

BOOK REVIEW

DARK CONTINENTS: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND COLONIALISM

Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism. By Ranjana Khanna. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003. 310pp, £17.50 pb.

‘Dark continents’ is a phrase once used by Europeans to describe the unknown territory of Africa.

Dark indeed. Ranjana Khanna has written a dense text tracking a relationship between self-concept and nationality through the psychological impact of colonialism. This is a tome of deep philosophical, psychoanalytical, socio-analytical concepts. It represents a vast expanse of thinking from Jacques Derrida to Slavoj Žižek. Psychoanalysis is offered as a tool to view the melancholic soul of both the colonized and colonialists.

Genealogies (pp. 1–95)

Khanna considers psychoanalysis as an archaeology of the mind, pointing to Freud’s literal interest in archaeology. Drawing on the writings of Foucault and Lacan she muses on notions of self-retrieval as the archaeological search. Wondering if Freud’s use of archaeological language is in itself ‘acting out’ (p. 47), Khanna sets the tone, using psychoanalysis as a vehicle to describe the colonial experience. The ‘Dark Conti-

nent’ is compared to female sexuality, colonized unrest paralleled to female fury and lack of knowledge displaced as absence of penis. Through the colonial act the ego becomes destroyed, it breaks down when it can no longer affiliate to a nationality. The job of the colonized, the black man, is to learn to become whole again.

Paralleling psychoanalysis with ethnology, alienation is seen as crucial for anthropology, as colonialism is for psychoanalysis – indeed the client/analyst alienation. Female sexuality becomes cultural loss and enigma is primitive culture. As cultures in the colonized countries are ranked inferior (hidden), it is the archaeologist/psychoanalyst who searches them out, deep in the collective consciousness. All this moves the book towards notions of neurosis as cultural acquisition, transference as an expression of a cultural melancholia. Khanna notices the absence of a sustained study of culture as a nationalized phenomenon prior to colonialism and so-called civilization.

Dark Continents seems to ask what a national self is. How much of the disorder of the modern mind heralds from collective memories of colonial struggle? Does the splitting of the world parallel the splitting of the ego? Can the nationalized soul ever reintegrate itself? Does the mind remain split or does it consolidate? If psychoanalysis is a colonialist discipline, does it merely seek to fit diversity into its own paradigm, or seek to destroy range and difference?

Colonial rescriptings (pp. 99–204)

From a Sartrean perspective Khanna presents the *colonial project* ‘... not ... as an exploration into the other primitive unconscious but a conscious choice to know the unknown that had come into the consciousness of the west (and eventually exploit it under the guise of exploration)’ (p. 106).

She offers Lacan’s concepts of language as an embodiment of understanding and expression of aggressivity towards others in opposition to Sartrean concepts which would suggest the aggressivity is located elsewhere.

Weaving colonialism, feminism and psychoanalysis, Khanna talks of ‘the libido of the people, suppressed as it is repressed’ (p. 122) in relation to resisting the force of assimilation in French colonial policy; all of which is paralleled to the paradox of the civilization that destroys what it seeks, as it attempts to consume (a nation, a culture, a people). Considering the voice of the ‘negritude writers’ and the colonized Martiniquan, Khanna points to the notion that they must find their own way to voice their colonial trauma in poetry and she wonders at Jungian collective unconscious. This takes the author to reference Césaire and collective ‘black’ as alienated from past, language, self. Using an excellent quotation from Satre she notices how the indigenous are robbed of their own means for expression of self and how they are forced to express that self through an alien language and culture that cannot reflect their true being, therefore, indigenous self remains half hidden; moving us to greater fragmentation and an even darker (hidden and repressed) continent.

The book proceeds to consider a Freudian unconcealing of woman as darkness, the ‘feminine as inconceivable’ (p. 137), and in the face of colonialism ‘renders the question of woman’s anticolonial subjectivity as

opaque at best, irrelevant at worst’ (p. 137), the links seeming to be the loss of voice, loss of place for voice, loss of language in which to speak, in which to be understood and hence in which to be valued.

Awareness, or lack of it, seems to be accounted for by Sartre’s notion of where consciousness of self arises from and our willingness to be subsumed by group mentality. Group consciousness fails to account for morality, and Fanon is seen to call for the blacks to speak and be heard, whereas Sartre appeals for perspective and ‘re-humanity’ (p. 141). This in turn is paralleled to Memmi and ‘de-humanized behaviour’ (p. 142). Khanna then asks what changes in the post-assessment of such behaviour, what shifts in the sense of group and gives rise to a colonial melancholy which Mannoni describes as ‘counter transference’ from black natives.

References to Mannoni seem to make the psychoanalytical parallel stronger; colonialism as desire to ‘dominate’. References made to *Hamlet* take Khanna to consider the three lines of reflecting upon the colonial experience: Mannoni’s ‘singularity of affect’ (p. 162), Menni’s psychoanalytical Marxism and Fanon’s notions of symptom and cure. This pondering assimilation, colonial mimicry (loss of indigenous purity) leads to the notion of the ‘individual ... held together by collective shell ... social mask ...’ (p. 164).

The book further examines the attempts by Foucault (cultural and historical), Lacan (political) and Freud (psychoanalytical and archaeological) to make sense of groups, and how *black* seems to remain in and out of group boundaries pointing to a ‘difference between “social antagonism” and “psychic antagonism”’ (p. 186) expanding to notions of what is and is not seen or acknowledged.

Understanding victimization and group consent is queried as our tendency towards

the wholesale consumption of writings on ways of being, from the Bible to Lacan's ethics. This is not about good or bad, but about what happens after swallowing wholesale scripts for living. Lessons can be learnt after the fact, the retrospective learning is paralleled to Fanon's new man emerging from the past and Freud's archaeological dig. (p. 189).

Khanna integrates a theme of unexplored self, referencing de Beauvoir and her 'Hegelian neglect of feminine' (p. 196). Interestingly, Khanna draws on references to 'class condemnation' through language – I wonder what that means for this text and its proliferation of scholarly words, phrases, concepts and references.

Haunting and the future (pp. 207–73)

This section explores feminism as it appears to be split into 'activism and theory' and consequently it struggles with 'inadequacies of feminist universalism' (p. 208), raising questions about contextualized ethics (workplace, medical) and a removal from 'justice and responsibility'. Does group normalizing (through swallowing a script) make feminist coalition inherently impossible (p. 209)? This takes us to a discussion about legacies of the imposition of notions of right and wrong, and what is and is not exploitative. Loss of contextualized (using indigenous language) ethics could lead to the breakdown of transnational feminism as it becomes generic and not specific or applicable (p. 211). Furthermore, Khanna asks (in the postwar reflections of justice, right and wrong, assimilation and transnational experience) whether psychoanalysis provides a framework to view ethics.

A Foucauldian/Butler view of 'Know Thyself' (The pursuit of knowledge not as the end in itself but as a way of life) becomes 'contextualize' and it seems to me that

Khanna works hard to say that the general will only ever be general and if we wish to look at specifics we need to set in its appropriate historical, sociological, linguistic context. The book points to Copjec's rejection of power holding and cites her query '... how can the superego or even the ego-ideal ...' work to explain the socialization of groups (p. 219) and references Homi Bhabba and the 'foreign cultural translation' that dislocates the original (p. 220).

Further discussion of the issue of feminism and its struggle to reconcile difference seems to lead to the destruction of the term 'women' and leaves us without a consensual collective noun; is this the post-modern disease to destruct, I ask? Taking us back to De Beauvoir and her investigations into how we can accept the horrors of war (concentration camps, sublimation) as a horror of ourselves and reconcile it in any way to a joy of existence, again asking us: 'how does a transnational coalition constitute for or against individualised acts (like clitordecotomy) without the force of the colonised generalised act?' (p. 228).

Khanna asks for vigilance against: 'colonialist and nationalist acts' and urges us to develop an awareness of the psychic trauma carried from past acts by and to the self' (p. 229).

Hamlet is offered as an embodiment of the spectral haunt of guilt, poor parenting and the melancholic manifestation of psychological disturbance. Further references are brought in to show how notions of international uniformity in neurosis through the application of a single psychoanalytical theory, parallels to nationalism, which Khanna asserts is racist in its assimilation nature. Using a Hellman observation that colonialism was exploitative, not absorption based, she questions whether we need to choose between 'social analytical frameworks, like Marxism and the individuation

of psychoanalysis' (p. 241) wondering if, in fact, political oppression leads to madness (*King Lear*). Khanna returns to Gramsci and the subaltern spirit of the past asking how we mourn our past and, if we don't, what still lives? There is a *Heart of Darkness* feeling towards the end of the book, a sense of something elusive, primitive and intuitive as she raises thoughts on detribalization, loss and universalism.

Through discussion of black *Hamlet*, the spectre phantom moves from familial, to public and ideological and she wonders at loss in afrosentrists, superiority and the narrative of continuity. A parallel is drawn between going to the analyst to come to terms with self and going to the native doctor to read messages from the spirits, as different mechanisms to understand our experiences in the world.

The book seems to try to understand colonial disaffection and its appearance as melancholy in the collective consciousness. Towards the very end the author raises an interesting point that the fiercest forms of nationalism are now located in the formerly colonized world, the real-world *Hamlet* perhaps. The book seems to explore how different psychoanalytical paradigms can rationalize the issues of colonialism, power and universalism.

Sometimes I found it impossible to keep with the myriad of threads that weave through this exploration of the impact of colonialism on the human psyche. The book looks to resolve patterns and meanings, and occasionally it felt that the elusive point was constantly refracting in mirrors of theory. I struggled to read the book, interestingly it was my competitive (male?) ego-spirit that kept me reading and I wonder what that says of oppression and expression? I am sure if I wrote the review again it would be different! Is that the point? As we try to make retrospective sense, it will reframe in the new concepts (scripts/ethics) that we acquire/consume? However, I felt the gross political violence of colonial subjugation became lost in the thick theoretical and philosophical detail and I didn't know if I could hear the Dark Continent speak.

This book is aimed at those who are well versed in scholarly presentation and are willing to accept, or research, the many references, which are commendably acknowledged throughout (an alphabetical bibliography would have been helpful). I think that you need a reason to read it in order to read it.

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