

Colonial Strangers: Women Writing the End of the British Empire. By Phyllis Lassner. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004. 288 pp. \$62.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

Scholars and critics of the twentieth century, modern fiction, women's studies, and postcolonial history will welcome Phyllis Lassner's new study, *Colonial Strangers*. It is a vastly important investigation that links the end of World War II and fascism with the end of the British empire by examining memoirs, novels, reportage, and film adaptations of works by Olivia Manning, Muriel Spark, Ethel Mannin, Rumer Godden, Elspeth Huxley, Phyllis Shand Allfrey, and Phyllis Bottome; these writers examine both the ideological concept of "empire" as well as the effects of actual empire building "on our critical and creative imaginations" in order to bring about its end (1). Unlike other writers of the 1930s and 1940s, these women did not fail to see that while their nation was fighting for its own life in the Second World War, it was stifling the lives of other new nations with its own colonization policies. "Just war" theory had been subverted in the colonial narrative. Earlier critical books by Rosemary Marangoly George (*The Politics of Home*, 1996), Clare Midgley (*Gender and Imperialism*, 1998), Margaret Strobel (*European Women and the Second British Empire*, 1991), Joanna Trollope (*Britannia's Daughters: Women of the British Empire*, 1983), and Vron Ware (*Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History*, 1992), have not linked the imperial-conquest ideology of the Axis powers with the racially defined postcolonial narrative and its violation of human rights.

Lassner begins by remarking that "[l]etting go of an empire is very hard to do" (1) and then turns to a critical analysis of seven British women writers who witnessed and wrote about the imperial debacle in careers that ranged from the 1930s to the 1970s. Lassner seamlessly moves from Africa to India, the Caribbean, and finally to the Middle East in order to show the influence of the Third Reich's ideology on colonization, subjectivity, oppression, and victimization. Empire today is still a hotly debated topic, and so the study of Britain's collapse and "the malignity inherent in all imperial ideologies, policies, and practices" (1) is a timely one, especially for Americans. Most importantly, Lassner is the first scholar to recognize the importance of race to a study of colonization and empire-building; there has been little attempt, she writes, to integrate the cataclysmic racial ideology of the Holocaust into the complicated postcolonial narrative. Phyllis Bottome and Olivia Manning, for example, show how "blackness" under Hitler's Master Race ideology becomes "a sign not merely of color or biological difference, but of social disease and corruption" (5). Not to consider racism and antisemitism in a study of post-colonial literature is to erase the colonial's savagery against all "Others," for imperial racism slides into mass extermination, as proved by the genocide of the Second World War. These seven women writers recognize this hidden agenda of imperialism. Their knowledge, however, is double-edged, for just as they recognize the

principles of freedom and self-determination as part of the British spirit that defeats Nazism, they also recognize that these same qualities must be extended to the British subjects in the colonial and postcolonial worlds. Thus, the disorder and instability of the colonized sites reflect the resistance and insurrection against the empire's "civilizing" mission.

Using Ernest Van Alphen's (1997) concept of "moral friction," Lassner asks whether "the history of colonial oppression and the subjectivity of the colonial Other disappear into the literary experiment of the British woman writer" (192). In her revisionist postcolonial critique, Lassner finds the answer in the satiric, ironic novels of Godden, Huxley, Manning, et al. "Without political or moral compromise, but with withering irony," she concludes, "these writers argue that the continuing myopia of Britain's geopolitical self-interest only broadens the scope of colonial racism. Their own broad canvases include the multicultural dimensions of resisting colonial subjects whose dreams of belonging to themselves are frustrated by the nationalist tensions exacerbated by a colonial history. It is the setting and memory of World War II that exposes the wandering British subject to those Others who are stuck, with no exit from the nightmare scenario of belonging to someone else" (192-93).

Phyllis Lassner's scholarship is extensive, and her bibliography first-rate; *Colonial Strangers* is a must-read for all scholars of modernism and postmodernism and a welcome companion to Lassner's *British Women Writers of World War II* (St. Martin's Press, 1998).

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