

## **The Global South and Literature: A Response**

Ankhi Mukherjee

*University of Oxford*

With all the necessary caveats about the provisional and unstable signifieds of the signifier “Global South,” Russel West-Pavlov seems to indicate that this contestation of ideas around the term leads to a fruitful excess, not lack, of meaning: “it refers simultaneously to a geopolitical area, a global economic process, a collective actor, a discursive event, and a body of theories, paradigms, and texts” (2). As editor of a timely collection, *The Global South and Literature*, West-Pavlov proposes we treat this term not just as literal or figurative marker but as ushering new modes of praxis, new “fields of agency,” and even new subjects (2). Having supplanted the bare and rude Bandung-era designation “Third World,” “Global South” promises to be a place name, a concept, international networks and configurations, all at once. Accreting meaning steadily through the 2000s in economic and political discourse, it finds its rightful place in the North American humanities, West-Pavlov points out, when the Modern Language Association (MLA) of America consecrates it in 2015 as a forum under the rubric of “Comparative Literary and Critical Studies.”

A tricky spatiotemporal term, “Global South” resists literal (Southern hemisphere) and metaphorical (an emancipatory state) interpretations. What, then, is it particularly useful for? As a hermeneutic for literary works, West-Pavlov, argues, which are “atelelogical but not hopeless” (15). The characteristics of such “Southern” work are as follows: a new theory of temporality; a globality that is multilocal and multifocal; a fragmentation which is not to be mistaken for a destruction of meaning; reorientation and restructuring. As a foil and contrast to this, Russel-Pavlov offers postcolonial literature. Global South is the “positive equivalent” to postcolonialism’s “negative picaresque” (15), an emergent form to the latter’s exhausted paradigm. Postcolonial studies, in this positioning, is little more than a cautionary tale, running its gamut from the hyphenated “post-colonial” to “postcolonial”: Global South, he speculates, “may be in danger of going down

the same deempiricizing and depoliticizing road” (16) if it does not overcome its anxiety of influence in relation to postcolonial studies.

Russell-Pavlov’s engagement with the putative postcolonial studies that Global South studies must now successfully overcome could have been a lot more detailed, sustained, and in-depth. Confusingly, postcolonial studies is both presented as a deficit (exhausted, de-politicised, dematerialised) and as a greedy epistemology (gobbling up the gains of world literature). The histories of these phenomena are tangled, as are their elaborations in humanities scholarship, in particular literary criticism. It is undeniable that “postcolonial,” as it is used in literary criticism and the academic humanities, is a contingent placeholder and an umbrella term. Representing, as it does, intersectional thought extrapolating from discourse theory, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, gender theory, race studies, urban studies, history, and anthropology, it functions best as heterodox ideation about wished-for postcolonial futures. It does not claim to be a realisation of that future after/beyond colonialism, but this is not simply negative or deflationary: it can be diagnostic, as in Achille Mbembe’s formulation of necropolitics; emancipatory, as formulated in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s upholding of subaltern voice consciousness, reclaimed from the silence of the archive; or planetary, as seen in the poetry and literary criticism of Derek Walcott. It is surprising, therefore, to see the trans- and interdisciplinary richness of postcolonial studies reduced to a smattering of foundational figures: Said, Spivak, Ngugi, Bhabha (misspelled as Bhaba on p. 17). Citing Gikandi’s topical comments on the underrepresentation of the Global South in *one* roundtable discussion dominated by US (and North American) postcolonial scholars cannot possibly represent the debates structuring, mobilising and correcting postcolonial studies today. And, if the objection mentioned here was primarily on the grounds that only one roundtable participant was actually “based” in the Global South, this reader wondered why this edited collection too was heavily dominated by academics from Europe, United Kingdom, and the United States.

### Works Cited

West-Pavlov, Russell, ed. 2018. *The Global South and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.