is a tendency to confuse the valorization of cultural artifacts with their circulation in the market, which entails the problematic assumption that canons necessarily play a generative role in cultural production. For the most part, the winners of these ongoing battles quickly fall into oblivion whereas canonized items maintain their position as orientation points in the cultural market regardless of its vicissitudes. A text is in fact canonized in the sense that it is widely shared, cumulative and durable. Sela-Sheffy's argument on canon formation can initially be used to analyse whether the market economy does or does not really influence those patterns. The critics' take on economic circulation and the test of time can be summarized in the two positions:

1) The question of transitoriness: the fascination with relativism and contingencies of values leads to viewing the canon as entirely negotiable and versatile, far more so than it is in reality. This view underestimates the canon as a cumulative, widely shared and persistent cultural reservoir, which endures the vicissitudes of dominant taste, promoted by different groups at different times.

2) The question of generativeness: the nexus usually taken for granted between the valorization of artifacts and their recycling in the cultural market is misleading. Canonicity is independent of whether or not the items serve as generative models for current cultural production. Often the sanctioning of items through canonization rituals suspends the availability of these items as active models for interfering with the actual market. Consequently, the canon operates as a stabilizing mechanism in the ongoing cultural battlefield, and may be equally invoked as a sort of legitimization, by all of the participating rival groups.

Sela-Sheffy's view of the canon is coherent, but rather classical – not really able to account for the puzzling shift in the actual practical aesthetics of reception that is happening worldwide, let alone how literary market operations are at one time a reflection and at another time a propeller of which factors finally influence the canon formation, i.e. of what is 'in' and what is 'out'. This is because – to recall Hume – the role of the canon oscillates between the consolidation of an existing canonized repertoire and the prefiguration of a new one, and yet must present it as canonical from the outset. The tacit connection of these two positions to literary prizes, either commercial or more institutional such as the Nobel, brings up two explicit questions:

1) what does it take for the fashionable to become canonized?

2) what is the actual impact of the canon in regulating cultural production and consumption?

We have to ask the question: how does newness, which is important for the conferring of literary prizes, correlate to the process of canonisation, which emphasises instead a widely shared universal value and representativeness? The issue of newness is very relevant because difference is praised often when formulated and styled in a way that makes it understandable to different audiences. Within newness there always seems to be an emergent process of fusion and pastiche between old and new, far and close. As Rushdie wrote:

How does newness come into the world? How is it born?

Of what fusion, translations, and conjoinings is it made?

How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is?³⁵

We can say, then, to elaborate this point, that literary prizes have an impact on academic reception and canonical recognition, as long as

the old is present in the new. An act of innovation can take place along with an act of sanctification of established criteria.

We can even argue that on the international scene the selection and rewarding of specific national authors only confirms older mechanisms of canonization, namely that those postcolonial texts considered to a certain extent innovative and subversive get stabilized by their inclusion into the 'international aesthetic circuit' through their labelling and codification as prize-worthy. Or simply that postcolonial authors who receive literary prizes have already made it into the literary world, and their acknowledgement through literary prizes is an inevitable confirmation of a long due recognition.

The function of a literary award, such as winning or getting a nomination for the Booker for Indian authors running from Naipaul to Rushdie, Seth, Ondaatjee, Roy, Mistry, Ali and many others, gives a sort of quality label, a guarantee for the reader of what to buy, often the flavour of the month, destined to be surpassed by the resonance of a new award for someone else, but possibly revitalised by the adaptation of a novel into a film. The old is mixed in the new, and shrewd marketing strategies invest in the security of the familiar packed in a new format. This often requires the hunting for new literary talents, often recognisable as young, telegenic, of mixed heritage, often schooled in Oxbridge or the Ivy League, part of a cosmopolitan *élite* which reinterprets the values of the roots, and the sense of the past from a detached position. All this would guarantee the Western reader the authority and authenticity of the source and at the same time a fictionalisation of possible worlds, insightful, magisterial, and approved.

What in the past was the task of academics and intellectuals – to establish a literary canon which would direct the readers towards a definition of quality and prestige (what according to Bourdieu in his *Distinction* was used to sanctify and consolidate the role of specific social classes) – is now left to the whims and unpredictability of global market forces. Literary awards help to exponentially increase the visibility and the sales of nominated authors, magically equip them with an unprecedented publicity which their predecessors could only have dreamed of, and maybe provide them a place in the short-term canon. The question remains whether this canon is not contaminated by the old imperial regime of evaluation. In between there is the whole publishing industry, with its annexed complicity with the literary award system. This has to deal with the limits of translation, the exact criteria for eligibility and the composition of the juries for awarding prizes. The readers, reviewers and academics receive what could only be an ephemeral and at times purely provocative selection to what the literary world offers.

Thus, instead of undermining imperial practices such as the ruling of the English language, the awarding of postcolonial authors may well paradoxically be evidence of their strength and survival. By gaining the Booker Prize Rushdie, the Indian writer, becomes englobed as part of British literature, thereby erasing his subversiveness through assimilation. This implies that the mechanisms at work within the literary establishment are able to resuscitate themselves by absorbing the regenerative forces of subjects and talents once marginalized and excluded. Nowadays instead, they are picked up as excellent spokesmen of a culture of origin which is made part of the culture of arrival through a new form of unequal power relationship. Therefore the elective choice of a spokesman works both ways: on the one hand, it creates an image of democratization and emancipation; on the other hand, it inhibits the effort of discovering and recognizing new talents who compromise the expression of the local with less of a global touch. This could in a way signify that international prestige and literary awards do free the authors from the narrowness of national canons, and the economic restrictions imposed by a more limited audience. Awards and international reception allow the author to transcend the academic, economic and distributional limitations that a national literature would offer. And the glorification of a national author on the international market certainly secures a potential spooning up of new talents and younger writers.

Therefore, despite the more insidious mechanism of neo-colonial forces at work in the selection of prime-time native and authentic authors, the advantage and possibility of subversion through reception is always granted. It is up to the writers themselves to steer away from the pressure of publishing whatever *diktat*, and to confidently rely on their own tradition and innovation. Furthermore, an award can mean the possibility to be freer to write and express in the most desired way. Once the position within the literary pantheon is established, claiming extra visibility and more artistic freedom is possible. It is, however, important for the film-goers, the academics, the intellectuals not to be swallowed by the abnormal amounts of new publications ranging from best-sellers to rare jewels, from autobiography to crime fiction, from canonical literature to resistant literature, and to detect under the constant bombardment of literary promotions, awards and serialisations the texts that make a difference, or maybe just offer a more original encounter between the writer and the reader.

We conclude that the commercial thirst for new writers and new tales is based on the ambivalence of a supposed tokenism for short-listed black, female or diasporic authors, but also on the necessity of their inclusion as clear indication of societal and aesthetic changes at

large. In the first case of exotic tokenism, postcolonial authors make it to the short-term canon, and achieve a fleeting recognition which barely shakes the core of the value-endowed paradigm of the traditional canon.³⁶ In the second case, the recognition of innovative and challenging qualities shifts the politics of reception both in its aesthetic and commercial aspects and opens up the long-term canon. This two-edged welding of the medium and the message is complex and evolving, reconfirming the fact that ideology and culture can never be disengaged from their social and economic manifestations. It also proves that the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion have not only become more influenced by marketing strategies, but also by more diffused mechanisms of aesthetic appreciation. The once pivotal centre has long lost its position as a mark of reference.

¹ This title is a pun on Stanley Fish's "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech", *Critical Enquiry*, 23.2 (1997), pp. 378-95. Fish argues against the superficial respect for other cultures, called 'boutique multiculturalism', but also underlines the dilemma of tolerating other cultures to their cores, as proposed by strong multiculturalists (he takes the example of Khomeini's declaration of death on Rushdie as the limit to tolerance). By making a stand on something whose sole identity is in the name of a supracultural universality, strong multiculturalists often end up falling even deeper into the category 'boutique multiculturalism'. In this article I raise similar issues about the sustainability of a postcolonial agenda within the market economy.

² See Immanuel Wallerstein, *Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750*, New York: Academic Press, 1980, and *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*, Durham: Duke UP, 2004; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1996; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin, 1978; Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

⁴ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 6.

⁵ See, for example, the pioneering work of Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1982, which lets go of the old theory of the artist as the individual genius and offers instead an institutional approach. Becker shows how art is a collective process, a cooperative networks of suppliers, critics, dealers, consumers that together with the artist produce the work of art. Becker analyses the different aspects implied in the evaluation of art ranging from aesthetics, criticism and censorship to commercial distribution. He does not provide a theory of art in itself, and argues it can only be understood within the complex and extended social system that creates and defines art.

⁶ See David Throsby, *Economics and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), p. 11.

⁷ See Throsby, *Economics and Culture*, p. 29.

⁸ See Ruth Towse, ed., *A Handbook of Cultural Economics*, Cheltenham and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2003.

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- ⁹ See the article by Moshe Adler, “Stardom and Talent” in Victor Ginsburgh and David Throsby, ed., *Handbook of Economics of Art and Culture*. Amsterdam: NorthHolland, forthcoming. According to the author there are many artists that possess stardom-quality talent. What produces superstars is the need on the part of the consumers for a common culture, in other words to consume the same art that other consumers do.
- ¹⁰ For a comprehensive analysis of the literary canon as cultural capital see John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problems of Literary Canon Formation*, Chicago: Chicago UP, 1993. See also John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985 and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988.
- ¹¹ In “Forms of Capital” Bourdieu expands the notion of capital beyond its economic conception (which emphasizes material exchanges) to include “immaterial” and “non-economic” forms of capital, specifically cultural and symbolic capital. He explains how the different types of capital can be acquired, exchanged, and converted into other forms. The term ‘capital’ represents the collection of non-economic forces such as family background, social class, varying investment in, and commitments to, education, different resources etc., which influence academic success. He distinguishes three forms of cultural capital:
- 1) The *embodied state* is directly linked and incorporated within the individual and represents what they know and can do.
 - 2) *Embodied capital* can be increased by investing time into self-improvement in the forms of learning.
 - 3) As embodied capital becomes integrated into the individual, it becomes a type of *habitus* and therefore cannot be transmitted instantaneously. The objectified state of cultural capital is represented by cultural goods, material objects such as books, paintings, instruments, or machines. They can be appropriated both materially with economic capital and symbolically via embodied capital. Finally *cultural capital* in its institutionalized state provides academic credentials and qualifications which create a “certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to power” (p. 248). These academic qualifications can then be used as a rate of conversion between cultural and economic capital. Throughout his discussion Bourdieu favours a nurture rather than a nature argument. He states that the ability of an individual is primarily determined by the time and cultural capital invested in them by their parents. According to this model, families of a given cultural capital could only produce offsprings with an equal amount of cultural capital. This approach is often criticized as too inflexible. Bourdieu does not account for those individuals who elevate their social status or increase their cultural capital from what they inherited.
- ¹² Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), p. 311.
- ¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987.
- ¹⁴ See the book by the American critic John Guillory, which explains Bourdieu’s refusal. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problems of Literary Canon Formation*, Chicago: Chicago UP, 1993.
- ¹⁵ See James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005.
- ¹⁶ Robert Fraser, *Lifting the Sentence: The Poetics of Postcolonial Fiction*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000.

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- ¹⁷ See Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myth of the Nation*, Basingstoke and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988.
- ¹⁸ See Frantz Fanon, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” in *Wretched of the Earth*, New York, 1965 transl. of *Les damnés de la terre*, Paris: Gallimard, 1961.
- ¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, “The System of Objects” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1988), p. 31.
- ²⁰ Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, New York: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- ²¹ Saadia Toor, “Indo-Chic: The Cultural Politics of Consumption in Post-Liberalization India”, *SOAS Literary Review* 2 (July 2000), pp. 1-33.
- ²² See Somini Gupta, “The New Indo Chic. Beyond Yoga, Curry and Nehru Jackets into Film, Publishing and Body Painting”, *The New York Times*, Aug. 30, 1997, pp. 13 and 19. “Does this Indofrenzy, as the University of Chicago anthropology professor Arjun Appadurai calls it, signal a kind of cultural renaissance on the subcontinent, in literature, art and film? Or is it that Americans are just craning their necks East and taking notice?” (p. 13).
- ²³ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 152.
- ²⁴ Patrick McGee, *Telling the Other: The Question of Value in Modern and Postcolonial Writing* (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1992), p. 122.
- ²⁵ Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World. Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), pp. 203-04.
- ²⁶ Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York: Methuen, 1987.
- ²⁷ Philip French, *The English Patient* reviewed by Anthony Minghella in *The Observer*, 16 March 1997.
- ²⁸ Luke Strongman, *The Booker Prize and the Legacy of Empire*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002. See also Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today*, London: Bloomsbury, 1996.
- ²⁹ See Lisa Appignaes and Sara Maitland, *The Rushdie File*, London: Fourth Estate, 1989.
- ³⁰ Victor Ginsburgh, “Awards, Success, and Aesthetic Quality in the Arts”, *The Journal of Economic Perspective* 17.2 (Spring, 2003), pp. 99-111.
- ³¹ Ginsburgh, “Awards, Success, and Aesthetic Quality in the Arts”, p. 100. The authors and works included in the quotation are: David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757) in *On The Standard of Taste and Other Essays*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1965; Anthony Savile, *The Test of Time: An Essay in Philosophical Aesthetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982 and J. M. Coetzee, “What is a Classic?” in *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986-1999*, London: Vintage, 2002.
- ³² Robert McCrum of *The Observer* has compiled a list of the 100 greatest novels of all time. However, even this more scholarly and educated list does not offer substantial differences from the BBC Big Read, if not for the fact that McCrum privileges a wider spectrum of classics, both British and European, upon popular fiction. *Don Quixote* ends up no. 1, whereas *Lord of the Ring* at no. 64, but the whole list of Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Brontë, Hardy, and other Victorians is reconfirmed. It is a relief to note though that Virginia Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway*, no. 46) and Toni Morrison (*Song of Solomon*, no. 79) are included. However, these are very slim results on the postcolonial front: Chinua Achebe’s classic *Things Fall Apart* enters at no. 71, followed by Naipaul (*A Bend in the River*, no. 83), Coetzee (*Waiting for the*

Barbarians, no. 84), Carey (*Oscar and Lucinda*, no. 92) and finally Rushdie (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, no. 94). To see his complete list go to the website: <<http://www.murmurs.com/talk/archive/index.php/t-76688.html>>

³³ Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World*, p. 312.

³⁴ Rakefet Sela-Sheffy, "Canon Formation Revisited: Canon and Cultural Production", *Neohelicon* 29.2 (2002), pp. 141-59.

³⁵ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, 1992, p. 8.

³⁶ For a discussion on aesthetics and its shift in an age of multiculturalism see notably Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990; Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton and Jeffrey Rhyne, eds., *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001; Henry Louis Gates, *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992; and Charles Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.