

Helga Ramsey-Kurz and Geetha Ganapathy-Doré, eds. 2011. *Projections of Paradise. Ideal Elsewheres in Postcolonial Migrant Literature*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. xxv + 277 pp. ISBN: 978-90-420-3333-7.

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Elleke Boehmer in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* has argued that “perspectives on other lands continued to be directed through the prisms of inherited tropes: Utopia, or the lawless wilderness; the Noble Savage, or the unregenerate primitive; the Garden of Eden, and the Holy City. For Britain the glorious figure of Britannia was regnant over all” (2005: 43). Postcolonial texts have striven to rid themselves of these tropes of idyllic territories in order to reclaim them as everyday living spaces. However, it is also true that, in trying to erase such distorted visions of exotic paradises, the stereotype is inadvertently reinstated, as, beneath the claims for a share in modernity, there lies a yearning for the lost precolonial world. This appears to indicate a desire to return to an imagined unspoilt age of innocence: urban culture and lifestyle, long seen as the pinnacle of progress and modernity, seeking refuge in ‘nature’ and the ‘wilderness’. At the same time, undeveloped countries of the south, and allegedly unspoilt villages have lured cheap mass tourism and, more recently, adventure tours. This powerful desire to ‘penetrate’ virgin land reeks of past colonialisms as tourists often unconsciously destroy what they seek: the moment paradise is attained, it brings about its own demise. As Michael Wood argues: “The true paradises, indeed the only paradises, are the ones we have always already lost, because loss is what they are for, they have no other purpose than to be lost” (1997: 248). The increased critical focus on diasporic communities in the last thirty years has singled out the migrant — or diasporic subject — as the symbol of cosmopolitan travel and relocation. His or her anxieties as regards an often hostile host environment, and nostalgia for the lost homeland are frequently articulated through self-contrived myths of irretrievable, romanticised pasts. As Wood aptly puts it: “Paradise is the denial of the disagreeable; not an isolated garden but a form of willed blindness” (1997: 248).

This book of essays edited by Helga Ramsey-Kurz and Geetha Ganapathy-Doré centres on this notion of home as “a site mostly out of reach [and therefore] a site of desire” (xix). The thirteen essays, together with the introduction by Ramsey-Kurz, tease out the various understandings of the paradise trope as it is dealt with in recent writing by authors with backgrounds in countries that have experienced colonization. The originality of the volume lies in the challenging way the authors of the essays have approached a wide variety

of literary genres from what appears to be a universal concept, yet have found multifarious layers of meaning of the term *paradise* embedded in the texts. Ranging from tropes of abundance and ambition of mastery through to Utopian dreams of escapism from modern life, the essays bring together a series of writers and texts that engage in thought-provoking dialogues, whether one reads the volume in one sitting or dips into it only to read a specific essay. This collection is an excellent example of thematically based postcolonial criticism centred around the trope of paradise, and as such is a refreshing change from studies that seem determined to fit the text under scrutiny into a theoretical straightjacket.

In her introduction, Ramsey-Kurtz surveys various understandings of paradise, including the wild, as a place of innocence, and shows how the domination and exploitation of formerly unknown places actually brought about the disintegration of the earthly paradise only to reinstate it in the realm of myth. Her argument that “established conceptual hierarchies are displaced, alienated, suspended, and eventually replaced by new structures” (xviii) —what she later calls a site of desire (xix)— forms the framework for the remaining essays in the volume. This fashionable search for untouched Nature, disguised as nostalgia for the loss of innocence, pits the former colonies against the ‘peripheral’ areas. The latter are ruthlessly exploited and destroyed by industrialized agriculture, and are ironically devalued as being backward at the same time as being anxiously sought out as the object of urban longing. Nowadays tourists —read paradise seekers— want to experience nature and the landscape as consumers or voyeurs but rarely as actors. Interestingly, in view of this, only a few of the authors have linked their arguments with the rising body of work on ecocriticism. Ramsey-Kurtz touches upon “environmentalist anxieties about natural resource exploitation” (xvi), but no further reference is made to the way “a postcolonial poetics attends to the fragmented conditions of colonial displacement or diaspora without either idealizing fragmentation or yearning nostalgically for wholeness” (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011: 29). *Projections of Paradise* could have sought to incorporate some of the writers who are deeply concerned about the need to fight for “a sustainable ecosystem”, which is indeed modern jargon for *paradise* (see Benson 2011: 62). It is true that Evelyne Hanquart-Turner’s essay, ‘The Search for Paradise: Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*’ mentions in the conclusion “Ghosh’s ecological commitment as well as his social concern for the fate of the Indian subcontinent” (80), but her essay in fact focuses on the two visions of paradise that the novel projects: “a prelapsarian, elemental world of origins, beyond good and evil” and a “place of refuge from evil” (74-75) rather than on the environmental issues that the novel raises. Gerd Bayer does indeed cite several ecocritical studies in his contribution ‘Subverting the Tropical Paradise’, in which he seeks to explore how the myth of the island paradise is deconstructed in a selection of writers from Sri Lanka and India. Bayer reminds us that “the actual reality of such localities, not to mention the needs of the local population, easily falls by the wayside” (51). Through his analyses of some Sri Lankan novels and Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2005) he denounces the Western world’s commodification of nature, which “puts non-Western humanity into a position of subservience to the environment in which it lives” (57).

Continuing with Sri Lanka, Susanne Pichler asks “But are we not all refugees from something?”: Projections of Paradise in Romesh Gunsekera’s *Reef*. In linking her study with the work of sociologist Avtar Brah, Pichler unravels many of the connotations that the concept of paradise carries. Place inevitably conjures up the awkward question of belonging—a central issue for migrants—and banishment, which serves as a cruel reminder for those people who saw emigration as their only hope for survival. Pichler suggests that for Triton in *Reef* (1994) paradise is more an imagined space than a spatial configuration. Sri Lanka in Gunsekera’s work—like Zanzibar in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s fiction examined in the same collection by Sofia Muñoz Valdivieso—lends itself to deconstructions of paradisiacal islands when the sociopolitical realities take centre stage: civil war and interethnic genocide shatter any hopes of the harmonious communities the travel brochures hint at beneath the exoticism they doggedly promote.

Petra Tournay-Theodotou’s ‘Reconfigurations of “Home as a Mythic Place of Desire”’: Bernardine Evaristo’s *Soul Tourists* suggests that the project of rewriting Africans into European history does not necessarily bring about present-day satisfaction. The character Stanley becomes more conscious of his liminal status and the search for home constitutes “a place that remains forever out of reach, deferred – an unattainable paradise” (121). In ‘The Paradise Within: Displacement, Memory and Nostalgia in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *By the Sea*’ Sofia Muñoz Valdivieso has boldly opted to centre her discussion of the paradise trope in Gurnah’s *By the Sea* (2001) rather than his aptly, albeit ironically, named Booker-shortlisted *Paradise* (1994), which has been analyzed extensively from this perspective. She shows how the earlier novel proves “the impossibility of finding a paradise on earth [while] *By the Sea* ends on a note of hope” (142-43). Muñoz Valdivieso’s focus on the elderly asylum seeker, Saleh Omar, highlights his “ability to remember and spin stories from the land of memory” (124), which becomes the antidote to the sense of rootlessness that enforced migrancy entails. Guilt features in few of the essays despite the obvious religious connection between the biblical expulsion from paradise and the impossibility of any restoration of prelapsarian bliss because of wrongdoing. Muñoz Valdivieso links Omar’s quest for forgiveness with his search for internal peace and likewise Vera Alexandra suggests that the paradisiacal garden “raises questions about the inevitability of human guilt” (2). Alexander deals with the ambiguities of Penelope Lively’s writing in the first essay of the volume, ‘Revisiting Lost Gardens. The Expulsion from Childhood in the Writings of Penelope Lively’. Her discussion refutes any doubt about the postcolonial credentials of English writers, highlighting the fact that Lively’s works “reflect a concern with postcolonial questions and a shared interest in issues debated in postcolonial discourse” (3), apart from the writer’s personal history of having spent much of her early childhood in Egypt and the Middle East. Alexander suggests that paradise can be construed as time more than place (25) and much of Lively’s writing portrays childhood not only as an age of innocence but also as “an open state of mind free of limiting preconceptions” (26).

Geetha Ganapathy-Doré discusses narrative and the loss of paradise in ‘Kashmir by Way of London and New York: Projections of Paradise in Salman Rushdie and Agha

Shahid Ali'. Kashmir has been for many Indians an iconic, almost mythical, territory of desire —see the title of Kabir's recent study (2009)— and Ganapathy-Doré provides a thorough background with which the texts, Rushdie's novel *Shalimar the Clown* (2006) and a selection of Ali's poetry, are to be read. She points to "the loss of origin and childhood innocence that condemns the immigrant to exile and wandering" (45) as a shared motif in the novel and the poems, almost what Stephen Morton had called "a belated fantasy" (2012: 169). However, the close reading of Agha Shahid Ali's poetry is somewhat weakly linked with her discussion of Rushdie and to the concluding remarks.

Marta Mamet-Michalkiewicz's 'Paradise Regained? The Harem in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*' reads the memoir as a response to the Orientalist myth of the harem as a place of passive, erotic females meekly awaiting the Western male. Mernissi writes about a place of repressed but active women, some of whom were determined to defy the gender constraints imposed on them. The paradise motif is used to contrast the misconception Western males cherished of the harem in comparison to the daily routine of Mernissi's women, who cross imaginary borders through the "verbal transcendence of their physical imprisonment" and the discovery of "alternative modes of bonding" (155). Ulla Ratheiser undertakes a close reading of a single poem, in her excellent essay 'The Scent of Paradise: Michael Ondaatje's "The Cinnamon Peeler"', in which she raises multiple issues, including the link between paradise and food, and proposes various readings of the poem. Its ambivalence allows it to be read on several levels but the predominant theme of the poem, given its title, suggests a diasporic understanding of paradise through the strong link between cinnamon and Sri Lanka. The male persona narrates its colonial history and the reconquering of a woman's body which, in turn, comes to represent the island itself and thus constitutes an act of neocolonialism: "The return to paradise is to be found in (an elusive) past, retrieved in an act of nostalgic resuscitation" (173). Michael Ondaatje features again in Ursula Kluwick's essay 'Waters of Paradise: *The English Patient*'. Water serves both to redeem and to destroy in the temporary paradise that the characters create in the Tuscan villa in the last months of World War II. It metaphorically stands for their human interactions and "fertility, healing, rejuvenation, purity, physical and spiritual cleansing, nourishment and refreshment" (191). The bombing of Hiroshima and the thunderstorm work together to arouse Kip's anger, which leads to his leaving the villa-paradise. Kluwick concludes that "salvation lies not within artificial national and ethnic boundaries, but within the nucleus of personal relationships" (196).

Human relations figure prominently in Derek Coyle's reading of one of Derek Walcott's best known poems in his essay "'I Got Raptures Once, and I Saw God": Shabine as Prophetic Shaman of Paradise in Derek Walcott's "The Schooner Flight"'. The move across to the Caribbean singles out a liminal character in the shape of the sailor who undertakes the shamanic role of "providing insight and healing for his society" (200). In fact, the paradisaical vision with which Shabine's voyage ends is read as "an experience of genuine human closeness, solidarity, or *communitas*, despite his criticism of that society" (215). Janne Korke takes readers to the Canadian prairies in his essay "'I Feel

the Land”: Contradictions of Place in Rudy Wiebe’s Mennonite Novels’. Korka provides a comprehensive background to the Mennonite history of migration emphasising the community’s relations to place. Paradise is invariably never attained as the migrants are perpetually on the move even though the quest for an ideal locality features as a central motif in Wiebe’s work.

The final essay in the volume, Helga Ramsey-Kurz’s ‘Glimpses of Paradise: Hope in Short Stories of Migration by M.G. Vassanji, Cyril Dabydeen, and Janette Turner Hospital’ analyzes three texts by three authors of different backgrounds from the perspective of the trauma undergone by migrants. As Ramsey-Kurz perceptively notes, the short story genre cannot enter into detailed explanations of this drama but instead implies how modern day migrants cope with the upheavals of uprooting and displacement. She also makes the vital distinction between migrants and simple travellers, people who have been obliged to leave for good and those who can return: “To ignore this difference is to ignore the trauma of separation suffered by migrants and their families” (253). Ramsey-Kurz’s concluding remark that for migrants in our postcolonial world, home, “the place impossible to (re) possess . . . proves but a fantasy, a vision, a dream” (254), sums up many of the notions of paradise that the authors of the essays have presented. Moreover, the irony of the ideal elsewhere of the title of the volume is admirably conveyed by her view that “the migrant can be physically back in paradise and yet feel excluded from it . . . [and also experience] a sense of homeliness even in moments of utter displacement” (255).

This volume covers several authors and countries and diverse migrant experiences. Interestingly, the authors of the essays have not suggested that writers who live in the West may be tempted to resort to paradise motifs that prove to be attractive to Western readers despite the fact that this entails self-exoticisation. They have perhaps been excessively benevolent as regards the writers’ use of the paradise trope and have overlooked the role played by the publishing industry where the postcolonial book market is concerned. However, the essays are engaging and well researched, but perhaps tighter editorial control could have eliminated unnecessary repetitions, in particular concerning the origin of the term *paradise*, and have unified the length of the essays, which range from ten to twenty-eight pages. There are also several typographical errors which could easily have been avoided with more conscientious proof-reading. The index is helpful and a complete bibliography might have been a better choice rather than the separate listings at the end of each chapter as, again, this would have avoided many unnecessary repetitions. The overall impression of the volume is positive as the authors have tackled an intriguing theme in a very convincing and stimulating way.

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