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Your Local is Our Global:
Contemporary British Fiction and the Curriculum

on “Contemporary British Fiction and the Curriculum” there seemed to be considerable consensus on the F-

technology do inevitably have an impact on the contents discussed. At the conference, while we are virtually brought together by the technology, we are also practically kept apart: we are literally placed in boxes. The participating locations are physically framed, so at the same time as we appear on one screen, in one room, we are divided. In the Contemporary British Fiction conference this reaffirms our sense of location, crucial to the topic discussed. Everyone participating is, of course, still in *their place*, and delegates are speaking from their own home territory, something which becomes obvious in the ways the topic is approached. The fact that we inhabit two spaces at the same time during the video conference makes strange tensions emerge. On the one hand, our group in London is both expecting and expected to share some kind of insider knowledge on British fiction. On the other hand there is, in London, a sense of reticence at what is clearly perceived as too close for comfort to a "London broadcasting to the Empire" situation, and at the other locations, a sense of wanting to assert their choice to study or not to study Contemporary British Fiction. Indeed, the discussion revolves very much around the dichotomy of global and local, which the video conference technology in itself seems to suggest.

The term "contemporary" indicates that we are speaking about literature firmly in the "post-" if not in the "post-post"-era: certainly post-war, post-colonial and post-modern, as well as perhaps post-cold war, post-9/11 and even post-national. So while there are obvious problems with the term contemporary—how long ago did today's contemporary begin: in the 80s, 90s or after the millennium? Should we have a rolling contemporary "calendar" of fifteen or twenty-five years?—one also has to consider that the variable chosen for the time frame in the CBF equation will affect the geographical

variable. Indeed, the closer in time to the present, the more diverse the British variable of the label seems to become. That the word British in this context, as in many others, has become something immediately connected with diversity and hybridity is certainly something to celebrate, but not necessarily something that is unproblematic. At the conference the statement "Your global is our local" soon cropped up, and met with general accord. However, while the statement seems an obvious truism, things are a little more complicated when it comes to CBF. Indeed, the fact that in Britain we can, and enthusiastically do, say "Our local is global" is in part what makes the field of CBF so difficult to define.

The crux of the problem, of course, lies in the choice. Who and how to choose the works to be read and taught? Certainly we would all assert the right to choose, yet we cannot but be aware of the fact that choices are being made, in effect, by the publishing industry and academia. There seems to be much anxiety about the negative impact of both the popularisation of literature by publishing, and the elitism of academic choice. On the other hand, maybe we are forgetting that such narrowing down of choices may be useful, if the criteria are relevant, sound, and, most importantly, transparent. Perhaps we can find the authenticity we are ine

Prize shortlist are enormously influential on the titles generally seen as CBF, both of which, perhaps in particular the latter, have included many commonwealth writers. Indeed, the fact that "British" fiction now includes works by authors that could as easily be described as Indian, Pakistani, African, Arab and so on, was exulted in by the conference participants in London. This, of course, is an indication of the current central position enjoyed by the postcolonial debate in British literary academia today. The aforementioned diversity and hybridity are seen as attributes of Contemporary British Fiction as a matter of course. However, some of the points brought to the discussion from the other participating locations are indicative of a new shift in "postcolonial" thought. I put the term in quotation marks here to indicate that this shift may well be occurring from without as well as from within the postcolonial context, and that the term itself may have to give.

Indeed, while the postcolonial approach to CBF was something which seemed to be reassuring to the participants in London, in the face of that seemingly ubiquitous post-imperial discomfort, the other locations expressed concerns. In fact, the elision in academia between the terms Contemporary British Fiction and Postcolonial Fiction was seen as a limitation to the choice of works, as was the commodification of the postcolonial in popular publishing. The latter problem is nothing new, of course, and has been discussed in the postcolonial field repeatedly, but it seems that while in academia we convince ourselves that we are "studying" instead of "gawping at," the sense of being sold one's own wares is still justified to a certain extent—*both* in popular and academic terms. To take the most obvious examples, why should Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* or Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* be taught as part of the Contemporary

British Fiction courses at universities in Nigeria and India? Why not as Contemporary Nigerian or Indian Literature? Could one not suggest, perhaps controversially, that the current idea of CBF is co-opting all these "postcolonial" literatures under the label of "British" and congratulating itself for it?

Delegates in Cairo indicated that postcolonial theory seemed more intimidating than helpful to students, and that, in fact, it was felt that the postcolonial stance was driving wedges between cultures with its insistence on diversity. Instead, a return to theorising the commonality of the human was called for, even while acknowledging the fact that this may be perceived as naïve in today's academic climate. Participants in Karachi pointed out that such issues as hybridity often seemed more the concern of academia than individual writers, and were not felt to be the most useful approach to works studied. Indeed, Karachi suggested that works that would fall under the CBF umbrella would be far more usefully taught as part of other courses determined by thematics rather than location, a sentiment echoed several times during the conference. This does seem the pragmatic path to take in an increasingly post-national world, allowing both for diversity and the wished-for human commonality. Certainly such an approach would provide a solution for a string of problems voiced during the discussion of what to include on a CBF syllabus. While some w CB w CB w C

certainly some difficulty or at least a "moving out of comfort zones" in teaching such topics, it was generally felt that this was a positive thing. The consensus was that it was indeed one of the fortes of literature study that it provided a space for discussing such issues. The classroom, the fictional mode, indeed literariness itself provides a very useful safe arena. Although this safety was perhaps increased with distance in time, so that classics with difficult themes were easier to teach than contemporary works, it was striking that there was a real eagerness to find new material to teach, and the main issue, it seemed, was not the potential controversy of contemporary works, but whether they would be relevant and interesting for students. That is, while diversity and the celebration of difference is all well and good, if we are to enjoy reading and studying literature, there must be something in the works we choose that speaks to us. That something need not be culturally convergent, but it has to be relevant and interesting. Thus the discussion returned to the merit of such a term as CBF.

On the one hand there seemed to be a general inclination to reject the idea of CBF. Delegates in Cairo, Tunis and Karachi seemed to question the usefulness of such a "narrow" course in their context, while London, perhaps, saw the culmination of the diversity of Britishness in the very dissolution of CBF. On the other, however, as mentioned before, there was a very contradictory dynamic also in play around the virtual table. It became apparent that, in fact, despite any suspicions toward the CBF label, the English Department in Tunis was flourishing. Indeed, Contemporary British Fiction had a firm place in their English degree course, which aimed to teach English language, literature and culture. What they were looking for were texts that would be relevant to the study of English in particular. Here, it seems, resided the elephant in the ether. Had the

question been forthrightly asked as “So, we have chosen to study CBF—what texts should we read, do you think?” it seems to me London would have struggled to answer. Not because of the lack of knowledge or the lack of suitable material, but because that prevalent way of thinking, perhaps heightened by the very format of the conference, would make answering such a question uncomfortable. In the global forum of the international video conference it seemed that the *local* at hand, namely the British, was the most difficult to talk about. In fact, hardly any practical discussion took place about what CBF, should one wish to teach it, would actually consist of. There was a definite “Empire” shape to the (pink?) elephant, and its relative proximity was noticeably crucial.

Tunis with its different colonial background, seemed to have the fewest qualms about CBF (it would be interesting to find out what their discussions regarding Contemporary French Literature revolve around). Participants in Karachi, on the other hand, seemed to object the most to the label, although, as may have become obvious, much of the problem lay precisely in the postcolonial tendencies of CBF. Yet it was London, the metropolis itself, that insisted on the non-locality of CBF. And perhaps herein lies 6T(ha)4(nd)]-2(he)42(nt)-d on ty

There was indeed much more of a sense of a search for the new classics in the other locations than in London. As mentioned, there was a distinct lack of actual proposals for new texts to be studied. It seems that in the wish to encompass the world with our literature and to embrace maximum diversity, the idea of the great work of literature has somehow been lost. In a climate where the non-definition, non-specificity of culture is prized, how can we allow ourselves to find the defining novel? Of course we do, however much we may protest, and end up with Sir Rushdie and all the cultural discomfort that brings.

We should, however, perhaps learn to embrace the very idea of CBF in all its awkwardness. Indeed, I would like to suggest that searching for the next British classic is no shameful thing to do. We all seemed to agree at the conference that a good work of literature is one which makes us reconsider our attitudes and positions, that this was the heart of teaching literature. As initially noted, the label of CBF cannot ever be finally