Horáková, Martina

**[Moore-Gilbert, Bart. Postcolonial life-writing: culture, politics, and self-representation]**

*Brno studies in English.* 2010, vol. 36, iss. 2, pp. [195]-198

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/105073
Access Date: 17. 02. 2024
Version: 20220831

*Brno Studies in English*
Volume 36, No. 2, 2010
ISSN 0524-6881

**Moore-Gilbert, Bart:** *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics and Self-Representation.* London: Routledge, 2009. ISBN 978-0-415-44300-5, 174 pp.

While introducing *Postcolonial Life-Writing*, Bart Moore-Gilbert (Goldsmiths College, University of London) quotes David Huddard's claim that "autobiography is a central explanatory category for postcolonial theory" (xiv). Though this may seem an arguable assertion, Moore-Gilbert's project does provide reasonably sound arguments for the genre's prominence in postcolonial studies, addressing the lack of both practical and theoretical critical attention.

The introduction offers quite a comprehensive overview of the history of auto/biographical studies in relation, on the one hand, to feminist interventions into the genre and, on the other, to postcolonial studies. Moore-Gilbert explains that the *raison d'etre* of his monograph is to bridge the gaps in previous studies on postcolonial life-writing; these, he claims, are often limited geographically/historically, focus only on either women's or men's narratives, or privilege fictional auto/biographies (xiv). His main objective, then, is to provide a credible account of postcolonial life-writing as a subgenre with distinctive properties not only in comparison to canonical (i.e. Western and male) auto/biographies, but also to Western women's personal narratives. Indeed, since feminist and gender perspectives have proved to be quite successful in articulating the diverse practices of women's auto/biographies that undermine the assumptions made by Western male auto/biographers and critics, summarized so well in Phillip Lejeune's legendary "autobiographical pact," it is logical that many women's auto/biographical narrative strategies find common ground with those in postcolonial life-writing. Nevertheless, it is also important to acknowledge, as Moore-Gilbert does, that similar structures may have different motivations: for example, a fragmented, decentered selfhood, proclaimed by feminists as a specific feature of women's life-writing, may be represented in postcolonial texts as an aftermath of colonialism, "in which new and occasionally radically conflicting identities are inscribed in palimpsestic fashion on the subaltern, sometimes by force" (xxi). It is equally true that the homogenizing and sometimes essentialist tendencies of mainstream feminism have been complicit in neglecting postcolonial women's auto/biographies (xvii). On the other hand, when Moore-Gilbert claims that "it is … unusual to find any discussion of ethnicity as a dimension of western women's auto/biographical subjectivity" (xxi), one wonders whether he has deliberately decided to ignore the last fifteen years or so in which it was particularly Western women writers and critics who engaged in whiteness studies and critical race theory in order to problematize the notion of whiteness in relation to constructing one's subjectivity (Ruth Frankenberg's influential study *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters* was published as early as 1993; since then, a number of monographs, edited collections and special issues on whiteness, as well as a boom of white women's memoirs were produced mostly in, not surprisingly, settler colonies).

As suggested above, Moore-Gilbert goes on to examine closely the overlaps between Western women's life-writing and postcolonial studies in three areas (these are what he calls "thematics of subjectivity," issues of form and, lastly, the social function/cultural politics of life-writing), attempting to locate features that might differentiate the two subgenres. The thematics of subjectivity that the author pursues in the first four chapters are (de)centeredness of the Self, relationality of the Self, embodiment and, finally, location of the Self. "Centered and Decentered Selves" offers an intriguing analysis of the ways in which postcolonial life-writers – namely Aboriginal author Sally Morgan in *My Place* and Equiano in his slave narrative – re-work, on the one hand, the basic premise that canonical auto/biography has aspired to textually construct a sovereign, centered, unified subjectivity, and, on the other hand, the challenge to this premise posed by postmodernist and feminist perspectives, which instead foreground instability, decenteredness and multiplicity of

selfhood. Morgan's text, for example, is assessed by Moore-Gilbert as promoting a quest for a centered self and a unified identity not because of its desire to imitate, possibly appropriate Western models of auto/biography but precisely because the socio-historical circumstances in Australia led to the fractured and fragmented subjectivity of Aboriginal peoples. Similarly, the second chapter "Relational Selves" subverts the long-held (and controversial) feminist argument about the inherent relationality of female subjectivity which, among other things, resulted in blurring the boundaries between autobiography and biography. Moore-Gilbert shows how this strategy has also been adopted by postcolonial male life-writers, who often shift from individual towards collective auto/biographies. This is an important point in relation to indigenous and ethnic minority personal narratives having emerged from a long tradition of collaboration between indigenous "informants" on the one hand, and white anthropologists, on the other, and having resulted in various ethnographies and community biographies. Hence, the stress on relationality and communal voices in much postcolonial life-writing might also be an expression of taking over the agency that has been reserved to colonizing authorities.

The other two thematics of subjectivity, embodiment and location, are explored in the third and fourth chapters. In "Embodied Selves" Moore-Gilbert, in a fashion similar to previous chapters, again first rehearses feminist arguments about the absence of the theme of embodiment as an important part of subjectivity in male auto/biographies; and, more importantly, he points to a feminist ambivalence about the intensity with which the female body should be (re-)inscribed, which may sometimes reduce femininity to "patriarchal synecdoches of … 'birth, belly and body'" (35). Needless to say, similar debates are mirrored in postcolonial feminist discourse in which postcolonial women life-writers try to articulate different, sometimes radically opposing experience concerning female bodies from that of Western women, mainly as a site of restrained sexuality, fully realized motherhood and resistance to state intervention into the private sphere. To demonstrate that postcolonial male life-writers also reflect the theme of embodied selfhood, Moore-Gilbert provides a detailed examination of Gandhi's *An Autobiography* (1927–29) in which he points to the intimate relation Gandhi makes between the individual body and the larger "body politic," leading to his awareness of his status as a colonized subject precisely through corporeal experience (37). This observation brings to mind Foucault's (and later Negri's) development of *biopolitics* as a regulatory system which, through biopower managing and controlling spheres such as hygiene, diet, fertility, sexuality, etc., governs so-called "populations." It remains a question whether it would be worthwhile to link Moore-Gilbert's analytical discussion of the text to this theoretical notion and speculate, for example, how it could be used in anti-colonial and decolonizing discourse. The chapter "Located Selves" engages predominantly in dislocation and displacement of postcolonial subjectivity, arguing that a specific socio-geo-historical location is crucial for articulating postcolonial subjectivity. Place, in this context, is not only gendered and racialized, it is also "selved" (54).

The remaining three chapters are dedicated to exploring the form, style and cultural politics of postcolonial life-writing. "Working the Borders of Genre" is useful in its overview of the ways in which forms of traditional auto/biography, with a stress on the Derridean "law of genre," have been altered through various interventions, namely the postmodernist, feminist and also postcolonial. The aesthetic criteria of "stylistic harmony," "fine logical and rational order," and "psychological continuity," praised and sought-after by early critics of auto/biography (69), were contested by generic experimentation which celebrates fragmentation, discontinuity, hybridity and multiplicity of styles. Thereby, Moore-Gilbert focuses on three major influences in auto/biographical narratives – fiction, historiography and travel-writing. Once more, Moore-Gilbert takes issue with feminist claims that genre-crossing has been predominantly a Western women life-writers' domain and rightly points out that this kind of experimentation has been taken up by postcolonial men as well as women life-writers. His analysis of V. S. Naipaul, for example, argues that it is the "historical-cultural predicament" of colonization, rather than gender, that leads to articulating a specific Caribbean subjectivity which is "chronically suspended between the 'real' and fictive, domains which cannot, in any case, be easily isolated from each other …" (76). Similarly, feminist arguments that women's auto/biographical narratives provide a counter-history, or *Her*story, blurring the boundary between the public/political and private/personal, are also mirrored in the postcolonial tendency to

inscribe, on the one hand, collective histories promoting relationality and representativeness, and, on the other, the history of subaltern subjects. Lastly, the relationship between travel-writing and postcolonial life-writing is examined by Moore-Gilbert once more against canonical auto/biographies and Western women's life-writing, suggesting in the end that while postcolonial narratives can hardly be considered as inherently imitative *vis-à-vis* the canon any more (89), neither can this formal hybridity be considered as exclusive to the postcolonial sub-genre.

The chapter titled "Non-western Narrative Resources in Postcolonial Life-Writing" proceeds with an examination of formal innovations and provides perhaps two of the most illuminating analyses of the book. While the mélange of auto/biography and fiction, history or travel-writing is also commonly found in contemporary Western (women's) life-writing, integrating non-Western narrative strategies is what makes postcolonial life-writing distinctive, in the way that it often uses a Western template but transgresses it at the same time. For example, Moore-Gilbert asserts that Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1985), apart from integrating historiography and collective auto/biographies of Algerian women during the French invasion, incorporates narrative forms inspired by the musical tradition of the *Magreb*, in particular a *nouba* – a lengthy narrative song of a determined structure (96), while Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days: A Memoir* (1989) draws, on the one hand, on the tradition of Mughal painting and its concepts of miniature and portraiture, and on the other hand on *ghazal*, a classical form in Urdu literature (103–104). Discussion of these texts proves, according to Moore-Gilbert, that such narrative structures, neither gender- or historically-specific, invoke "different conceptions of Selfhood to what is normative in the West" (109).

The last chapter "Political Self-representation in Postcolonial Life-Writing" looks at two examples of Palestinian life-writing in order to show how the genre problematizes the traditional conceptions of auto/biography as poetic self-expression and their insistence on strictly literary modes. Indeed, the analyses of Edward Said's acclaimed memoir *Out of Place* and Suad Amiry's *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*: *Ramallah Diaries* do prove the sound political resonance of similar narratives in which gaining agency, mitigating invisibility and, frequently, drawing international attention to various long-term conflicts is the primary reason for producing and marketing them, in Sidonie Smith's words, as "revolutionary gesture[s] against amnesia" (128). However, such an argument may seem slightly contra-productive: postcolonial life writing, also referred to as ethnic minority auto/biographical narratives, have, it seems, until recently been subjected to critiques for their overly political charge at the expense of their "literariness"; in other words, the subgenre's critics sometimes downplay their significance for the literary canon, seeing them at best as useful social realist documentaries or ethnographies with sociological value, at worst as propaganda. Moore-Gilbert himself acknowledges this fact in a short comment: "postcolonial life-writing has often been seen as a branch of 'protest writing' rather than literature 'proper'" (128). In this light, it seems that the task of contemporary criticism, if it aspires to establish postcolonial life-writing as a legitimate area of study and research, is to draw our attention as much to the *poetics* as to the *politics* of postcolonial life-writing. Interestingly, Moore-Gilbert's book actually does precisely this, most visibly in the chapter on non-Western narrative resources, as mentioned above, but also by carefully pointing out the variety of forms and styles postcolonial life-writers adopt. It may be appropriate to mention here the recent scholarly attention paid to unconventional auto/biographical forms such as emails, blogging (e.g. by Gillian Whitlock and Sidonie Smith) or, in particular, graphic books. Indeed, the international success of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* confirms this critical interest, even though trauma and human rights auto/biographical graphic narratives have predecessors in, for example, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a biography of Spiegelman's father as a Holocaust survivor. This trend seems to have found its way into Czech literature too, with Petr Sís' graphic book *The Wall* (2007), about his childhood spent in communist Czechoslovakia, and the recently published graphic trilogy of three Roma narrators *O přibjehi: Ferko, Keva, Albína (2010)*.

In conclusion, *Postcolonial Life-Writing* will undoubtedly become a very useful source for students and teachers of postcolonial literature alike. The book's contribution is perhaps not so much in drawing our attention to a neglected subgenre, since similar narratives have already been integrated in various analyses of postcolonial literature and have found their way into university curricula, but mainly in the careful contextualization the author provides as he consistently juxta-

poses postcolonial life-writing to a well-researched compendium of Western women's life-writing, comparing and contrasting not only the two texts examined in each chapter but also referring to a number of other texts. In this light, it is not surprising that one of the pleasant details of the study is the recurring references to Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, a classic text of the psychology of (anti-)colonialism, which serves as a guiding text throughout Moore-Gilbert's monograph, deviating from what is otherwise a very rigid, textbook-like structure: in each chapter, Fanon is turned to as a representative model and an influential inspiration to all thematic and formal properties discussed in the book, which leads Moore-Gilbert to conclude that Fanon's text is an example *par excellence* of postcolonial life-writing. All in all, *Postcolonial Life-Writing* provides a credible account of a representative group of narratives which can serve as a starting point for further theoretical observations. This is certainly a credit to Moore-Gilbert's focus on men's, as well as women's, postcolonial life-writing, since considering them together has probably been undervalued in this context. Moore-Gilbert claims at the beginning that his is not an extensive study, and as such it serves its purpose and is a competent introduction to the field.

Martina Horáková

Address: Martina Horáková, Ph.D., Department of English and American Studies, Masaryk University, Arna Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic. [email: mhorakov@phil.muni.cz]