The Postcolonial Exotic
Marketing the margins

Graham Huggan
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4 Prizing otherness
A short history of the Booker

The [Booker] Prize has become a British institution, rather like Derby Day.  
(The Economist)

We had the cash; we came home; what were we to do?  
(Sir Michael Caine, former Chairman of Booker plc)

Introduction

Literary prizes have existed in one form or another for many centuries. In former times, literary prizes were frequently bestowed by rulers, monarchs and other powerful individual patrons who cannily deployed them for the double purpose of proving their munificence while reconfirming the loyalty of their subjects (Winegarten 1994). Such reciprocal ties of patronage, while by no means unknown today, have become increasingly uncommon. Literary prizes as we know them now are best seen as a phenomenon of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries: as reflections of shifting patterns of patronage, with an increasing emphasis on public sponsorship, and, above all, as signs of the dominant role played by international industry as a legitimising agent for literature and the other arts. In a global cultural economy controlled by huge multinational companies, the corporate sponsorship of the arts has become an indisputable fact. The corporate prize, like the endowed Chair, is a ‘gift’ that brings publicity to the company while functioning as a symbolic marker of its authorising power. As state subsidies of the arts have dwindled, alarmingly in many countries, corporate sponsors have emerged to dominate the literary/artistic scene. Corporate sponsorship has largely overtaken the earlier, predominantly hierarchical systems of private and public patronage through which ideas of literature and literary value were upheld (Bourdieu 1993). The evaluative criteria for corporate sponsorship vary widely; it would clearly be misguided to see it as a uniform ‘regime’
Prizing otherness (Appadurai 1986; see also Introduction). A structural analysis of types of sponsorship patterns—types of award, funding requirements, social and ideological factors, and so on—risks underestimating the historical trajectory that each particular sponsoring agency takes. This is no less the case with agencies operating across geopolitical boundaries: for example, international literary awards bestowed by globally active companies. Such awards, it could be argued, have emerged, many of them in the later twentieth century, as a response to the globalisation of—especially English-language—literature (Todd 1996). This view overlooks, however, the continuing asymmetries of power that are attendant on the production and consumption of world literature in English. Hence Bernth Lindfors’ provocative suggestion that the most famous of all international literary awards, the Nobel, established in 1901, has had a distinctly Eurocentric bias since its inception (Lindfors 1988:222). The same might be said for more recent, and more obviously corporate, awards like the Booker. As Hugh Eakin has suggested, the Booker, despite its ‘multicultural consciousness’, has arguably done less to further the development of ‘non-Western’ and/or postcolonial literatures than it has to ‘encourage the commerce of an “exotic” commodity catered to the Western literary market’ (Eakin 1995:1). In this chapter, I shall examine Eakin’s proposition further by inquiring into the history of, and histories behind, the Booker Prize.

Two cheers for Booker: the emergence of a literary patron

Wuk, nuttin bu wuk
Maan noon an night nuttin bu wuk
Booker own me patacake
Booker own me pickni.
Pain, nuttin bu pain
Waan million tous’ne acre cane
(David Dabydeen, ‘Song of the Creole Gang Women’)

In David Dabydeen’s poem ‘Song of the Creole Gang Women’ (1994), Booker features as a cruel plantation-owner, ruthlessly preying upon his disempowered female workforce. A footnote to the poem reads, simply enough: ‘Booker: British sugar company that owned Guyana’. Booker, it would appear, has a history in contradiction with its current reputation as a postcolonial literary patron. Not surprisingly, Booker plc, formerly the Booker McConnell company—a leading multinational agribusiness
conglomerate employing over 20,000 people and generating annual revenue in excess of $5 billion (Todd 1996:63)—has been eager to downplay its nineteenth-century colonial past. But as Hugh Eakin notes with requisite irony, the Booker judges’ ‘recognition of postcolonial authors carries the dubious tincture of the company’s history’ (Eakin 1995:2). The company, initially formed in 1834 to provide distributional services on the sugar-estates of Demerara (now Guyana), achieved rapid prosperity under a harsh colonial regime. At the onset of independence the company was relocated to London, which remains its headquarters today. It was in London in the early 1960s that it established its book division, primarily designed to buy up copyrights of famous popular-fiction writers (Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming, etc.). This proved a lucrative enterprise, prompting the company a few years later to found the Booker Prize for literature in English. Sponsored by Booker plc but administered since 1971 by the charitable concern the Book Trust (formerly the National Book League), the Prize, first awarded to P.H.Newby (Something to Answer For) in 1969, soon grew into one of Britain’s most recognisable cultural institutions.

The history of the Prize itself is no less conflicted than its donor’s past. As Tom Maschler has suggested, the Prize took its inspiration from the then better-known French Prix Goncourt—a hierarchy since arguably reversed, with *Le Figaro* describing the Goncourt as the ‘French Booker’ (Maschler 1998). Originally established as a £5,000 award to the best full-length English-language novel of the year, the Prize grew both monetarily and, exponentially, in prestige. Widely regarded today as one of the world’s top literary prizes, the Booker has acquired and cultivated a mythology of its own. Much of this has to do, of course, with careful media management. Newspaper coverage was solicited, and granted, from the beginning; but probably the crucial step was taken in 1981, when the Prize’s final award-ceremony was first televised on BBC. Currently broadcast on Britain’s culturally oriented Channel Four, the ceremony and the lavish gala dinner that accompanies it have become the subject of endless anecdotes; television, as Hermione Lee wearily suggests, has ‘ ensured that Booker [will] forever be identified by the word “razzmattaz”, playing up to its vulgar Miss World aspect and fixing in the British eye a peculiar view of writers as dinner-jacketed gormandisers’ (*The Times*, 21 September 1993:VII). Sir Michael Caine, former Chairman of Booker plc as well as of the Prize Management Committee, is equally wry in noting the costs involved in attracting such high-level publicity:

At first, the Management Committee organised both the award procedures and the ceremony. Gradually, the ceremony and its form
became a wholly Booker matter. The costs bear this out. In the beginning, the selection process and the prize were 70% of the costs and the ceremony 30%. Over the years, these proportions have been reversed.

(Caine 1998:9; see also Appendix for details on the management of the Prize)

The Booker, now more than ever, is a meticulously staged media event; it succeeds seemingly effortlessly in drawing attention to its bombastic televised finale and, no less, to the inevitable wrangling that accompanies its ‘controversial’ run-up debate. The timelag between the announcement of the shortlist and the declaration of the winner successfully generates suspense while maximising commercial appeal (Todd 1996). Even the betting shops do good business (although ironically the only odds-on candidate, Salman Rushdie at 4/5 on for *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995), failed to win (Todd 1996:74)). Prizewinners and, often, finalists are guaranteed commercial success: sales of Booker prizewinning novels have historically increased by three- or fourfold; large advances are distinctly possible for the successful authors’ subsequent books; TV and film rights beckon, as for, most recently, Michael Ondaatje, the film-version of whose novel *The English Patient*, a co-winner in 1992, has collected several prizes of its own. Such is the Booker's impact on the economies of the book trade that authors, in league with publishers, carefully time the appearance of their books. All in all, there can be little doubt that the Booker, more than any other literary prize in recent history, has blazed a trail in the commercialisation of English-language literature (Todd 1996). As the stakes get ever higher, the Prize exerts a major influence over the cultural perceptions, as well as the reading habits, of its consumer public (Eakin 1995). As Merritt Moseley says, surveying the scene from the other side of the Atlantic with mock-astonishment, ‘The Booker Prize exercises an influence on the publishing world—and more surprisingly, on the minds and enthusiasms of people well outside that world—which is by American standards impossible’ (Moseley 1993:613). Controversy, manufactured or not, continues to stalk the Booker. The commercial puffery and media hoopla have reached, for some, unacceptable levels; and while the Prize has been acknowledged as a ‘wonderful marketing idea’ (Moseley 1993:613), it has also been seen more sourly as ‘writing and commerce…blatantly put together’ (*The Economist*, 20–6 October 1990:114). Some critics of the Prize have claimed that its ‘media-circus aspect interferes with the exercise of sound critical judgment’ (*The Economist*, 21–7 October 1989:101); others have accused the judges of nepotism, chauvinism, or petty squabbling; still others have seen the
authors as angling for a prize or pandering to a commercial public. Individual selections have been singled out by the media as 'catastrophic' (Keri Hulme's Maori novel *The Bone People*, a controversial winner in 1985, appears to be the favourite here, despite its critical acclaim and its relative commercial success, especially in Australasia); while individual authors have been lambasted for 'obscenity' (Hulme again) or 'obscenity' (particularly the Scottish writer James Kelman, whose expletive-filled 1994 winner, *How Late It Was, How Late*, attracted reviews that spluttered with sanctimonious wrath). The gala dinner, meanwhile, has been tainted by incendiary speeches and spoilt-boy tantrums. In the former category we might place John Berger, who, upon being awarded the Prize in 1972 for his 'scandalous' experimental novel *G*, proceeded to cause further scandal by donating half his prize-money to the militant Black Panther movement: on the grounds, as he said in his acceptance speech—swiftly covered up as an 'embarrassment' (Goff 1989)—that 'they resist, both as black people and workers, the further exploitation of the oppressed; and because they have links with the struggle in Guyana, the seat of Booker McConnell's wealth—the struggle whose aim is to appropriate all such enterprises' (*The Times*, 21 September 1993:VII). The latter category might include Salman Rushdie, worthy winner in 1981 for *Midnights Children*, but not-so-gracious runner-up two years later for the heavily favoured *Shame*. (The story goes that Rushdie thumped the table in rage at losing, declaring to anyone within earshot that J.M.Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, which had beaten him to the line, was a 'shitty winner' (Goff 1989).) Such criticisms might be seen as having a primarily anecdotal value, merely adding to the commercial overkill of a media-inflated event. A more serious criticism, however, concerns the highly ambivalent status of the Prize and its donor company as legitimising agents for global English-language fiction. A word is needed here, then, on criteria for eligibility, and on the implications of a perceived shift from 'English literature' to English-language literature 'published in Britain' (Todd 1996).

In his book *Consuming Fictions* (1996), Richard Todd suggests that the Booker Prize, particularly in the last two decades, has played a vital role in raising consciousness of the global dimensions of English-language fiction:

[The] unprecedented exposure of fiction from English-speaking countries other than the United Kingdom or the United States led to an increasingly global picture of fiction in Britain during the course of the 1980s. It is now the case that the line-up of half or more of a typical late 1980s or 1990s Booker shortlist is not centred on Britain. This reflects a new public awareness of Britain as a pluralist society,
and has transformed the view that prevailed in the 1960s, that English-language fiction from ‘abroad’ meant fiction from the United States.

(Todd 1996:83)

For Todd, this global picture is postcolonial in perspective, replacing earlier, now clearly anachronistic views of a Commonwealth of literary nations. Pico Iyer, in a high-profile 1993 article in Time, underscores the postcolonial consciousness that is apparently endorsed by internationally minded prizes like the Booker. Like Todd, Iyer sees Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) as a watershed novel, a major catalysing force behind the emergence of a postcolonial literary era (see also Chapter 2). The Prize, since Rushdie won it, has gone to:

two Australians, a part Maori, a South African, a woman of Polish descent, and an exile from Japan. Runners-up have featured such redoubtably English names as Mo and Mistry and Achebe; when a traditional English name takes the prize—A.S.Byatt, say, or Kingsley Amis—it seems almost anomalous.

(Iyer 1993:46)

Tongue only partly in cheek, Iyer sees this international cast of characters as ‘writing back’ to a literary Empire whose centre can obviously no longer hold. A new ‘frontierless’ writing has emerged to challenge Britain’s insularity, and to interrogate the glib nostalgia with which it clings to its imperial past. ‘Postcolonial’, for Iyer, is the codeword for these transnational operations: it describes both the impetus toward anti-imperial struggle and the celebration of a cultural pluralism that cannot be contained within national boundaries (Huggan 1994b: 24). This usage of ‘postcolonial’ is strategically malleable, conflating patterns of commodified eclecticism and multicultural cachet. What Iyer fails to account for is the possibility that prizes like the Booker might work to contain cultural (self-)critique by endorsing the commodification of a glamorised cultural difference. Even Todd’s more sophisticated treatment, while noting assimilationist tendencies, does not acknowledge the ironies behind his own phrase ‘fiction published in Britain’ (Todd 1996:83). The postcolonial dynamic, for Todd, involves a process of pluralist rejuvenation whereby the English language and, by extension, English-language fiction are recognised as a ‘shared cultural fund’ (Todd 1996:83). This view, ostensibly liberal, avoids confronting structural differences in conditions of literary production and consumption across the English-speaking world. In Africa, for example, English-language publishing is
severely hindered, not only by a lack of funding and a weak commercial infrastructure but by a foreign-held monopoly over English-language books. The English language might be ‘shared’, but access to English-language literature is channelled through foreign markets, not least through the agency of the British-based Heinemann African Writers Series (see Chapter 1, section three).

Booker plc’s supportive role can thus be seen within the wider context of a symbolic legitimation of ‘multicultural’ and/or exotically ‘foreign’ goods. The discursive link is provided here by exoticist objectification, as English-language literature splinters into a variety of commercially viable ‘othered’ forms. This fetishisation of cultural otherness risks merely reduplicating the authority of the assimilationist paradigms (e.g. Commonwealth Literature) that such multicultural writing apparently seeks to replace. The Booker might be seen, in any case, despite Todd’s charitable disclaimers, as remaining bound to an Anglocentric discourse of benevolent paternalism. Eligibility for the Prize has historically been organised around Commonwealth literary principles, with Commonwealth nationals, plus Pakistani, Irish and (now readmitted to the Commonwealth) South African writers entitled to win the spoils. Most of the judges, however, and crucially, the seat of judgement remain British, thereby reinforcing the earlier, now largely discredited view that farflung Commonwealth fictions should be referred for validation back to the ‘parent [British] stock’ (Walsh 1970). In this light, Todd’s view of the Booker Prize as endorsing British cultural pluralism seems ironically appropriate. All the more so when individual authors and their prize winning novels are considered; for while the judges have certainly striven to maintain a healthy critical balance, prompting sceptics such as Hugh Eakin to wonder whether the Prize might not be ‘some form or other of affirmative action for marginal literatures’ (Eakin 1995:6), there is still a residual conservatism playing about the Booker’s edges—a conservatism brought out in approaches to the prizewinning novels’ themes. One such theme, sometimes considered to be a gauge of the Booker’s postcolonial leanings, is revisionist history. More than half of the prizewinning novels to date investigate aspects of, primarily colonial, history or present a counter-memory to the official historical record. In the next section of this chapter I shall explore some of the implications of these historical representations, focusing on four prizewinning novels whose subject is, at least in part, colonial India. These novels, in chronological order, are J.G. Farrell’s The Siege of Krishnapur (1973); Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s Heat and Dust (1975); Paul Scott’s Staying On (1977); and, more recently, Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient (1992). Having traced the ambivalent
history of the Booker Prize and its wealthy corporate sponsor, it is now
time to inquire into the role of history in the works its judges favour.

Revision and revival: Booker versions of the Raj
(and after)

Anyone who has switched on the television set, been to the cinéma or
entered a bookshop in the last few months will be aware that that the
British Raj, after three and a half decades in retirement, has been making a
sort of comeback.

(Salman Rushdie, 'Outside the Whale')

In his polemical essay ‘Outside the Whale’ (originally published in 1984),
Salman Rushdie locates a ‘revisionist enterprise’ at the heart of Thatcher’s
Britain, the aim of which is the ‘refurbishment of the Empire’s tarnished
image’ (Rushdie 1991e: 91). Included in this enterprise are various
commodified vehicles of Raj nostalgia, from literary bestsellers like Paul
Scott’s Raj Quartet to popular TV serials like The Far Pavilions to
blockbuster films like Richard Attenborough’s Gandhi and David Lean’s
adaptation of A Passage to India. Rushdie gives short shrift to products like
these, obviously designed for their wide appeal on the commercial market,
accusing them of being little more than ‘artistic counterparts to the rise of
conservative ideologies in modern Britain’ (Rushdie 1991e: 92). Rushdie’s
argument, in the nature of polemics, is boisterously hyperbolic, tarring
works of varying quality with the same broadsweeping brush. Nonetheless,
his essay serves a useful purpose in drawing attention to the reactionary
implications of some contemporary revisionist narratives seeking to
rework imperial themes. Historical fictions such as Scott’s, while
ostensibly debunking imperial glories, might still be seen as peddling
commercially profitable imperial myths. And one of those myths, as
Rushdie points out, is that the history of the end of the Raj can be reduced
to a summation of ‘the doings of the officer class and its wife’ (Rushdie
1991e: 90):

Indians [in The Raj Quartet] get walk-ons, but remain, for the most part,
bit-players in their own history. Once this form has been set, it scarcely
matters that individual fictional Brits get unsympathetic treatment
from their author. The form insists that they are the ones whose stories
matter, and that is so much less than the whole truth that it must be
called a falsehood.

(Rushdie 1991e: 90, Rushdie’s italics)
For Rushdie, Scott’s revisionist critique of the late history of imperial India masks a revivalist ideology—one which tacitly rehearses imperialist mythmaking even as it transforms the Empire into a helpless witness of its own decline. This view, while debatable, certainly helps cast a critical perspective on three Booker prizewinning novels that deal with a British view of (post)colonial India. One of these is Scott’s *Staging On* (1977), often seen as a coda to *The Raj Quartet*—an ironic swansong both to the Empire, memorialised by its ageing servants, and to Scott’s own literary career (while writing the novel he was ill with cancer, and he died not long after receiving the Prize). The others are by J.G. Farrell, whose tragicomic Mutiny narrative, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, turned out a winner in 1973; and by the Polish-born Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, whose multilayered novel *Heat and Dust*, awarded the Prize in 1975, reconstructs the story of a colonial misalliance, only to find itself condemned to repeat it. In each of these novels, the interplay between revision and revival is given subtly ironic treatment, both on the level of historical representation (Rushdie’s ‘Raj revivalism’) and on the level of literary reinterpretation (Brontë, Kipling and, especially, Forster).

These two levels—the historical and the literary—are inextricably interconnected. As Judie Newman shows in her book *The Ballistic Bard* (1995), Farrell’s novel wittily dramatises the postcolonial axiom that English literature is highly effective as an instrument of imperial power (see also Trivedi 1993 and Viswanathan 1989). Newman picks a comic example from Farrell’s heavily fictionalised representation of the siege at Krishnapur (1857), where the electroplated heads of British poets, converted into makeshift weapons, are fired from cannon onto a suitably bewildered foe:

> [T]he most effective [head] of all had been Shakespeare’s; it had scythed its way through a whole astonished platoon of sepoys advancing in single file through the jungle. The Collector suspected that the Bard’s success in this respect might have a great deal to do with the ballistic advantages stemming from his baldness. The head of Keats, for example, wildly festooned with metal locks...had flown very erratically indeed, killing only a fat money-lender and a camel standing at some distance from the field of action.


*Heat and Dust* effects rather more subtle, if no less lethal, intertextual manoeuvres. The novel’s cross-hatched historical narratives are interwoven around the descendants—more specifically, the female descendants—of the Rivers family. (Their literary precursor St John, it
might be recalled, had gone to India a century earlier to convert the
heathen, only to succumb there to disease—his foretold death concludes
*Jane Eyre.* Jhabvala re-envision Brontë’s allegory of the White
(Wo)man’s Burden by displacing its sacrificial rhetoric onto the embodied
colonialist trope of *sati.*

Scott’s *Staying On*, published two years later, then shifts the Burden to the present, evoking comic pathos for the failed
Civilising Mission and a post-Forsterian awareness that the British in
India were always too late.

All three novels are connected, albeit with a measure of ironic
distance, to a literary genealogy of Orientalist representation (Said 1978).
What is apparent in each case, though, is that a history of literary
representations of British India is being conscripted into the service of
recurring myths of self-defeat. Rushdie is surely right to draw a connection
between Raj nostalgia and the ideological requirements of Thatcher’s
post-imperial Britain. Yet this connection may involve, not so much the
will to revive former successes as a seemingly pathological fascination
with current *failures*. Hence the figure of nostalgia as an index of self-
mockery in novels which, like *The Siege of Krishnapur* and *Staying On*, are
suffused with the historical past. In the former novel, nostalgia coheres
around memories of the Exhibition—a showcase for British inventiveness
and imperial achievement. Yet as the novel proceeds, the siege lays waste
to such delusions of cultural grandeur; Anglo-Indian culture—a veneer
over power (Newman 1995)—succumbs derisively to the law of entropy,
as its accoutrements are either destroyed or hurled as weapons into the
fray. In the latter novel, Tusker Smalley and his wife, the ageing couple
who have ‘stayed on’ in post-independence India, weave a skein of
comforting memories to protect themselves from a troubled past. But such
protection proves illusory; nostalgia emerges as a correlate to physical
deterioration, as a thinly disguised rationale for the characters’ admission
of self-defeat (Scott 1977:81–3). Susan Stewart, in her discussion of
nostalgia in *On Longing* (1984), provides a useful supplement to these
readings. Nostalgia, according to Stewart, engenders a process that is
always ideological; the past it seeks:

> has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that
past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to
history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure
context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a
distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future past, a past
which has only ideological reality.

(Stewart 1984:136)
This is the past of the Raj, itself an ideological construct, with little historical basis other than in European imperial fantasy. Such recourse to historical fantasy might be seen as an indication of the atrophying of historical consciousness in postmodern Western society (Jameson 1991). But it might also be seen as an instance of a neocolonial ‘othering’ process—of the process by which history, transformed into an exotic cultural spectacle, becomes a packageable commodity for metropolitan consumption (see also Chapter 2). This exoticisation of (colonial) history is most obviously achieved in epic film (Gandhi, A Passage to India, and so on); but literature participates as well in the spectacularisation of a cultural otherness that is projected out in mythicised space and back in imagined time. Novels such as Scott’s, Farrell’s and Jhabvala’s are arguably complicit in this process, even if they show an ironic awareness of their own belated status. While it might be going too far to suggest that the Booker Prize drives such potentially retrograde cultural products, it certainly helps legitimise them, promoting them for a wider public. A preliminary analysis of patterns of reception among the Booker’s historical novels also suggests that history is being marketed and read in particular ways. Contradictions abound here: history, on the one hand, is retooled for mass consumption as a recognised series of easily packageable exotic myths; while on the other, it is upheld, despite the authors’ fabrications, as a more or less transparent window onto verifiable past events.

The Booker prizewinning novel that best exemplifies these contradictions is, of course, Rushdie’s aforementioned Midnight’s Children (1981). Ostensibly, Midnight’s Children is a radically revisionist novel, a work of ‘historiographic metafiction’ (Hutcheon 1984/5) that shows the inescapably ideological character of historical facts. Yet, as previously suggested (see Chapter 2), this has not prevented the novel being read—and judged accordingly—as a surrogate guidebook, or as a medley of incomplete historical narratives that engage with India’s (post-)imperial historical past. While deconstructive of historical accuracy, Midnight’s Children has still been accused of being inaccurate; while critical of the commodification of an Orientalised India, it has profited precisely by circulating such commercially viable Orientalist myths. The Booker Prize has not only advertised, but has also arguably helped produce, these contradictions. Hence the irony that the novel has been exploited, directly or indirectly, for the Raj nostalgia it despises; and that its author has been rewarded, not so much for writing against the Empire, but for having done it so amenably, with such obviously marketable panache.

A similar argument might be made for Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient (1992), a less obviously commercial novel than Rushdie’s but still one with considerable exotic cachet. Like Rushdie, Ondaatje has
occasionally been criticised for pandering to a wonder-seeking Western readership (Mukherjee 1985); but this is better seen, like Rushdie's, as a strategically self-conscious exoticism and, also like Rushdie's, as a stylishly hybridised literary/cultural text. Both writers share a postcolonial concern with historical revisionism—a concern born of the need to complicate all forms of historical representation, but also to critique the narrowly ethnocentric view 'that project[s] the West as history' (Prakash 1994:1475 n.1; see also Chakrabarty 1992). Finally, Ondaatje, like Rushdie, has made the jump to literary celebrity on the back of symbolic capital acquired largely from the Booker Prize. Thus, while the film was certainly responsible for reactivating sales of Ondaatje’s novels, particularly in America, it was the Prize that was instrumental, as Rushdie’s had been a decade earlier, in pushing a talented writer into the international limelight.

Clearly, the film, with its emphasis on torrid melodrama in a series of spectacularly exotic locations, was always likely to affect perceptions, as well as sales, of Ondaatje’s book. Yet exotic appeal seemed to contribute as well to the earlier success of The English Patient (in terms of sales-figures, largely Booker-driven), as did the ephemeral quality—‘Englishness’—that the novel sought to suppress. The dismantling of a unifying ‘Englishness’ in an age of ‘multicultural consciousness’ (Eakin) has itself become something of an industry—consider, for example, the recent fetishisation of Scottish literature and film in Britain and elsewhere. Enter Ondaatje’s novel, with its (Hungarian) ‘English’ patient—the absent centre around which the (hi)stories of the other, conspicuously displaced, characters revolve. The interweaving of private and public spaces, of micro- and macro-historical narratives; the persistent undercutting of national identitary labels; the disruption of the normative relationship between the colonial ‘margins’ and the imperial ‘centre’; the emphasis on displacement and the diasporisation of cultural knowledge—all of these indicate a postcolonial sensibility at work in Ondaatje’s novel that insists on the right to reclaim its stories from the moribund ‘English’ (cultural) body.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the transition from Kim to Kip—from Kipling’s Orientalist novel, allaying emergent British anxieties, to Ondaatje’s canny Indian sapper, defusing left-over German bombs. Kip is in the service of the British—not ‘English’—army; but as soon transpires, he has a will and a history all of his own. The ‘English’ patient self-destructs; Kip rescues others from destruction. Yet this postcolonial lesson in the politics of dependence has arguably been overshadowed by the book’s recently revitalised commercial success. The English Patient, like Midnight’s Children, risks being brought to attention as the latest in a series of publicly endorsed ‘multicultural’ products. One of the effects of this
sponsored multiculturalism is a levelling out of different histories, and an aestheticised celebration of diversity that disguises the lack of sociohistorical change. Another is the tendency to assimilate ‘marginal’ cultural products, rejuvenating, but also protecting, the beleaguered mainstream culture (see Introduction; also previous chapter). The Booker Prize, as a popular retailer of the postcolonial exotic, exemplifies the double standards in promoting ‘multicultural’ goods. On the one hand, it has certainly played a role in broadening definitions of ‘Englishness’ and ‘English literature’; as Jonathan Wilson says in an admiring 1995 article on the Booker for The New Yorker, the Prize reflects an increasing cultural, as well as commercial, recognition that ‘the better books have been coming not out of England per se but out of the old colonies of England’ (Wilson 1995:99). On the other hand, the Prize, in assuming a common (‘English’) cultural heritage, might be accused of availing itself of a patron’s proprietary rights. Eakin puts it succinctly:

[F]or the prize to have a coherent center in London while calling itself a Commonwealth-wide award, it must reinforce to some extent the shared colonial heritage of included nationalities. In this sense, a British cultural-linguistic hegemony has begun to replace the old one.

(Eakin 1995:3–4)

Booker plc’s inability to shake off the ghosts of its own colonial history might be seen here as symptomatic of a much wider cultural malaise. This malaise, and the forms of ‘imperialist nostalgia’ (Rosaldo 1993) it tends to engender, engage the contradictions of a postcolonial (literary) era. In this era, Britain, no longer a player in the world’s economic sweepstakes, still accumulates symbolic capital as a legitimising cultural force. Eakin again: ‘It is ironic that just as the old British imperial government used its colonies for the interests of capital enterprise at home, it is again London that is—through the Booker Prize—using its Commonwealth in the interests of literary consumerism in Britain’ (Eakin 1995:6). This reversion to the ‘centre’ haunts multicultural celebrations; it also acts as a secret sharer in the postcolonial cause. What emerges from these scattered speculations on the intertwined histories of (and in) the Booker is the need for a much more detailed sociological study of the literature it promotes. Much of this literature, I have argued here, might be loosely defined as ‘postcolonial’. In other chapters of this book, I go some way toward suggesting what might be at stake in a sociology of postcolonial literatures, and what might underlie the emergence of these literatures, both as targets of commercial enterprise and as celebrated objects of academic study. This chapter is a
contribution, however provisional, to such investigations; in its concluding section I shall offer some general thoughts, extrapolating from the case of the Booker, on the seemingly conflicted relationship between the oppositional politics of postcolonialism and the assimilative machinery of the ‘global’ literary prize.

Conclusion

Literary prizes, according to Bourdieu, function as legitimising mechanisms that foreground the symbolic, as well as material, effects of the process of literary evaluation (see also Introduction). As Bourdieu suggests, prizes reflect as much upon their donors as their recipients; part of a wider struggle over the authority to consecrate particular works or writers, they are powerful indicators of the social forces underlying what we might call the politics of literary recognition. Far from offering tributes to an untrammeled literary excellence, prizes bring the ideological character of evaluation to the fore. So much is clear, for example, from recent arguments that have broken out over the Nobel Prize for Literature, which, as several commentators have pointed out, has shown more evidence of the parochialism than of the much-vaunted impartiality of its selection committee.18 Renee Winegarten’s complaints, in her helpful overview article, are symptomatic: the Nobel Prize, if not openly biased, is nonetheless guilty of sins of omission, having overlooked ‘some of the greatest writers of the century, including Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Leo Tolstoy, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Federico García Lorca, to name a few that spring to mind’ (Winegarten 1994:65); it tends to look to Europe as a locus of cultural activity and development; it considers writers and/or their work to be representative of their respective countries, inspiring an ‘intense patriotic gratification’ that makes the Prize ‘akin to a victory in international sport’ (Winegarten 1994:74); it has a history of rewarding writers who are already internationally recognised and thus resembles, in George Bernard Shaw’s memorable phrase, ‘a life belt thrown out to a swimmer who has already reached the shore’ (qtd in Winegarten 1994:65). But behind these complaints, in themselves legitimate, lies a conservative fear that ‘too many political and geographical motives come into play [in the adjudication process], too many extraneous considerations that have little or nothing to do with the act of writing or the art of literature as such’ (Winegarten 1994:65). Laments such as these may serve to replicate the Swedish Academy’s naive insistence that the evaluative process, like the work itself, be freed from ideological constraint. The opposite is more often the case, and not only with the Nobel; for as I have suggested, the history of the Booker also
demonstrates that the attempt to reward literary excellence, however
generous or well intentioned, may well contain an unannounced
ideological agenda—a hidden politics—of its own.

While the same might also be said to some extent for other, more
'postcolonially' oriented prizes—the Commonwealth Writers Prize, for
example, or the Neustadt, specifically designed as a more globally
conscious alternative to the Nobel—it is the Booker's unusual history, as
well as the commercialism that sustains it, that has helped turn it into the
most significant index of conflicting public, as well as more narrowly
academic, perceptions of the globalisation of English-language literature
in the post-independence era. What effects has the Booker had on the
postcolonial field of production, other than that of drawing attention to
the ambivalent role of its ostensibly benevolent commercial sponsor? Two
effects, already mentioned, might be briefly reiterated here. The first of
these is that the Booker Prize, even as it has expanded public awareness of
the global dimensions of English-language literature, has paradoxically
narrowed this awareness to a handful of internationally recognised
postcolonial writers. While the Booker judges can hardly be accused, as
has sometimes been said of their Nobel counterparts, of falling back on the
safest options—the 'courage' of some prizewinning selections has almost
inevitably gone on to become part of Booker Prize lore—it would still be
ture to say that several, though by no means all, of the Booker
prizewinners belong to a recognised postcolonial canon; and that these
writers comprise by and large a list of international figures whose names
circulate freely within the media and on school/university curricula and
examination lists. This self-perpetuating process of recognition, much
enhanced of course by the global media, is reflected in the regular
appearance of the 'big names' (Achebe, Atwood, Naipaul, Rushdie, etc.)
on many of the Prize's heavily publicised shortlists. Thus, while the South
African J.M.Coetzee is the only writer to have won the Prize twice (for
Life & Times of Michael K in 1983 and Disgrace in 1999), Rushdie has won
once and finished three times on the runners-up list, while Naipaul,
Atwood, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Kazuo Ishiguro and Timothy Mo
have all won and/or made it onto the shortlist more than once. This is not
to question these writers’ undoubted literary abilities; nor is it to accuse
the judges of outright favouritism, which would be unfair in the extreme.
Rather, it is to suggest that the Prize has participated in a process of
canonisation which, as such processes will, tends to reproduce the value-
systems of ‘culturally and otherwise dominant members of a community’
(Herrnstein Smith 1984:34). Obviously, the various ideological
apparatuses and ‘reading formations’ (T.Bennett 1990) underlying the
canonising process are much more complex than I am giving the
impression here. However, the point still holds that while canons usually function to support establishment values, even those works with apparently ‘anti-establishment interests participate in the cultural reproduction of canonical texts’ (Herrnstein Smith 1984:34, my italics). Within this context, prizes like the Booker, while apparently opening the door for a more politicised view of ‘Englishness’ and ‘English literature’, might also be seen to operate to some extent at least as what Fredric Jameson calls ‘strategies of containment’ (Jameson 1981). They function, that is, as mechanisms for the management of subversive political tendencies, and for the redirecting of oppositional energies into the mainstream of Western metropolitan cultural thought. It remains moot, in any event, as to how ‘subversive’ or ‘anti-establishment’ the Booker’s selections were, and are, in the first place; as Timothy Brennan has argued convincingly, the privileging of a certain kind of highly aestheticised ‘political writing’ under the sign of the postcolonial has had the ironic effect of shutting down, or at least deflecting public attention away from, more radically unorthodox alternatives. Whatever the case, the obvious horror with which the Booker Committee greeted John Berger’s anti-imperialist tirade in 1972 (and then succeeded in brushing off J.G. Farrell’s repeat criticisms of economic hegemony the following year—see The Times, 21 September 1993:VIII) seems to provide a fair indication, both of the company’s and of the Prize’s institutional boundaries and ideological limits.

Such self-defensive gestures also help set up a context for those wider institutional processes through which postcolonialism’s anti-imperialist imperatives may be partly defused by being rerouted into the commodified aesthetics of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘the global village’. Here, it seems worth turning again for a moment to Pico Iyer’s aforementioned article in Time—itself of course a highly commodified piece of image-conscious journalism (Brydon 1994). In the article, Iyer, who tellingly uses the terms ‘postcolonial’, ‘multicultural’, ‘transcultural’ and ‘global’ almost interchangeably, defines the ‘new transcultural’ writers as:

the products not so much of colonial divisions as of the international culture that has grown up since the war, and they are addressing an audience as mixed up and eclectic and uprooted as themselves. They are creators, and creations, of a new postimperial order in which English is the lingua franca, just about everywhere is a suburb of the same international youth culture, and all countries are a part of a unified CNN and MTV circuit, with a common frame of reference in McDonald’s, Madonna, and Magic Johnson.

(Iyer 1993:48)
For Iyer, the Booker Prize, ‘London’s way of formally commemorating and coronating literary tradition’, has helped to register a general shift in public awareness toward the new global ‘polycultural order’ (Iyer 1993:46). While the writers the Prize has celebrated are more striking for their differences than their similarities, many of them, of non-Anglo-Saxon background,

born more or less after the war, and choosing to write in English… are situated at a crossroads from which they can reflect, and reflect on, the new forms and Mississippi masalas of our increasingly small, increasingly mongrel, increasingly mobile global village.

(Iyer 1993:48)

Iyer’s article, as previously suggested, joins postcolonial literary/cultural production to a naively celebratory global cosmopolitan sensibility in which conspicuous inequalities of technological resources and international divisions of labour are elided, and where the continuing anti-imperialist concerns of contemporary postcolonial writing are emptied out. This is postcoloniality with a vengeance, and it is associated, significantly, with a prize apparently designed to ‘illustrate how the [literary] Empire has struck back’ (Iyer 1993:46). Iyer’s article, in advertising its own complicity with the late-capitalist global commodity culture it celebrates, might well appear to be a paradigmatic example of the literary/cultural phenomenon I have been describing in this book as the postcolonial exotic. Yet the postcolonial exotic is by no means restricted to consumer-oriented writing like Iyer’s, or to such blatantly commercialised literary extravaganzas as the annual Booker Prize. As should be clear by now, the postcolonial exotic is integral, rather than peripheral, to the postcolonial field of cultural production—a field in which ‘commercial’ and ‘academic’ products intermingle; and in which a constant vigilance is required to the ideologies that underlie evaluative procedures, and to the institutional frameworks within which such procedures have evolved.

Appendix: Booker Prize management and adjudication procedures

At present, the management of the Prize is entrusted to a committee comprising an author, three publishers, an agent, a bookseller, a librarian, the Prize administrator and Public Relations consultant (for the most part of its thirty-odd year history, Martyn Goff), with the chairman being appointed by the sponsoring company, Booker plc (Goff 2000; see also
Prizing otherness

Goff 1989:12). The administration of the Prize, from the first moment of calling in entries—which in recent years have tended to hover around the hundred mark—to the eventual announcement of the winner, was handed over after the first few years to the independent charitable trust, the National Book League (still in charge, though since 1986 under the new, radically simple name of Book Trust). The Booker Prize, as its administrator claims, thus has some reason to take pride in a relatively flexible system of management that involves its sponsoring company while still managing to keep them at a respectable arm’s length (Goff 2000; see also Goff 1989:12).

For all this flexibility, the composition of the Management Committee itself has been slow to change. Similarly, the five judges selected by the committee to adjudicate the entries—while changing each year—have arguably shown a certain establishment bias, with several recurring names (Professor Gillian Beer of Cambridge University, for instance, has judged the Prize twice inside the last decade). The judges, according to Goff, are picked to maintain a healthy balance between the Chairman (who is picked first, and has a casting vote) and the other contributors, usually 'an academic, a critic or two, a writer or two and the [wo]man in the street' (Goff 1989:18). Not surprisingly, this last category (now freely acknowledged as comprising a celebrity or 'major figure'—Goff 2000) has caused the occasional upset, such as in 1985, when the actress Joanna Lumley, pronouncing judgement in absentia, objected in the strongest possible terms ('over my dead body') to the winner. Adjudicatory committees of the past have also been vulnerable to the criticism of white (upper) middle-class British bias—a bias also seemingly reflected in the demographic make-up of the Booker Management Committee. The make-up of both committees thus arguably gives historical support to those who have attacked the Booker Prize as arrogating a different form of colonial authority, and lends a certain strength to the argument that there continues to be a mismatch between ‘postcolonial culture’ and ‘postimperial criticism’—between sites of literary production and seats of cultural legitimation and control (Eakin 1995; W.J.T. Mitchell 1992).

Adjudication procedures for the Prize, while somewhat modified in their finer details, have retained throughout a simple structure. Submissions are made by publishers in conjunction with the authors themselves and their agents, with a closing date of 30 June (sometimes extended, under mitigating circumstances, until the end of July—Goff 1989). Publishers are currently limited to two submissions, although a third may be added if the title is by an author who has won or has been shortlisted for the Prize over the last ten years. (Each publisher may also submit up to five additional titles, with the judges eventually calling in
between eight and twelve of these titles for further consideration (Goff 2000).) In the second half of August, the Prize Administrator asks each judge for his or her six frontrunners; a provisional shortlist is thus established, whittled down after subsequent meetings to a shortlist of first twenty to thirty, and then the final six. The all-important meeting at which the winner is decided does not take place until the afternoon of the gala dinner at which the Prize is presented. (In recent years, however, media leaks have abounded, rumours have proliferated, and it has become increasingly difficult to keep even the final stages of the adjudication process secret.) The process, already drawn out, is then brought to its suspense-filled conclusion with the ceremonial dinner. It is at the dinner, with the cameras trained, that the announcement of the winner is finally issued—whereupon the debate re-opens in the media, and the wrangling already begins over who might win, perhaps, next year.
this sense, they seem much more in keeping with Kureishi’s anarchic egotism than with Frears’ righteous anger (see interview below).

17 Heterotopias, in Foucault’s definition, are both contestatory ‘counter-sites’, challenging the established spaces of the dominant culture, and multi-level zones that are ‘capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several different spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible’ (Foucault 1986:22, 25). Both aspects of the definition would appear to apply here, although it is significant in either case that the ‘counter-site’ is eventually destroyed.

18 On ‘carnivalisation’ as a temporary overturning of the social order, see Bakhtin (1984).

19 As is the case with Rushdie, Kureishi is much more direct, and more obviously ‘political’, in his essays: see, for example, the powerful polemic ‘The Rainbow Sign’ (1986). And as is the case with both Rushdie and Naipaul, a tension emerges between non-fictional ‘political’ statements and fictional works which seem bent on undermining the ‘political’ views their protagonists present (see also Note 6 above).

4 Prizing otherness: a short history of the Booker

1 For further critical reflections on Nobel conservatism, see Wai (1985) and, particularly, Winegarten (1994).

2 The Booker shortlist has of course become as much of an institution as the Prize itself. The ‘list’ has become the site of a veritable media feeding frenzy; it might also be seen as a characteristic of the increasing commodification of cultural knowledge in general, one of whose symptoms, according to Lyotard and, more recently, Guillory is, precisely, ‘the list’ (see Guillory 1993:36–7; also Chapter 8 and Conclusion).

3 A good example of this was the simultaneous appearance of Salman Rushdie’s and Vikram Seth’s latest novels in ideal time for Booker 1999 (see previous chapter for a discussion of the media fabrication of literary rivalries). While the ‘rivalry’ between Rushdie and Seth was no doubt effective in attracting attention and generating sales, the half-expected ‘battle for the Booker’ did not materialise, neither novel making it onto the 1999 shortlist.

4 Note, however, Alistair Niven’s spirited defence of the Booker’s contribution toward fostering what he calls a ‘common wealth of talent’: qtd in Booker 30 (1998).

5 Discussions of these differences are integral to my argument in Chapters 1 and 2; see also Brennan (1997: chap. 1) and, especially, Altbach (1975).

6 On the assimilationist tendencies inherent within the category of ‘Commonwealth Literature’, see the Introduction and, especially, the Conclusion (section one) to this book. For a more detailed discussion of the various connotations of the term ‘multicultural’, see Chapter 5.

7 The term ‘counter-memory’ is derived here from Foucault (1977). At its simplest, counter-memory refers to the attempt to narrativise the past in ways that defy, and work toward transforming, official historical records, also presenting alternatives to a linear view of history that favours imperialistic myths of progress. The term is of obvious relevance to postcolonial writers, but it also played a major role in the international wave of ‘revisionist’ fiction that, beginning in the 1960s, had itself begun to take on an establishment feel by, say, the early 1980s. The consecration of ‘historical revisionism’ has been completed by such prizes as the Booker, which are testament both to the
enduring energies of the genre and, ironically, to its official approval as one of the hallmarks of exciting new English-language fiction.

8 Two further Booker prizewinners which deal extensively with Indian colonial history, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), are either treated cursorily here (in the first case) or omitted (in the second), on the grounds that I have already dealt with them in some detail elsewhere: see especially Chapter 2.

9 For alternative, more charitable views on *The Raj Quartet*, see Sharrad (1992) and, particularly, Moore (1992).


11 For a further discussion on the Exhibition, see T.Mitchell (1992) and, in more detail, Richards (1993).

12 For different perspectives on the Raj, see Sharrad (1992) and, particularly, Moore (1992).

13 For alternative, more charitable views on *The Raj Quartet*, see Sharrad (1992) and, particularly, Moore (1992).

14 For a further discussion of nostalgia in the colonial/exotic context, see Bongie (1991); see also the connection made between colonialism, exoticism and tourism in Chapter 7 of this book.

15 As the distinguished Indian novelist R.K.Narayan has declared frostily, 'the Raj concept seems to be just childish nonsense, indicating a glamorised, romanticised period piece, somewhat phoney' (Narayan, in Greet et al. 1992:151). Fictions of the Raj, for Narayan, are irredeemably shallow, offering marketable Western melodrama 'against a background supposed to represent India' (1992:151). The term itself is 'meaningless...a vacuous hybrid expression neither Indian nor British, although the O.E.D. (which is a sacred cow for us in India) has admitted it for a definition' (1992:151).

16 Irony, it could be argued further, functions as an effective alibi for the revival of a decadent, discredited imperial imaginary: see Holland and Huggan (1998: chap. 1).

17 For a more extended treatment of *Midnight's Children*, see Chapter 2. On the question of historical representation, see also Rushdie's essays on *Midnight's Children* in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991c).

18 On ideologies of 'Englishness', see previous chapter. (See also the references in the chapter to the work of Gikandi (1996) and Wachinger (2000).)

19 On the aestheticising and/or dehistoricising effects of multicultural discourses, see the next chapter of this book.

20 See the previously mentioned essays by Wai (1985), Lindfors (1988) and Winegarten (1994). The flurry of media activity surrounding the awarding of the 1999 Nobel to Günter Grass indicates that, while less openly commercial than the Booker, it still has a considerable impact in the public sphere.

21 For further discussion of canon formation within a postcolonial context, see Chapter 8 and the concluding chapter. See also Guillory's indispensable 1993 account of the ambivalent status of 'non' or 'counter-canonical' works within the Western (specifically, US) university curriculum.

22 On the ideological function of 'strategies of containment', see Jameson (1981), particularly the introductory chapter.

23 For an elaboration of this argument, see Introduction; for critical responses to Iyer, see also Brennan (1997) and Brydon (1994).

24 These dates—and the procedures in general—have undergone minor changes over time, with the Prize ceremony this year (2000), for example, being
delayed until 7 November. Booker plc, meanwhile, is itself in evolution, 280 Notes having merged in May 2000 with Iceland plc to become the Iceland Group plc. For the latest on the Prize, consult its regularly updated web site at http://www.bookerprize.co.uk.

5 Exoticism, ethnicity and the multicultural fallacy

1 This latter tension is at the centre of Charles Taylor’s influential essay (1994, see also below), which attempts to recuperate multiculturalism for community-oriented projects of social transformation. See also the instructive responses to Taylor’s paper by Habermas and Appiah in Gutmann (1994).

2 For an overview of some of these arguments, see the essays in Goldberg (1994); for more polemical alternatives, see Schlesinger (1992) and Hughes (1993). It seems worth noting in passing that relatively few of the many books and articles on US multiculturalism mention models deriving from other ‘multicultural’ societies (Canada, Australia, Britain, New Zealand and South Africa provide the most obvious bases for comparison). While it is tempting to conclude that this is just another example of US self-obsession, it would be more accurate to say that multiculturalism has become the focus in the United States for an emotionally charged debate on the strengths and weaknesses of liberal democracy in general, and more specifically, as I have implied, for attacks from both Left and Right on the loopholes in liberal-pluralist thought.

3 For an historical overview of the issues involved, see Breton (1986).

4 See, for example, Marlene Nourbese Philip’s polemical essays ‘The “Multicultural” Whitewash’ and ‘Why Multiculturalism Can’t End Racism’ in her collection Frontiers (1992). For a critique of Nourbese Philip’s position, see also below.

5 For differing views on the White Australia Policy and its relation to contemporary redressive multicultural policies, see Castles et al. (1988), Jupp (1997) and, particularly, Kane (1997).

6 The equally clichéd term ‘mosaic’ has arguably served a similar function in Canada. As Evelyn Kallen notes, the concept of the [multicultural] mosaic…implies that many different cultures live within one societal framework, [with] the ethnic groups displaying…a low level of ethnocentrism and prejudice toward each other. The theory also assumes that no group is dominant and that, therefore, processes of acculturation and assimilation are restricted equally through all groups.

(Kallen 1982:163–4)

On the mystificatory function of multicultural metaphors, see also Hinz (1996).

7 For a more detailed consideration of the special status of Aboriginals in Australia, see next chapter.

8 See Hutcheon’s introduction to the collection Other Solitudes (1990); for a similar exploration of the discrepancy between multicultural ideals and ideologies, see also Kulyk Keefer (1996).

9 Thanks to Lynn Lee, who contributed much of the research for this section, for providing this insight.

10 For alternative criticisms of Ondaatje’s ‘elitism’, see Mukherjee (1994c) and Sugnasiri (1992); for a counter-argument, see Verhoeven (1996).


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