Established in 1968, the Booker Prize has rapidly become one of the most prestigious literary prizes in the English-speaking world. Not only does the prize result in an immediate boost in sales for that year’s winner (by three to five-fold, as well as increasing back catalog sales and insuring lucrative advances), but it has also resulted in an almost immediate canonization for a number of writers. And, indeed, it is this literary canonization that is intriguing for postcolonial cultural critics. For despite the fact that the Booker prize bears the name of a European multinational that owes its existence to colonial domination and is, arguably, still guilty of neo-imperial practices, a large proportion of the novels that emerge victorious (as well as of those that simply appear on the short-list) offer alternative perspectives to dominant histories and, quite often, explicit critiques of British imperialism. As Graham Huggan notes in his 1997 study of the Booker, “More than half of the prize-winning novels to date investigate aspects of –primarily colonial—history, or present a ‘counter-memory’ to the official historical confirmation.”

Considering the history of the original business that bore the name Booker, such celebrations of literary postcoloniality may seem rather ironic. After all, the Booker Prize is named for the British brothers who, in the mid-nineteenth-century, controlled 80 percent of the sugar business in the British colonial possession of Guyana (then known as Demerara). Over the past century and a half, the Booker name has become a brand name that bears the twists and turns of a convoluted transnational history. Diversifying into an array of (mostly) food related industries, the company went public in 1920. The Guyanese struggle for political autonomy and subsequent statehood in

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1 The prize was initially named The Booker-McConnell Prize, after the company’s full corporate name at the time. In 2002, Booker’s new owners, The Icelandic Group, transferred administration of the prize to the Booker Prize Foundation. The Foundation sought out corporate sponsorship and received it from the investment group Man. Currently the official name of the prize is the Man Booker, though colloquially it is still referred to as the Booker Prize.

1953 resulted in further diversification in the company’s holdings. In the late fifties they acquired the UK food-chain Budgens and by the early 1960’s the Booker-McConnell Corporation had, according to their Year 2000 corporate website, “established an author’s division to take advantage of a tax loophole.” In the summer of 2000, the Icelandic Group acquired Booker LTD and thus the corporation no longer exists under that name. The acquisition of Booker Cash and Carry by Icelandic led to company’s renaming as The Big Food Group. In 2005, The Big Food Group was acquired by The Baumg Group. The Booker brand name lives on in the chain of cash and carry stores that bear its name, and through the prestigious literary prize.

The prize itself was conceived as a way to promote Booker’s publishing ventures. The publishing firm Jonathan Cape approached Booker about establishing a literary prize that might resemble the French Prix Goncourt. In 1969 the first Booker Prize was conferred. Two years later, V.S. Naipaul, the Indian Trinidadian writing about displaced ethnic Indians won for In a Free State. In the following seven years, three of the winning novels were about the Anglo-Indian colonial experience (all authored by non-Indians): The Siege of Krishnapur by J.G. Farrell (1973), Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s Heat and Dust (1975), and Paul Scott’s Staying On (1978). This disproportionate emphasis on India (three out of a total of nine prizes) can be interpreted in a number of ways. Certainly the burgeoning Raj nostalgia, which later reached its peak in Great Britain in the early eighties, can be seen as part and parcel of Booker’s early emphasis on Anglo-Indian life. The revisionist historical perspectives that inform these three novels by non-Indians can certainly be criticized for their hermetic views of Indian history—generally narrated as an internal failure within the culture of the colonizer, and, as such, reiterating the denial of Indian historical agency. My aim here is not to draw attention to the complicity between early Booker fiction and Raj nostalgia. I simply note the emphasis on India in order to consider how ‘otherness’ in general, and ‘Indianness’ in particular, has achieved such a prominent place during the Booker’s brief history.

In the past twenty-five years the prize has been awarded to three Indians, Rushdie in 1981, Arundhati Roy in 1997 and most recently in 2006 to Kiran Desai for her novel The Inheritance of Loss. In addition, diasporic Indian authors regularly appear on the short list (of six to seven novels) that comes out several months before the prize is actually awarded, and which leads to rampant speculation and odds-making in the weeks and days before the winner is announced. Anita Desai (three times) and Rohinton Mistry (twice) have appeared on the short-list while, in addition to his 1981 Booker, Rush-

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4 Salman Rushdie’s 1984 essay, “Outside the Whale” is an excellent analysis of the phenomenon of Raj nostalgia.
die has been short-listed four times. In 1993, Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* caused a stir by not being nominated for the Booker, despite numerous predictions that it would be the odds on favorite to win. My emphasis is on two things here: first, the prominent place of India as a setting and subject for fictions celebrated by the Booker; second, the number of (primarily diasporic) Indians who have authored works that draw the Prize Committee’s attention. Obviously, one cannot chart a single line of reasoning or interest that might adequately track this passage of ‘Indianness’ through the history of what has become Great Britain’s, and arguably the English-speaking world’s, foremost literary prize. Yet, the prominence of India in Booker fiction does bring to mind the early history of the Nobel Prize.

In 1907 and 1912 respectively, Kipling and Tagore were awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. This confluence of events put an emphasis on India within European literary circles. As I argue in my book, *Negotiating the Modern* (Routledge 2007), such emphasis bore the characteristic marks of Orientalism. Kipling’s prize came closely on the heels of his patronage by and support for Cecil Rhodes during the Boer War. Tagore, on the other hand, was virtually unknown in Europe and became a literary sensation due to his small volume of pastoral and mystical poetry, *Gitanjali*. Both authors regularly trafficked in the characteristic cultural and geographical essentialisms of the time: the East as the provenance of spirituality, the West of science and reason. European and American readers were far less enthusiastic about Tagore’s Post-Nobel writings, which were generally more historically and politically engaged. While the historical circumstances between the early Booker and early Nobel are incommensurate, it is worth pointing out this interesting pattern of first endorsing the exoticist representations of an Indian landscape as fictionalized by a “European” authorial perspective, then rewarding an ensuing Indian author’s representation via the same Western cultural institution. Nearly seventy years later, a novel about India by an ethnic Indian, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, won the 1981 Booker Prize.

At present the Booker brand name exists primarily through the literary prize, the company itself being nowhere more broadly recognized than during the annual clamor over who won, who should have won, and who wasn’t even nominated that occurs at a disturbingly ubiquitous (and highly choreographed) level of public discourse in Great Britain. My aim here is not to attack the colonial roots of contemporary culture—that would be an unproductive (and ceaseless) task. Rather, I seek to position myself against a number of critics who find it highly suspicious that a former and current imperialist endeavor has established one of the world’s foremost ‘trademarks’ (“Booker Prize-Winning”) for assigning ‘literary excellence’; and has done so by ascribing the seal of ‘literary excellence’ to these English-language

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5 I develop this argument at length in Chapter Four, “Colonial Divides and Shared Orientalisms: Kipling and Tagore in the World,” 81-104.
narratives of ‘counter-memory’ produced as part and parcel of the legacy of imperialism.

I want to approach a specific charge leveled at the Booker’s penchant for rewarding postcolonial fictions. Arguing that the Booker replicates older historical forms of cultural imperialism, Graham Huggan suggests, “post-coloniality implies a condition of contradiction between anti-colonial ideologies and neo-colonial market schemes” (412). The title of his 2001 book, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, neatly encapsulates this primary claim: that institutions such as the Booker have led “to the marketing of exotic writings to the Western world, rather than to the development of a body of postcolonial literature” (412). Of course postcolonial critics have long been concerned with just such facets of metropolitan cultural consumption. Gayatri Spivak and others have warned of precisely such dangers. Aijaz Ahmad, on the other hand, has constructed his attacks on metropolitan practitioners of post-colonial theory in a similar vein as Huggan, suggesting that commercial viability inevitably undermines the force of anti-colonial critiques offered by postcolonial fiction and criticism.

Yet, why should the circulation of postcolonial fiction via the Booker Prize mark such literature as being more ‘complicit’ than other literary works? Do literary awards change the dynamics of reading? Pointing out the difficulties in determining stability and cohesion in reader response, Huggan none-the-less takes the cynical view that Booker fictions, though often criticizing the legacy of imperialism, are still pulled into the vortex of a metropolitan ‘alterity industry,’ a present day exotics trade. But it should be clear by now that the post-industrial capitalist marketplace is often defined by precisely such contradictions. It is quite clear that Anglophone fiction arising outside of the Anglo-American world must always contend with the possibility of naïve, de-contextualized consumption. Is this not the state of culture more broadly, in an era when such media has become more globally dispersed? Given all of this, one must wonder how a ‘naïve’ reader might consume a five hundred page novel steeped in modern Indian history and come away uninformed?

Probably the most celebrated of all Booker Prize winners, *Midnight’s Children* has become central to the study of postcoloniality. The novel has proven to be remarkably prescient in anticipating many of the exigencies of postcolonial theoretical and critical thought and remains highly relevant, some twenty-five years later, to the body of literary and cultural criticism whose existence was catalyzed by its appearance. In 1993 *Midnight’s Children* was awarded the ‘Booker of Bookers,’ as the most influential novel to receive the literary prize in the first twenty-five years of its existence. This labyrinthine narrative about India’s inception as a sovereign nation, which relies heavily on a complex mythology and history that is generally unfamiliar to metropolitan readers, has become one of the most celebrated works in English during the last quarter of a century.
Deemed ‘historiographic metafiction’ by Linda Hutcheon, *Midnight’s Children* places history and historiography at the center of its formal and thematic concerns. We are all by now versed in the narrator (and novel’s) tortured relationship with modern Indian history, with the deliberate feints and lunges at articulation that mark the narrator as unreliable, capable of errata. Rushdie himself has commented on how the emphasis on history in *Midnight’s Children* has mistakenly led some readers to read the novel as history. These concerns are apparent from the first words, “I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won’t do there’s no getting away from the date ...And the time, the time matters too” (3). This opening passage is the beginning of a long characterization of protagonist Saleem Sinai’s obsession with historical time and its dependence on the narrative sequencing of events. The novel’s tortuous relationship to history is the subject of numerous debates and I shall not recount them here. I emphasize this beginning in order to highlight the immediacy with which the novel’s central concerns are put forth. Indeed, in light of the argument that metropolitan consumption occludes critiques of imperialism, I would like to point out the immediacy with which both *Midnight’s Children* and 1997 winner, *The God of Small Things*, establish the basis for their respective thematic and formal concerns.

The opening pages of Arundhati Roy’s novel are replete with a turgid and exotic lyricism. Ayemenem is a “hot and brooding” place, where “red bananas ripen” and “[ja]ckfruits burst” (3). Yet, Roy’s lyrical exoticism, which fulfils metropolitan readerly expectations of the ‘exotic,’ also establishes an awareness of the stereotypical constructions that often mark representations of India in twentieth-century Anglophone literature: the laziness, passivity, and quietism of undisturbed village life; essential, unchanging, timeless. The novel enacts this critique of readerly expectation by conforming to just such expectations in its first few paragraphs, drawing the reader in through precisely those features of landscape and life that have long characterized India in English language fiction. A rhythm of monsoon rains, pepper vines, rat snakes, still green ponds, and mongooses establishes a familiar pattern of imagery—these features of the lush landscape are, however, soon joined with the less familiar features of modern life that have long been excluded from literary representations of India—PWD potholes, a sky-blue Plymouth and a young Syrian-Christian Indian with an Elvis Presley puff.

Of course, this ironic relationship with the market forces that induce exoticism is not new. Certainly Rushdie has playfully exploited such readerly expectations, proffering snake charmers and stammering saddhus, characters and descriptions of exoticism that offer sly gibes at those who might simply consume his fiction for its ‘otherness.’ Other novels of contemporary Indian life, such as Vikram Seth’s expansive exploration of Indian middle class family life, *A Suitable Boy*, have eschewed such exoticism altogether.
Yet Roy does heighten her critique of exoticism by placing the metropolitan reader in an ironic relationship with not only the exoticism that has been characteristic of Western representations of India, but also of a reversed exoticism, an exoticism of the displaced Americana that litters the novel. The first chapter carefully establishes this series of disjunctures—both cultural and geographical—between the exotic landscape and the inhabitants of that landscape. American culture—music, movies and cars—begins to punctuate the novel, offering ostensibly ‘familiar’ semiotic markers within a cadence of exoticism. My reading of this runs in two very contrary directions. My initial response is to wonder if this does not heighten the exoticism of the novel: whether the existence of metropolitan familiarity further seduces the reader to participate in older patterns of consumption. Yet, I find that my initial resistance erodes in light of the juxtaposition taking place—the novel places familiarity in an exotic locale. As such, I would like to think the novel is defamiliarizing the reader from their assumptions about that which they perceive to be their own—displaying that familiarity as ‘elsewhere’ and pointing out how, in turn, those very same markers of familiarity are themselves subject to similar exoticist manipulation.

_The God of Small Things_ fits into that mold of Booker Prize ‘postcoloniality’ that might trouble some of us in the academy. We must all be concerned, as part of our own critical projects, with the fact that celebrations of postcolonial writing and, one might add, theorization and critique, risk being subsumed within larger (and older) currents of consumption. Understanding factors such as Primitivism, Exoticism and Orientalism as forces in European cultural production during the twentieth century does not make such forces go away.

Is it possible that modes of Orientalism actually generate ‘Western’ critiques of imperialist practices? Elsewhere I have argued that even though Orientalism produces uneven modes of power and exchange, these exchanges can still facilitate the critique of Eurocentrism and of First World Imperialist practice. Even though systems of production and exchange quite often occlude their conditions for existence—particularly when we are talking about Literature and Reading—Booker fictions often provide a sustained and generative critique of ‘Center’ practices, even as they are circulated by just such practices.

Both postcolonial critics (Ashcroft _et al_) and mainstream media commentators (Pico Iyer) have argued that the traditional relationship between the imperial center and margin, and the language and culture that once radiated outwards, has simply reversed polarities, thus providing a heightened sensibility to both the past, as well as the future of the English language—The Empire Writes Back argument. The current institutions responsible for ‘producing’ the annual literary event that is the Booker, often overtly cater to a desire to consume the ‘exotic’ that is part and parcel of first world literary consumption.
However, we must keep in mind that the category of ‘Literature,’ and perhaps any cultural institution with a vested interest in producing new products, provides for a sustained analysis of how late capital Cultural production contends with ‘otherness.’ I believe that it is this ironical relationship between the center and margin that is the commodity here, not the ‘exoticness’ of the literature itself. I would argue that we are within a paradigmatic historical shift in both the analysis, as well as the consumption, of Enlightenment spawned, modern categories such as Literature. Roy’s ironic lyricism, like Rushdie’s ironic postmodernity, is not simply the case of a new set of circumstances plugged into old forms. Rather, Indianness, both from the perspective of authorial identity, as well the stylistic, thematic and formal criteria for Booker award-winning fiction, allows for a sustained social and cultural analysis of the constitutive relationship between past colony and empire, current semi-peripheral experience and core consumption.”

Postcolonial studies of Orientalism have focused on the representation of ‘otherness’ in Western literature, science and the arts. Despite the tremendous distortions produced by the disparity of power in this lopsided and monolithic binary, Orientalism has always involved the production of a space for trafficking in ‘otherness.’ If we read the act of consuming ‘otherness’ in literature as a venture in Western narcissism, we risk negating the materiality of those representations—the very fact that ‘otherness’ was (and often continues to be) a process by which non-Europeaness enters into a cultural field where the very idea of ‘Western’ or ‘European’ is being built up as historical fact: the moments when ‘otherness’ comes to the fore in the established metropolitan institutions of Literary production provide the textual artifacts that can allow for an increasingly nuanced historiography of the consolidating, centralizing, conflicted and impossible project of rationally ordering and narrating a human life-world—the Sisyphean task we are compelled to reproduce, over and over, without end.

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