

Wisker, Gina. *Post-Colonial and African American Women's Writing: A Critical Introduction*. Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000

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1 In this book, Gina Wisker attempts to bring together two areas of criticism and fiction which have by now been widely but separately discussed, namely African-American and Post-Colonial women's writing. Their juxtaposition and analysis along the lines of gender and patriarchal oppression have encountered strong opposition. This criticism points to the dangers of erasing the differences existing between, for example, ethnic groups in the United States and Great Britain and people in formerly colonized regions such as the Caribbean, India, or Australia. Therefore, it is no surprise that Gina Wisker uses much of her introduction to justify this "bringing together [of] overlapping areas of study - post-colonialism and African American, with the focus on women" (1) by arguing that "[s]ilencing and subordination have been a shared experience for colonial and African American peoples, and for women in particular. Speaking out and back in one's own terms is a shared development" (3). Wisker identifies as common interests the exploration of "family relationships, mothering, and motherhood, the role of women in family and economic life, and a search for identity with all the complexities of race, religion, sexual choice, myth, family position, unique experiences" (32).

2 Three major sections follow her introduction which explains aims, methods, terms, critical contexts, and choice of authors and cultural and geographical areas. Part I discusses African-American women's writing with a particular emphasis on Toni Morrison and Alice Walker; part II focuses on writing in English by women from post-colonial contexts, including the Caribbean, Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Great Britain; part III presents emergent women's writing in English from South-East Asia, Oceania, and Cyprus. Wisker explains that this vast array of authors and contexts is motivated by "a mixture of the personal and the academic, as well as space" (3). Wisker rightfully names as problems in her juxtaposition an unintentionally imperialist point of view (7), the danger of appropriation (9), "essentialising and Otherising" (9), and of misrepresentation and misreading by "relying solely on discourse and text for interpretations of the daily realities, historical and contemporary, of colonization, and the post-colonial" (25), but emphasizes that "silencing and absence are no solutions . . ." (9). Instead, she suggests "the tactics of cultural studies," which for her means "looking at images, artefacts, visiting, interviewing, etc." in order to "situate the textual more usefully as a crucial historical element of control" (25).

3 Unfortunately, space is always limited so that all Gina Wisker can do in her chapter on African-American women's writing is to give a short overview of its development beginning with Anne Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, and Harriet Wilson, continuing with short biographical sketches of writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, Maya Angelou, Ntozake Shange, and Jewelle Gomez, and finishing with brief presentations of the works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. What I find missing here and in subsequent chapters is a more intensive and fruitful engagement in a dialogue between Wisker's introduction to theories and theoretical parameters and her actual analysis of authors and texts.

4 By far the largest of the sections, part II concentrates on women's post-colonial writing in English, setting side by side writers from highly different cultural contexts. After locating some common concerns of each group, Wisker proceeds again by briefly introducing biographies and works of selected women writers and by pointing at similarities, for example, between the long-neglected "Caribbean oral performance poetry" and "the oral literatures of other countries such as Africa . . . and the Aboriginal culture of Australia . . ." (106). By appropriating, deconstructing, and redefining in their writing patriarchally and colonially constructed concepts such as "Mother Africa," "motherhood," "mother tongues," and "mothering," women writers succeeded in creating voices of their own. Wisker focuses on writers such as Louise Bennett, Jean Rhys, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Arundhati Roy, Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Janet Frame, Keri Hulme, Margaret Atwood, Joy Kogawa, Merle Collins, Joan Riley, and, in part III, on Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Catherine Lim, and many others.

5 Wisker's book turns out to be more a reference book than an in-depth analysis of any particular writers or works. But it is a literary history of its own unusual kind bringing together well-known, unknown, and emerging women writers from and situated within an impressive variety of cultural contexts. Never, at least to my knowledge, has anyone juxtaposed African-American, Canadian, British, Caribbean, Asian, African, Australian, New Zealand, Malaysian, Samoan, Cypriot, etc. women's writing in such a skillful way. Gina Wisker manages to single out common denominators but never ignores decisive differences among these authors and their works.