Refusing to Tell: Gender, Postcolonialism, and Withholding in M.G. Vassanji's The Book of Secrets

Alison Toron

Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which M.G. Vassanji's novel The Book of Secrets (1994) engages with postcolonial feminist theory in the context of a fictionalized Muslim community in present day Kenya. While previous studies have examined the text in light of such concepts as postmodernism, history, memory, and space, there has been no sustained feminist analysis of the novel to date. Examining the character Mariamu as the primary locus around which gendered powered relations operate, this paper argues that the text paradoxically reveals its resistance to patriarchal and colonial discourses by withholding multiple secrets and refusing narrative closure. By using a female character as an allegory for Africa, Vassanji both panders to traditional colonial discourses that view the land as a feminine entity to be penetrated and conquered while also subverting those discourses through the process of withholding. This alignment of gender and incomprehensible mystery is potentially dangerous, as it risks marginalizing Mariamu and other voices deemed deviant or suspect, such as that of the gay poet Gregory. However, the text is able to subvert the gendered tropes that objectify and silence women, opening up complex questions of agency and the ability to speak and be heard.

Keywords

Gender; postcolonial theory; literary representations

Full Text:
PDF

Postcolonialism does not simply seek to tell the story of what happened after decolonization, but seeks a critical perspective on its ongoing, problematic legacy: as Young writes, "Postcolonial critique focuses on forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world: the politics of anti-colonialism and neo-colonialism, race, gender, nationalism, class and ethnicities define its terrain" (2001: 11). A key theme here is that there is more to achieving liberation through decolonization than the formal decoupling of state apparatuses: as Diana Brydon writes, "Postco...