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IS BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *THE POISONWOOD BIBLE*  
A "POSTCOLONIAL" NOVEL?

In a National Public Radio interview American writer Barbara Kingsolver made what struck me as a rather remarkable assertion: namely that her 1998 novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, is part of "the postcolonial tradition," which she said is a tradition "we've inherited" (Interview with Michael Kransey). This caught my attention for three reasons. First, it never occurred to me to consider postcolonial writing a "tradition" in any sense of the word as I understand it. Second, I was mildly amused at the idea of a white American, who has lived her entire life in relative affluence, claiming for herself the mantle of postcoloniality. Hers, after all, is not the sort of background one normally associates with the term—though, theoretically, I see no reason why that should automatically exclude her. And finally, I wondered if a text by such a writer, which focuses on characters representative of the American cultural majority, could or should indeed be considered "postcolonial"? Judging simply from the political positions it stakes out vis-à-vis European colonialism and American hegemony in Africa, Kingsolver's text certainly *feels* postcolonial. It is therefore tempting to regard it as such. And, a cursory

search of the internet reveals that the author is not alone in considering her novel “postcolonial”.<sup>1</sup> However, when subjected to a postcolonial reading it seems to me the text fails to live up to either the author’s noble intentions or the postcolonial reader’s expectations.

I do not intend to consider at length here the question of whether postcolonial writing has become a tradition in the sense that, for instance, European realism is a tradition. Ultimately, such a discussion may be little more than a pedantic exercise in hairsplitting. If a tradition is measured by a combination of such factors as longevity, matters of form and subject, and an identifiable school of practitioners somehow indebted to those practitioners who went before them, then it may be reasonable to speak of a “postcolonial tradition”—or at least an “*African* postcolonial tradition.” For one, europhone texts produced by indigenous African novelists date back at least to the 1930 publication of Solomon Plaatje’s *Mhudi*. This particular novel, in turn, is but the first of many similar texts since produced that have sought, notes Lyn

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<sup>1</sup>The jacket blurb, for instance, places the novel “alongside the classic works of postcolonial literature,” while a cursory search of the internet reveals that most book vendors regularly classify it under the heading “postcolonial fiction.” One critic, in turn, described it as a “postcolonial parable” (*Village Voice* 77), and another as “an innovative treatment of the topic of post-colonialism” (Austenfield 294). There are, as well, at least two university instructors who have included the novel in their reading lists of postcolonial literatures (Paxton, Zwicker). And one academic so far has published an essay in which she makes a case for reading and teaching the novel as postcolonial (Jussawalla).

Innes, both to reclaim African history from European contempt and delineate it on African terms, and to affirm an African cultural validity long denigrated by Europeans as primitive and savage (37). At the same time, literary critics have long given at least tacit recognition to a body of literary production—poetry, fiction, and plays—that has been described as *postcolonial*. Deepika Bahri, for instance, in her wide-ranging and illuminating 1995 essay, which tries to get a handle on this elusive term, points out that “the *postcolonial*” is not just “an academic construct” but “a literary genre” as well (53). Rather than quibbling over when a genre becomes a tradition, the more relevant issue is that of who and what can (or should) be considered “postcolonial.”

Peter Childs and Patrick Williams try to demonstrate through the “Points of Departure” catalogued in their book, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, that while there may seem to be “obvious” answers to the questions of when, where, who, and what is “the postcolonial,” there are inevitably multiple alternate possibilities contesting for inclusion (or at least a hearing). This would certainly argue for at least considering a text such as Kingsolver’s. Still, I would like to keep in mind Jeremy Hawthorn’s point that the term “postcolonial” is freely applied to issues that fall into either (or even both) “critical or theoretical groupings” (269). While the term has been particularly

contentious in discussions of *theory*, there really has been relatively little of the same bickering about who or what *writing* should or should not be included under the heading of “postcolonial.”

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin famously got the discussion started in 1989 when they defined “post-colonial,” for their purposes, “to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day” (*Empire 2*). Consequently they argue for the inclusion not only of texts from such places as the various African countries, India, Bangladesh, and the South Pacific Islands, but also Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and even the United States. While many have taken exception to the inclusion of such First World literatures (particularly the USA), most critics agree in principle with the emphasis their definition gives to the literary production of those nations formerly grouped under such banners as “Commonwealth literatures” and “Third World literatures” (and more recently “emergent literatures” and “new literatures in English”). Elleke Boehmer, for instance, wrote in 1995 that for her postcolonial writing is “that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives” (3). More recently Hawthorn said that for most

readers the term applies to that “literature emanating from or dealing with the peoples and cultures of lands which have emerged from colonial rule (normally, but not always, relatively recently)” (269). Even Aijaz Ahmad, for whom Ashcroft et al.’s definition, from a theoretical standpoint, is rendered practically useless by the breadth of “transhistoricity” that deprives it of specificity (283), nevertheless quickly agrees that as a literary designation “postcolonial” refers simply (and at times pejoratively<sup>2</sup>) to the literary production, in the first instance, “of non-white minorities located in Britain and North America,” and more recently to “the contemporary literatures of Asia and Africa” (282). What all of these definitions have in common is that they foreground the experience of colonization (or, in its North American permutation, domination and exploitation by a materially superior and overwhelming surrounding culture) and resistance to/recovery from it.

What question remains, then, is whether an American writer of the dominant cultural grouping, or a text by such a writer that focuses on characters representative of that majority, can or should be considered

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<sup>2</sup>Ahmad also associates the term “postcolonial” with the notion of “Europe and its Others,” adding that “[i]n at least one of its many nuances, ‘postcolonial’ is simply a polite way of saying not-white, not-Europe, or not-Europe-but-inside-Europe [or its North American offshoot]” (282).

“postcolonial.” Ahmad would most certainly say no. Hawthorn and Boehmer seem at least to allow for the possibility, while Ashcroft et al., obviously, say yes. Arif Dirlik and Peter Hulme, as well, agree. Both arrive at their conclusions from similar Marxist interests (which, ironically, lead Ahmad to the opposite conclusion). Both similarly argue that neither colonization nor postcoloniality is the privileged (or exclusive) domain of the colonized and those who would represent them (or, I would add, of Marxism). The existence of the colonized implies a colonizer, both of whom were affected (albeit in different and doubtless unequal ways) by the process. My intention here is not to resurrect questionable (or even discredited) binary relationships but rather to stress that colonialism was a multifaceted phenomenon which cannot be viewed simply as a one-sided victimization. Hulme insists that ““postcolonial”” as a critical term should be “descriptive,” not “evaluative,” and should refer to “a *process* of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome”—to whatever extent that may be possible (120). By this I take him to mean a *mutual* process of moving away from those assumptions about the nature of the relationship between the former colonizing and former colonized societies; assumptions that originated in Western liberal paternalism, were often uncritically accepted by both the colonizer and the colonized, and have

since locked the two in such unequal and binary relationships as civilized/primitive (if not savage), teacher/disciple, benefactor/dependent.

Dirlik similarly reasons that if one of the basic themes of postcoloniality centers on “a crisis in historic consciousness ... then the First World itself is postcolonial.” He argues that

[t]o the extent that the Euro-American self image was shaped by the experience of colonizing the world ..., the end of colonialism presents the colonizer as much as the colonized with a problem of identity (300).

Therefore, he suggests, “one does not have to be *postcolonial* in any strict sense of the term to share in [the concerns and themes of postcoloniality]” (300). And it is within this framework that a writer like Kingsolver, or her text, *might* be considered postcolonial.

Kingsolver has described her novel as a “political allegory” intended to dramatize the “the awful things” perpetrated by the United States government “all over the world, in [her] name” throughout the twentieth century (*Barbara Kingsolver: FAQ*). Through the alternating voices of her five central female characters, she relates the gradual disintegration of the family of Reverend Nathan Price, a zealous, self-righteous fundamentalist American Baptist preacher who in 1959 took his wife and four daughters from Georgia to the jungle village of Kilanga in the soon-to-be-independent Belgian Congo on a

one-year mission to convert primitive African heathens living in darkness. Recounting, first, a year and a half of pestilence, disease, drought, floods, hunger, witchcraft, and finally the bloody political upheaval of Mobutu's American-supported coup and assassination of independence Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, the novel catalogues the ineptitude and arrogance of Price as he confronts and attempts to change a people and culture he does not understand and who do not particularly desire what he has to offer. The anticlimactic latter third then kaleidoscopes across the more than 30 years of Mobutu's reign of terror in Congo/Zaire, with occasional intimations of American subversion in neighboring Angola and of South African apartheid. Throughout, Price and his religion function as stinging metaphors for an inept and arrogant American foreign policy driven by a similar patronizing, self-righteous zeal and xenophobic loathing of competing political and socio-economic ideologies.

The novel represents Kingsolver's engagement with and repudiation of the exercise and consequences of twentieth century American political, economic, and cultural hegemony. It is in this vein that Feroza Jussawalla has made a case for reading the novel as postcolonial, focusing on what she calls the "postcolonial intent of the work" (169). Specifically, she suggests a reading of

the text as a *Bildungsroman* with daughter Leah as the central character, tracing that character's gradual rejection of her identity as a member of the hegemonic culture and simultaneous reidentification and solidarity with the African peoples, in the process of which, Jussawalla suggests, Leah becomes "a trope for the suffering of Africa" (166). It is, arguably, a reading that focuses on the sort of "crisis of historic consciousness" Dirlik suggests the shifting colonial/hegemonic order poses for the First World subject. It is also, again arguably, an act of textual resistance to hegemony's attempt to define the hegemonic subject. The character and the author refuse to be interpellated as members of the hegemony, but rather embrace the oppressed.

I am sympathetic with Jussawalla's project, as I take the position articulated by both Hulme and Dirlik that postcoloniality is not the exclusive domain of the colonized. Just as colonialism and hegemony have shaped the subject construction of both the Third World and First World subject, so too has the dismantling of the formal structures of colonialism. However, I find her privileging of intent problematic. Such a privileging, it seems to me, only confirms Ashcroft et al.'s observation of a tendency for the word "postcolonial" to be reduced at times to simply a synonym for "anti-colonial" (*Key Concepts* 188). If that is indeed the case, then there are a great number of texts

previously regarded as colonialist in nature that would suddenly demand inclusion in the postcolonial canon (if such a canon indeed exists). Jussawalla herself is aware of this implication and suggests Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. A better candidate would probably be Alan Paton's most sensitive anti-apartheid text, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, while (highly questionable) cases could also be made for Joyce Cary's African novels or even something like Elspeth Huxley's *Red Strangers*. In terms of the American case, as well, such anti-slavery texts as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would demand reconsideration. More importantly, such a privileging of intent automatically deprioritizes other theoretical concerns, particularly those connected with issues of representation.

Kingsolver's text is clearly rooted in an anti-colonialist/anti-hegemonist ideology. It takes the European powers and the United States to task for all of the misery that colonialism, neo-colonialism, and hegemony have helped to bring about. At the same time it clearly articulates the author's deep-felt solidarity with the African masses. Nevertheless, a postcolonial reading of the text reveals tendencies on the part of the author to essentialize Africa, to perpetuate stereotypical and derogatory images and conceptions of the

continent and its peoples (and to likewise perpetuate similar images of Christians, particularly evangelical Christians, and missionaries), and in the end to do little more than invert the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized rather than lead to Hulme's "process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome" (120, cited above).

Kingsolver's novel is the only work of fiction I am aware of that comes with an author's bibliography of sources (545-546). To me, at least, this suggests the author wants the authenticity of her rendering of historic events and her representations of Africa and African peoples to be taken seriously. She states in the "Author's Note" that during the process of researching and writing the novel she was unable to travel to Congo/Zaire. She therefore relied for her information in part on memories of a brief childhood experience, "travel in other parts of Africa, and many people's accounts of the natural, cultural, and social history of the Congo/Zaire" (IX). A brief review of the contents of that bibliography, in turn, is revealing. Of the 29 works listed, 11 contain either the word Congo or Zaire in the title; some half dozen are travelogues written by Westerners, dating from the classic nineteenth century texts of David Livingstone and Henry Morton Stanley to more contemporary accounts of journeys up the Congo; another half dozen items are pertinent to

the political and historic background of Congo's pre- and post-independence period; several are anthropological and zoological works; four are works of fiction; one is linguistic in nature; and one is Albert Schweitzer's 1921 missionary journal, *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest*. It seems initially an impressive amount of research.

However, a closer look at this bibliography reveals that quite a few of the works, particularly those anthropological and zoological in nature (as well as Schweitzer's missionary journal and two of the works of fiction), have little or nothing to do with Congo. This applies, for example, to Chinua Achebe's acclaimed first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, and Janheinz Jahn's highly respected 1958 anthropological text, *Muntu*, both of which Kingsolver singles out for specific mention as sources from which she "gleaned many kinds of instruction" (IX). Achebe's novel, of course, is situated in nineteenth century Igbo country of present-day Nigeria, while *Muntu* spans the length and breadth of sub-Saharan Africa, and draws mostly from West African cultures, as it tries to tease out an essential African culture. It is also a touch ironic to note that although Jahn's book has achieved elevated status among African American scholars, Achebe has said writers in Africa have generally "dismissed it" because of its essentializing project ("Interview," 133). Briefly,

he suggested, Jahn's project reflects the aims and ideology of the negritude movement of the 1950s and probably gained authority among African Americans who were "looking for a crystallization of the ideas of their blackness" (133).

One of the consequences of the breadth of Kingsolver's research is a tendency, as in many colonialist and anti-colonialist texts emanating from "First World" writers, to reduce Africa from a continent teeming with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of diverse cultures and languages to an undifferentiated cultural monolith. For instance, in her text there is a tendency to use "Congo/Zaire/Angola" and "Africa" almost synonymously. In the opening chapter, for instance, as Orleanna Price looks back across the years at her time in the Kilanga region of colonial Belgian Congo, she says "Africa and I kept company for a while" (9), and then in the space of four paragraphs uses the word "Africa" five more times, saying variously that she was "afflicted with Africa" (9), that she "walked across Africa with [her] wrists unshackled" (9), that Livingstone and those who followed "walked out on Africa as a husband quits a wife" (9), that she "trod on Africa without a thought" (9) but that "Africa shifts under my hands, refusing to be party to failed relations" (10). In the later chapters Leah as well makes a myriad of

such overarching and essentializing statements. The development of urban cities, for instance, is “a bad idea, at least for Africa” (454); malaria and other insect-borne diseases are reminders that “Africa has a thousand ways of getting under your skin” (456); her children as well, are not Congolese or members of one or another of the specific ethnic groups that make up the country, but “Africans, for always” (470), while the space her children were born into is neither Congo/Zaire nor Angola, but “Africa” (472); even her choice to settle in Congo despite all of the hardships she had previously endured, she says, is “to give Africa a fair shake” (504). Throughout the text Congo/Zaire is Africa, and Africa is Congo/Zaire. I can hardly imagine her similarly setting a novel in, say, France or Mexico, and then labeling these places and their peoples respectively as “Europe” and “Europeans” or “North America” (or “the Americas”) and “Americans.” Yet, precisely because it is Africa it seems permissible for a continent of cultural, linguistic, geological, and zoological diversity to be reduced to a single (and itself quite diverse) region.

In the process of essentializing Africa, Kingsolver also seems to have freely borrowed cultural practices from other parts of the continent and relocated them to Kilanga. In particular, I have argued elsewhere, there are two practices that she seems to have borrowed specifically from Achebe’s novel

about the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, far removed from the Congo region, and reinscribed them onto the culture of Kilanga. One is the practice of abandoning twins in the forest at birth (210-211), a practice anthropological evidence suggests probably never existed in this region.<sup>3</sup> The other is a belief in what Achebe's text calls the *ogbanje* child, which in the present text Anatole describes as "a child who keeps dying before birth and coming back into her [mother's] womb" (128-129). It is the inclusion of these practices, the first in particular, that I feel contributes to relating the text more closely to colonialist writing than to postcolonial texts. That is because they are indicative of a tendency on the part of the author to view Africa, like many other Western writers before her, not as a continent that is home to hundreds,

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<sup>3</sup>Anthropologist Hermann Hochegger catalogues a number of rituals among various Congolese ethnic groups, all connected with blessing, purifying, and naming twins, and in at least one case petitioning for their rebirth after a premature death. John Janzen, as well, notes that among many of the Kongo subgroups women with twin pregnancies often were treated in healing rituals involving *ngoma* drum therapy in order to enhance successful birthing and the survival of healthy children (161-162). Elsewhere in the region, Wyatt MacGaffey says that among other Bakongo groups twins were treated with deference because it was believed they, along with other persons of 'abnormal birth' such as albinos, could use their supposed supernatural powers to somehow afflict persons who incur their displeasure (73). While not proof of the non-existence of twin infanticide practices, the existence of these rituals indicates that twins, rather than being killed or cast away, were permitted to live, and, in some cases, were even desired. In addition, Hochegger also catalogues rituals in several Congolese cultures for beseeching deceased children to return to the mother's womb, which would suggest that they are not considered the sort of evil spirit-children that torment mothers as recorded in Achebe's novel. For a complete discussion see Purcell, 2-3.

or even thousands, of diverse cultures but rather as an undifferentiated cultural monolith. Further, by selecting for inclusion and drawing attention to these particular beliefs and practices she also reaffirms, authenticates, and perpetuates stereotyped Western images of African cultures as superstitious, and in the case of the killing of twins, as primitively brutal, cruel, unfeeling, and indifferent to the weak and defenseless.

This type of homogenizing of Africa and perpetuating stereotyped images is not limited to these few cultural practices. Rather, it extends also to Kingsolver's representations of the land and its peoples. The Africa she portrays, for instance, is a wild, dangerous, and hostile environment in which the human inhabitants are locked in a constant struggle to survive on the most basic level. It is a world in which children are eaten by crocodiles that lurk in the river (81); where villagers are stalked by hungry lions (139-141); where ravenous army ants devour everything and anything in their path (299-311); and where deadly poisonous snakes strike unsuspecting victims with lightning speed (361-367). It is a world rampant with sickness and diseases like malaria, which is an ever-present threat that requires the Europeans in particular to ingest a regular diet of quinine (35, 148 and elsewhere); like "*kakakaka*" (dysentery) that claims the lives of the village's children on an

almost daily basis (172); or like the numerous other infections that leave the children with ever-present “white crusts on their eyes and [genitals]” (91). It is a portrait of the African environment not all unlike that of a Joseph Conrad or a Rider Haggard, rich in detailed information of a zoological nature, but one in which potential tragedy and death for the human inhabitants lurks constantly on the fringes.

Kingsolver’s Africans, as well, are for the most part stereotyped as often helpless, blissfully ignorant, and totally complacent victims of this hostile and unhealthy environment. For instance, the village of Kilanga is peppered with characters like the one-eyed Mama Tataba (39), and a one-legged ritual dancer (45), the legless Mama Mwanza (51), and the fingerless Tata Zinsana (53). The children, as well, have bloated bellies from parasitic infestation and malnutrition (50), and there are scores of people with rotting teeth from a lifetime of sucking on the sugar cane that grows wild (113). As Ruth May observes, each family has “their own handicapped children or mama with no feet, or their eye put out. When you look out the door, why, there goes somebody with something missing off of them” (53). Yet, despite the deformities and infirmities, none seem bitter or despondent over their misfortune. Rather, again quoting Ruth May, they are “not even embarrassed

of it. They'll wave a stump at you if they've got one, in a friendly way" (53). Indeed, it seems at times almost as if Kingsolver is reaffirming theories about the environmental origins of a supposed African complacency towards life as the primary obstacle to material, scientific, medical, and technological progress that were endorsed by earlier generations of so-called authorities on African issues, such as Elspeth Huxley.<sup>4</sup> Rather than striving to overcome hardship, Kingsolver's African villagers seem just happy to exist: they are grateful for the daily blessings nature provides and accepting of the suffering and hardships that come with being a part of that natural world. Unlike Europeans who seek to dominate, to conquer, and to manipulate the natural world to their advantage, the villagers are satisfied simply to be part of it.

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<sup>4</sup> Huxley, among others, supported an idea popular in the early part of the twentieth century attributing the relative lack of scientific and technological development in sub-Saharan Africa, as compared with the West and with Asia, to climate. In a 1936 article she called for research into the environment "to discover how far this might be a contributory cause of [Africans'] apparent backwardness" ("Nature of the Native" 16). Later she expanded her thesis to include modes of production and divisions of labor, suggesting that whereas Europeans in their northern climate have had to work hard to cultivate the land, Africans have had to do "infinitely less, because there is no winter and plant growth is so much quicker, and what work there was he managed, for the most part, to delegate to his wives" ("Some Impressions" 206). Eventually she even applied her theory to political life, suggesting the "Puritan spirit" and its "passion for individual liberty" to be a product of the northern climate which she said "promoted forethought, doggedness of character and a tendency to brood over matters of principle," characteristics she said were not indigenous in Africa ("West Africa" 318).

Repeated, as well, are the notions that even the refuse of Western material society represent often comic improvements to the standards of living for the indigenous peoples.<sup>5</sup> Rachael observes, for instance, the children and adults of the village are “all dressed up in ragbags of Baptist charity” (43). She points particularly to the adult males wearing shirts with “childish prints, ... [a] cast-off janitor uniform[,]... antique wing tips curling up at the toes, black rubber galoshes unbuckled and flapping open, ... even a knit woolen cap with a ball on top,”—obviously out of place in a tropical climate—“or a woman’s bright yellow beret” (44). Then there are the shoes made from old automobile tires (44) and the carburetor air cleaner cover (33) or “salvaged hubcap” (459) turned into cooking pots. Indeed the villagers, as Kingsolver presents them collectively and individually, in their deformity and material poverty could be primary subjects for Oxfam and Save the Children posters so often seen in Western societies.

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<sup>5</sup> In the story “Everything Counts,” Ama Ata Aidoo similarly catalogues the frequently absurd forms Western aid to developing countries takes: “Snow-ploughs for tropical farms. ... Outmoded tractors. ... Discarded aeroplanes. ... And now wigs—made from other people’s unwanted hair” (2). Aidoo’s catalogue squarely criticizes such Western “largess” as little more than convenient and financially expedient ways (in such forms as tax write-offs) to dispose of excess production, outdated equipment, and other unwanted junk, often with little or no concern for what practical benefits such donations may (or may not) actually bring to the recipients. Unlike Kingsolver’s catalogue, however, it does not simultaneously turn the indigene into an object of amusement.

To be fair, the author's interest from the beginning is not with the African characters, but with the Price women and the consequences for them of patriarchy and American hegemony. Consequently, as Kimberly Koza suggests, all of the Africans in the text are included primarily to provide local color and romance; they are not real people—though the general reader will undoubtedly perceive them as such (287). Ironically, though, this is one of the characteristics Boehmer attributes to “colonial” fiction (3), and, unfortunately, the presence of most of these characters in the text serves primarily to confirm many Western assumptions and presuppositions about Africans as helpless victims in dire need of the benefits of a superior Western civilization.

Only one of Kingsolver's Africans is treated as more than “local color”: Anatole, the orphaned school teacher and translator for Nathan's sermons whom Leah marries. Yet even he is not realistic. Rather, he is a highly romanticized character intended to embody some pre-colonial African nobility that counters derogatory Western stereotypes of Africans as intellectually, culturally, spiritually, and politically underdeveloped. The distinctive body art that intricately adorns the character's face and are emphasized several times in the text (125, 279 and elsewhere) clearly set him apart as an “Other,” linking him to pre-colonial, pre-Western, pre-Christian society. Leah similarly likens

him in appearance to “a Pharaoh or a god in an Egyptian painting” (279). Highly intelligent, he speaks at least four languages: “French, English, Kikongo and whatever all he first started out with” (126). He is obviously Price’s intellectual superior, engaging the preacher calmly and rationally in discussion about local beliefs and traditions—not defending them so much as trying to make Price aware of their significance to the local people—while Price himself rages emotionally and irrationally about heathenism (128-133). He is, as well, knowledgeable and articulate on subjects ranging from contemporary history and politics (e.g. 229-235) to sociology, ethics, and economic theory (280-284). At the same time he is a true son of the land, well-versed in traditional crafts, such as the fashioning of weapons for hunting (277), and in traditional herbal medicines (399). In the latter parts of the novel, as well, he is a tireless champion of the people, working long hours for little remuneration to educate them, and suffering long imprisonments under the Mobutu regime for his political activities—during which he even tutors his jailers and fellow prisoners in literacy (431). He is, in other words, a self-sacrificing proletarian-revolutionary hero of mythic proportions. What Kingsolver apparently fails to realize, however, is that rather than embodying some idealized pre-colonial indigenous social order, the character is firmly

rooted in her own left-wing socio-political ideology, which is of decidedly Western origins.

If Kingsolver's representations of Africa and Africans are problematic, so, too, are her representations of the Western characters. Particularly in the post-climactic latter third of the novel, the three surviving siblings ultimately deteriorate from what were well-defined and engaging characters into stereotyped caricatures for predictable and not-very-sophisticated political positions. For it is in this latter section that Kingsolver turns to polemic to vent her anger at the injustices inflicted on the developing world by colonialism and hegemony. In the process, as Koza suggests, she often essentializes both Africans and Americans, generalizes, and oversimplifies complex histories (288). The result is that the latter part of the novel becomes an almost Manichean struggle between world-consuming evil and vulnerable innocence, or as Leah puts it, between "white men [and] Africa" (420). This crime against humanity will only be expiated when the passage of time "erases whiteness altogether" (526).

Adah, Leah's crippled younger twin, is the least important of the three surviving siblings insofar as my present discussion is concerned. In the anti-climactic section of the novel she is portrayed as a victim of hemiplegia, a

birth defect resulting from atrophy of half of the brain that causes paralysis in one side of the body. She nevertheless possesses a brilliant mind. Mostly silent owing to her condition, in the sections of the novel she narrates she articulates an acerbic and cynical assessment of her father's religion. It is only after the death by snake bite of the youngest sister, Ruth May, and the subsequent disintegration of the family that she is freed from her father's oppressive patriarchy and can realize her full potential, eventually becoming a medical doctor specialized in researching tropical diseases. Along the way, she also forces herself to both talk articulately and to walk straight. Ultimately she is turned into a mouthpiece through which Kingsolver voices some predictable and not very insightful positions regarding the oppressive nature of patriarchy.

Then there is Rachel, who in the earlier sections of the novel is rather convincingly developed as a self-centered, malapropism-spewing teenage prom queen. Unfortunately, she too disintegrates in the latter sections of the novel into a very flat stereotype of the exploitive, neo-colonialist Western capitalists in Africa who, on the one hand, despise and look down on the Africans as inferiors, yet drain from Africa every penny they can squeeze out.

Of greatest interest in this regard is Leah, arguably the heroine of the novel and the character who comes closest to embodying Kingsolver's own political

positions. It is her journey, her transformation, from obedient daughter who desires only her father's approval to mature woman who has rejected the oppressive gender and racial injustice of the culture of her childhood, that Jussawalla claims makes this a postcolonial novel. While I agree that Leah's gradual awakening to the oppressiveness of her father's religion (and the culture it represents) in the sections of the novel leading up to Ruth May's tragic death makes her a fascinating character, like her sisters in the post-climactic sections she too collapses into a flat caricature manipulated to articulate particular political positions that are ultimately inconsistent with postcoloniality.

Hulme suggests that postcolonial writing should move in the direction of disengaging with the colonial syndrome (120). In the present novel, and particularly in the Leah-Anatole relationship, Kingsolver fails to do this. Rather, the text remains engaged in the colonial binary while inverting it through a series of reversals of colonialist themes and practices in which Leah and Anatole trade places as colonizer and colonized. In this variation it is the black man who rescues the white woman from oppression by the white man, with Anatole becoming Leah's deliverer from the "guilt of her blood" and her past life of enslavement to her father's delusions (399). The African then

inscribes his name (through marriage) upon the Western woman, with Leah Price becoming Leah Price Ngemba (429 and elsewhere). He is, as well, her teacher from whom she passively and longingly relearns “the history of the world,” discovering the “truth” of a near-idyllic pre-colonial Kongo society and the European conspiracy to erase all memory of it (519-20). Finally, he becomes her source of consolation and forgiveness when she feels weighed down by guilt and racial self-loathing, her white skin itself being the badge of moral inferiority Leah longs to erase but cannot (421, 474, 526 and elsewhere). Ultimately, rather than becoming Jussawalla’s First-World postcolonial subject who moves beyond the colonial syndrome, Leah instead becomes something more akin to what Albert Memmi has called a “left-wing colonizer” (30); that is, a Westerner living in a colonial (or neocolonial) situation who sides with the colonized in an uneasy relationship.

For Memmi, all Westerners living in a colonial situation are, either from the moment of their arrival in the colony or their birth into it, beneficiaries of the injustices of the colonial system and, therefore, colonizers (17). Some colonizers, Memmi says, eventually “discover the economic, political and moral scandal of colonization” and refuse “to become what his [or her] fellow citizens have become” (19). The practical choice for such colonizers is to

leave. That is because those who choose to stay and join the struggle, practically speaking, can never completely separate themselves from their membership in the colonizing race. Their culture, their language, the privileges of their race all become bricks in a barrier that prevents them from successfully pursuing the only alternative to leaving, namely, in Memmi's words, "adopt[ing] the colonized people and be[ing] adopted by them" (22). Their ideology, as well—usually communist or socialist and of the same Western origins as such right-wing ideologies as cultural hegemony and economic liberalism which are the underpinnings of colonialism—, becomes another barrier. For one, it gives rise to embarrassment and denial when they discover that the colonized can act at times in ways equally as brutal as the colonialists (30). For another, they are frustrated to realize that the colonized are frequently not receptive to their ideology, but rather have agendas or objectives different from their own (27-39). Finally, their convictions about the superiority and universality of their ideology tend to delegate to these benevolent colonizers self-appointed roles in the liberation struggle that are no less patronizing, paternalistic, or condescending than those assumed by the most benevolent officers of the colonial service or members of the missions.

In Kingsolver's novel Leah clearly finds herself in a similar position. Having first rejected the oppressive and paternalistic religion of her father and then having been shocked by the realization of American complicity in the Mobutu coup and the murder of Patrice Lumumba, Leah chooses to join the struggle on the side of the oppressed. Nevertheless, her membership in the colonizing race prevents her from ever being unconditionally accepted by the colonized: rather, her acceptance is always contingent on her position as Anatole's wife (434, 472, 500-501, 523-524). She is, as well, Memmi's "revolutionary and ... exploiter" (23) who sides with the oppressed while also taking advantage of the privileges of her passport (albeit initially, at least, not without twinges of guilt) for such things as vaccinations for her children, educational opportunities for her family, or simply rest and recovery after a particularly difficult childbirth—luxuries not available to native Congolese women (455, 467).

Then there are the ideological conflicts. Like Kingsolver herself, Leah has transformed herself into "a pinko [who wants] to change the world" (Interview with Epstein 37). That is, her focus is on the causes of material development and economic justice, while her method of analysis reflects the categories and vocabulary of the Western Marxist intelligentsia. She becomes, in turn,

something of a self-appointed missionary for these causes, volunteering at clinics (419, 433), offering instruction in areas such as nutrition and sanitation (436, 523-524), and, together with Anatole, organizing schools (437) and agricultural cooperatives (433, 522-523). Owing to her zeal and the depths of her convictions, she is, at the same time, “confused” by the apathetic response of the indigenous people to the wisdom and benefits she has to offer and tries to rationalize their behavior, first seeing it as a by-product of oppression and then, ironically, resorting to the sort of worn environmental theories proffered a generation earlier by colonialists such as Elspeth Huxley (523-525). Finally, there is the issue of the violence of the Simbas, Congolese rebels loyal to the murdered Lumumba, which conflicts with Leah’s ideology. It is, after all, the violence of colonialism and imperialism, namely the murder of Lumumba, which finally drove her into the camp of the oppressed. Yet, although she is appalled by their savagery, she nevertheless sees the Simbas as “an army of pure desperation and hate” (421) whose anger is quite “understandable,” though their actions are not (434). While not exactly “construct[ing] myths,” as Memmi calls it (32), to explain their behavior, Leah does go to great lengths to make distinctions between the violence of the colonialist and the colonized. The result of all this is that Leah (and Kingsolver) fails to move

beyond the colonial syndrome. Instead, Leah becomes Memmi's left-wing colonizer who, like those well-intentioned missionaries in the 1970s who resisted the call by the African churches for a mission moratorium,<sup>6</sup> seems incapable of allowing (or perhaps unwilling to allow) the Congolese to be agents of their own liberation without her participation and guidance. Further, Leah's racial self-loathing and romanticized notions of the indigenous people's innocence and moral superiority merely invert the assumptions underlying the colonial syndrome. In the process, Leah becomes herself a colonized subject, colonized by Africa and Anatole. And it is for this and the other reasons I have pointed out that I feel the novel fails to live up to the expectations of the postcolonial reader.

Jeremy Hawthorn notes that, in contemporary intellectual circles, the word "postcolonialism" and its connate terms have become "fashionable" (269). For

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<sup>6</sup> Speaking independently in 1971, Christian leaders in Asia, Africa, and South America—Emerito Nacpil (Philippines), John Gatu (Kenya), and José Miguez-Bonino (Argentina)—each called on the Western churches to initiate a moratorium, for at least five years, both on sending missionary personnel to these regions and on providing financial and material support for church-sponsored projects. Such a moratorium, they felt, was a necessary first step in overcoming the suffocating relationship of dependence by the indigenous churches on the Western churches that undermined self-reliance and self-determination. It would also afford them the space they needed to interpret the Gospel into their own cultural context without Western interference. Interestingly, the rationale underlying these calls for a moratorium echoed the principles of self-reliance articulated in Julius Nyerere's Arusha Declaration of 1967. Needless to say, these calls went largely unheeded by the West. For a fuller discussion see Anderson, also Luzbetak (107).

many contemporary liberal-humanist-intellectual (and pseudo-intellectual) elites the words resonate because of their association with anti-colonialism/imperialism, anti-capitalism, anti-globalization, feminism, environmentalism, and because of their accompanying materialist politics of the left that have the right “feel” about them. This, I believe, is the case with Kingsolver’s novel. The author is undoubtedly passionate and sincere about the positions she takes; too passionate, perhaps, for in the latter part of the novel she allows her politics to take over her art, turning what began as well-defined, complex, and compelling characters into stereotyped caricatures reduced to mere mouthpieces for rather worn and predictable political positions—all to the artistic detriment of the novel as a whole. Nevertheless, it has been well received and highly praised, particularly by critical readers sympathetic to her political positions.<sup>7</sup> The positions she stakes out, however,

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Millicent Bell likens Kingsolver to D. H. Lawrence and to Hemingway (424). John Leonard likewise dubbed her America’s “own Lessing and our own Gordimer” (30), while Ruth Conniff gives the author’s intents her blessing. Judith Bromberg is sufficiently impressed by the novel’s political and moral message to make it required summer reading for her high school students (13). Elsewhere, Robin Antepara calls it a “wondrous epic” whose characters allegorically explore “different aspects of the American mindset” (25), and Liane Norman likens Kingsolver to “George Eliot, Tolstoy, and Dickens” (59).

Predictably, readers at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum trashed it. In one of the most damning reviews, Lee Siegel dismissed Kingsolver as a purveyor of politically correct “Nice Fiction,” the purpose of which (so he claims) is to advance “the amoral pursuit of virtuous appearance. ... The portrait of people doing evil things to each other, or of

rather than being postcolonial in the sense of Hulme or Dirlik, are based on a humanistic-universalistic liberalism that tends to be sentimental—“dewy-eyed” is how Sarah Kerr described her (Kingsolver, Interview with Kerr 54)—and at times uncritical, totalizing, and even fashionable. It is not the sort of “postcolonial liberalism” that Duncan Ivison aspires to, a liberalism that goes beyond the colonial binary, facilitating “a genuine ‘multilogue’” among diverse peoples brought together, for whatever reason, into a commonly shared space (163). It is, rather, the sort of humanistic liberalism of which Ngugi wa Thiong’o is highly critical (15); a liberalism that begs the oppressor to recognize the humanity of the oppressed while at the same time reaffirming so many of the stereotyped representations of the oppressed as helpless, blissfully ignorant, and totally complacent double victims of Western racism and a hostile and unhealthy environment who are still in need of the materialist benefits of Western scientific, technological and intellectual achievements. Whatever the laudable humanitarian intentions behind their production, ultimately such representations, William Shultz and Willis

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someone sick and dying, or of a person psychologically hurt, flatters the portraitist. It can enfold the writer in a mantle of invincible goodness. The artistic worth of the portrait fades away as an issue. What remains is the invaluable appearance of goodness” (31-32).

Hartshorn of Amnesty International remind us, are “not particularly helpful in forming a picture of our common humanity” (qtd. in Achebe, *Education* 94).<sup>8</sup>

In the end, like in so many colonialist novels before it, Africa and its peoples become in Kingsolver’s text little more than an exotic backdrop against which very Western characters descend into the depths of their own cultural darkness and come face to face with the sickness of their culture. It is, indeed, a powerful (if overly simplistic) condemnation of Western capitalism and imperialism. However, good intentions (and correct politics) alone are insufficient. In order to achieve postcoloniality a text, particularly one by a First-World writer, must, in my opinion, push beyond the colonial binary, first by recognizing the multifaceted and complex nature of the former colonial world, as, for example, does Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the original version of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*, or (with less artistic success) Dominic Mulaisho’s *The Tongue of the Dumb*. It must then strive towards, not dialogue, which by its very nature remains locked in a binary relationship, but, as Ivison put it, “multilogue” with the diversity of

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<sup>8</sup> Schultz and Hartshorn were specifically criticizing a Western journalistic tendency, particularly in photojournalism, to highlight poverty, disease, and the consequences of economic, social, and political injustice in its coverage of various African societies. Achebe’s essay, “Africa’s Tarnished Name” (77-95), expands the discussion to include literary and non-literary textual representations.

participants involved in the negotiation (163). In my estimation this text fails to do that. Rather, it simply inverts the binary.

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