

Return to the Scene of the Crime: The Returnee Detective and Postcolonial Detective Fiction.

Kamil Naicker.

Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2021. 186 pp.

ISBN 9781869144807.

In *Comparative Literature*, Ben Hutchinson writes: “In an age that is paradoxically defined by migration and border crossing on the one hand, and by a retreat into monolingualism and monoculturalism on the other, the cross-cultural agenda of comparative literature has become increasingly central to the future of the Humanities” (5). Kamil Naicker’s *Return to the Scene of the Crime: The Returnee Detective and Postcolonial Detective Fiction* (2021) is such a piece of scholarship: cross-cultural comparative literature for a hopelessly entangled postcolonial world.

Impressively, this is Naicker’s first book, stemming from a PhD completed under the supervision of Meg Samuelson and Sandra Young at the University of Cape Town. I will let the author speak for herself as she deftly summarises the gist of the book:

In this book, I explore five different portrayals of postcolonial violence. In each, I argue, the “world-making” project of the novel eclipses the original mystery that the narrative presents. The five novels I explore are *When We Were Orphans* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Anil’s Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje (both first published in 2000), *The Long Night of White Chickens* by Francisco Goldman (first published in 1992), *Red Dust* by Gillian Slovo (originally published in 2000) and *Crossbones* by Nuruddin Farah (originally published in 2011). The novels are set in China, Sri Lanka, Guatemala, South Africa and Somalia, respectively. Each is an English-language novel set in a postcolonial nation during a period of civil war or violent transition, and each features a protagonist who has returned from abroad in order to assume the role of detective. A “detective” is broadly defined here as a moral observer who is intent upon clearing up a mystery, although some of the returnees operate in their professional capacity as lawyers, journalists or forensic pathologists. Each text has a different geographical and temporal setting, but engages with a similar historical moment—the eruption of civil violence in the years following decolonisation. (5)

The sheer ingenuity of Naicker’s topic is perhaps the book’s greatest virtue. To have identified the trope of the ‘returnee’ detective as a golden thread, and to have picked five suitable crime novels, each set in a different but comparable context of civil strife, is enviable. You

know a research idea is good when your first thought is: “I wish I had thought of that!”

Of course, such a nuanced topic requires a distinct critical approach, and Naicker necessarily has to draw on a wide range of theoretical and conceptual apparatuses, ranging from genre theory (for example Tzvetan Todorov’s conception of genre as a conventional set of ‘norms and expectations’ which may be confirmed or subverted), Michael Holquist’s concept of the ‘metaphysical detective story’ (later elaborated by Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney), Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee and Stephen Knight’s work on ideology in crime fiction, postcolonial theory (especially Edward Said’s *Reflections on Exile* and his ideas on ‘wordliness’ and ‘contrapuntal thinking’), Judith Butler’s *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, and many others.

Suffice to say that the way in which Naicker manages to pull together all these disparate strands of theory is an achievement. Incidentally, Naicker also does not shy away from disagreement, for example when she critiques James Dawes’s take on Goldman’s novel (81, 91), or when she dismantles the British journalist James Fergusson’s problematic book about Somalia (137).

Structurally, each novel gets its own chapter whilst leaving the strictly comparative bits for the end. I think this structure works, as it affords the author ample space to discuss each novel in some detail—and Naicker is arguably at her best when she performs close reading. It also avoids the comparatist trap of overgeneralisation and a “flattening out” (9) of the specificities of each respective postcolonial context.

Mostly I was impressed by Naicker’s lucid writing. It is easy to follow her well-crafted arguments and she manages to keep the novels “alive”; in other words, she does not stifle the novels with sterile analysis but captures something of the novels’ affective appeal—something I am learning to appreciate more and more in the best literary scholarship.

Who or what is *Return to the Scene of the Crime* good for? Anyone interested in comparative literature, postcolonialism, crime fiction; or better yet: all the above. To researchers working on postcolonial crime fiction, this book will henceforth be regarded as compulsory reading. It may also present a useful pedagogical tool for any lecturer or professor thinking of prescribing one of the discussed novels (or any postcolonial crime novel, for that matter).

If there is a blind spot in the book, it is perhaps the fact that all five chosen novels are English-language novels, bringing to mind the old debate in

Comp Lit circles of whether comparatists ought to be studying texts in different languages, and whether English (that poster child of colonialism) functions as bridge builder or homogeniser. For if the figure of the returnee detective plays the role of “hybrid mediator” (6), as Naicker contends, then surely the linguistic cum cultural medium itself comes into play? But these matters are largely of an academic nature and do not diminish the contribution of this book at all. Here is Hutchinson (12) again:

[C]omparative literature is ultimately not so much about policing borders as crossing them. Comparatists choose to distance themselves from their own native cultures, to forgo their “home” literatures in favour of a willed homelessness, the better to gain purchase on texts and tropes that transcend any single idiom. They choose not to belong to any one particular tradition—indeed, this “unbelonging” is arguably their defining characteristic. As intellectual emigrés, comparatists make links between cultures, but in doing so they also, paradoxically, reinforce the distinctions between them. As such, the contrasts are as important as the comparisons, the disconnections as instructive as the connections.

I would like to suggest that comparatists of Kamil Naicker’s calibre are the returnee scholars of the world republic of letters, taking as they do a liminal and remarkably productive vantage point of ‘transcendental homelessness’ (to borrow a phrase from Lukács). The most valuable asset a critic has is their own culture. It is only by moving away, and eventually returning to one’s literary *heimat*, that one acquires true insight into it.

Work cited

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v59i2.14257>