The Privilege of Crisis

Narratives of Masculinities in Colonial and Postcolonial Literature, Photography and Film

von
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1. Auflage

The Privilege of Crisis – Haschemi Yekani
schnell und portofrei erhältlich bei beck-shop.de DIE FACHBUCHHANDLUNG

campus Frankfurt am Main 2011

Verlag C.H. Beck im Internet:
www.beck.de
ISBN 978 3 593 39399 5
"Masculinity' is not a coherent object about which a generalizing science can be produced." (Connell 1995, 67)

The bemoaning of an alleged crisis of masculinity seems to be a cyclically recurring event, and given the still widely found adherence to the hegemony of the 'right kind of masculinity', must remain quizzical to all those who have been involved in counter-hegemonic practices for years. Currently, men in most Western societies are purportedly endangered as under-achievers in school, threatened by violence and/or unemployment and generally seen as 'less fit' to cope with the ever-increasing demands of capitalist societies and the changes this entails. While these are, in fact, issues that need to be debated more seriously, it is at least equally important to stress, as feminists such as Lynne Segal have done continually, that "it is men themselves, and their attachment to traditional ideas of 'manhood', which are very much part of the problem" (Segal 1997, xix). The realm of cultural texts has always been one of the prime arenas in which such "traditional ideas of 'manhood'" have been produced and negotiated. By focusing on the narrative patterns of colonial and postcolonial stories of male crises in this book, I want to highlight the discursive construction of crises rather than confirm that masculinity is, in fact, in crisis.

The recurrence of the discourse of masculinity in crisis in colonial and postcolonial narratives is no coincidence, and I deem it necessary to relate this discourse more strongly to questions of the construction of empire and nationality. The photograph on the cover links these colonial and postcolonial narratives. This picture by South African photographer Guy Tillim of the demolished statue of Henry Morton Stanley, which overlooked Kinshasa in colonial times, was shown at the 2004 exhibition Leopold and Mobutu. It points to fissures in the construction of masculinity. Stanley's statue is lying on a rusty boat, face to the ground and the lower parts of the legs shattered. A young Congolese is depicted casually urinating at the ruined monument of one of the most famous explorers of Africa and the embodiment of the fantasies of successful colonial masculinity. Impressively, this picture visually captures a connection between old colonial myths of masculinity and the postcolonial present. The iconic image of the White man as the benevolent 'father' overlooking 'his' land is no longer valid. Nonetheless, this fall of White masculinity continues to have an effect on how gender in general and masculinity in particular can be conceptualised. As the opening quote by Raewyn Connell emphasises, this book does not attempt to provide a meta-theory of masculinity or the concept of crisis. Rather, by providing readings of a selection of sources, it seeks to critically engage with English narratives of male crises that were so prominent at the end of the nineteenth and again at the end of the twentieth century.

For the field of cultural production, the notion of 'crisis' is widely considered to be a driving force of works of fiction as well as an engine for aesthetic innovation. Joseph Conrad is celebrated as one of the many innovators of English literature. In his Heart of Darkness, the search for the
mysterious Mr Kurtz sparks off an existential crisis for Marlow, the narrator of the tale. Conrad, who has been praised for his ability to delve into the abyss of the psyche of colonialism, conceived an intense and complicated journey that chronicles, in the words of the narrator, "[t]he dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (HD 105). Despite Conrad's apprehensions concerning the rightfulness of the colonial endeavour, the novella also encompasses elements that are akin to a nostalgic yearning for male adventure and an unspoiled ideal of chivalrous masculinity which links this text to earlier colonial fiction.

Almost exactly