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**Michael Perfect, *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism: Diversity and the Millennial London Novel*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, hardback, 240 pages. ISBN: 978-1-137-30711-8; £55.**

Reviewed by

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Focusing primarily on texts that are bedrocks of the 'postcolonial London canon'—for example, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000)—Michael Perfect's engaging, timely and lucidly-written book in many ways revisits familiar 'foreign' territory. His aim, however, is to 'enable future critical reconfigurations of [these authors'] *oeuvres*' (199), and he successfully prompts readers to critically review the practice of locating these fictions within a solely postcolonial interpretative frame. This line of argument is particularly persuasive in the case of Hanif Kureishi, a writer who is debatably too cosmopolitan to represent third-world nations and who has deliberately distanced himself from postcolonial themes in recent years.

Perfect not only effectively challenges us to approach these texts from a different theoretical perspective—mainly, postmodernism and magic realism—and to move away from the 'tired authentic versus commodified critical binary' (125) debate, but he argues convincingly for the inclusion of texts about migration to and diversity in London that are more experimental and less commercially successful. For instance, he claims that Gautam Malkani's debut novel, *Londonstani* (2006), which failed to sell many copies, deserves a place alongside more prominent novels not only due to its infamous twist at the end but because of its 'attempt to fashion a distinct new-fangled narrative idiom' (149). What Perfect highlights here and elsewhere, then, is the relative absence of stylistic innovation in works that belong to the 'postcolonial London canon', most of which are traditional, realist, character-driven novels produced post-1990. This is a valid point, and it chimes with recent concerns regarding the

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generically mainstream nature of contemporary fiction about multiculturalism in London. However it's a bit of a shame that the author himself does not explore a wider range of literary forms, or subgenres such as 'ghetto fiction' or 'estate literature', both of which are subject to increasing attention.

One of most thought-provoking aspects of *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism* is the case it makes for 'disregarding authorial ethnicity' (8), and Perfect takes a strong stance against essentialism, identity politics and the construction of ethnic writers as native informants. Devoting the last two chapters of his study to Chris Cleave's *The Other Hand* (2008) and Stephen Kelman's *Pigeon English* (2011), Perfect, in a bold and original move, proves that literature about migrants does not necessarily have to be written by migrants and, moreover, that many ethnic minority writers are no better positioned to carry the 'burden of representation' than their white counterparts. Thus the market, he says, is increasingly happy for anyone to write about the experience of migrants. There is a caveat, though, which is that these writers feel compelled to portray migrants sympathetically (201); in other words, white authors entering this field may find their creativity stifled by 'political correctness'—arguably a new form of censorship. Perfect is brave to raise this delicate matter, and he offers a very subtle and timely critique of both the publishing industry's leftist politics and postcolonial theory's double-standards and exclusionary tactics. He could, however, perhaps have reflected on how the problems faced by white authors might extend to scholars like him whose own cultural background he omits to discuss despite saying that, 'not to comment further/ on the fact that ... Cleave and Kelman are white British authors ... would ... be to leave something of an elephant in the margins' (200–01).

As suggested by the title, Perfect's book concerns itself not just with multiculturalism in fiction but, more compellingly, with the fictionality of multiculturalism. The 'myth' of multiculturalism is particularly apparent in the more recent fiction of Cleave, Kelman and Brian Chikwava wherein London's ongoing and perhaps increasing problems with racism and inequality are highlighted. This marks a significant departure, Perfect suggests, from earlier works such as *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane* which tend to celebrate the ethnic and cultural diversity of the city, and possibly reflects the impact of the July 2005 bombings and the current immigration crisis on the millennial London novel. Notably, the 'cynical turn' Perfect perceptively traces also coincides with the rise in the number of white British authors making their contributions to this field, suggesting that the 'postcolonial London canon' is (ironically) becoming more diverse and more accommodating of dissenting voices in the twenty-first century.

The fictionality of multiculturalism which Perfect discusses throughout also manifests itself in the book's inclusion of several photographic images of the metropolis all of which do not cohere and serve as visual signifiers at odds with each other: the iconic Tower Bridge, City Hall and Big Ben are juxtaposed with scenes of Brick Lane and Brixton Village thereby giving the impression of a city divided into separate spaces. What Perfect does, then, through both text and image, is effectively convey the disparate nature of the city and the fictions it inspires. Thus the need to adopt multiple and alternative critical approaches to these texts could not be made

more clearly and *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism*, which provides a comprehensive survey of the field (charting significant shifts and suggesting potential future directions), serves as a valuable stimulus to revisit and cast new light on well-known texts as well as check out the lesser-known, more recent fictions that are steering critical debates forward.

### **Note on Contributor**

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