

# Modern and Contemporary British Diasporic Literature's Part in the Construction of the British National Identity: A Review of *From Rudyard Kipling to Zadie Smith: A Study of Modern and Contemporary British Diasporic Literature*

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**Abstract** *From Rudyard Kipling to Zadie Smith: A Study of Modern and Contemporary British Diasporic Literature*, authored by Xu Bin, breaks with previous classifications and researches modern and contemporary British diasporic literature as an independent academic field. As the first of its kind in China, this monograph includes both the imperial diasporic writers and ethnic writers from different continents and reveals their respective parts in the construction, dissemination and continuation of the cultural hegemony of the British Empire. It concludes, on the one hand that imperial diasporic writers who are filled with colonial libido have successfully transformed the “Oriental imagination” created by former British literati into “imperial imagination,” and on the other hand that ethnic writers have completely changed the racial nature of the British literary landscape into a more inclusive, “color”ful, though controversial multicultural theme park of British literature. Presenting the diversities and complexities of the British diasporic writings, this monograph sheds brilliant lights on methodology of diasporic literature research and is undoubtedly a valuable reference and a source of inspiration for the future research.

**Keywords** modern and contemporary British diasporic literature; Xu Bin; British Empire; British National Identity

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## Introduction

The past decades have witnessed the wide recognition of diasporic literature, however, systematic studies regarding of British diasporic literature are still underrepresented, especially of interactions between British diasporic literature and the cultural hegemony of the British Empire. *From Rudyard Kipling to Zadie Smith: A Study of Modern and Contemporary British Diasporic Literature*, written by Professor Xu Bin from Northeastern Normal University, starts with the classic Rudyard Kipling and proceeds through to the present Zadie Smith, attempting to depict a robust panorama of modern and contemporary British diasporic literature and how it gets involved in the construction, dissemination and continuation of the cultural hegemony of the British Empire, thereby revealing, in the context of British colonial and post-colonial politics, the formation and maintenance mechanism of literature and cultural soft power. With exquisite depth and breadth, Professor Xu's latest book comes as quite a response to the research gap.

Modern and contemporary British diasporic writers in Professor Xu's monograph, specifically, refer to those who are identified as British and have travelled to and fro between the (former) British colonies and the mainland Britain. Following the researching logic of "writing the other and the other's writing (back)," modern and contemporary British diasporic writers researched by Professor Xu, ten writers in total, fall into three categories. The first is imperial diasporic writers who have emigrated from the mainland Britain to the (former) British colonies, represented by Rudyard Kipling, Maud Diver and Doris Lessing. The second is writers who (or whose elder generations) have immigrated from the (former) British colonies to the mainland Britain, represented by Hanif Kureishi, Caryl Phillips, Salman Rushdie, Sam Selvon, Zadie Smith. The third is writers who have kept travelling between the (former) colonies and the mainland Britain, represented by Lawrence Durrell, Doris Lessing, Caryl Phillips, Salman Rushdie.

Correspondingly, this monograph is divided into three parts, that are Preface, four main chapters and Conclusion. In the Preface, Professor Xu comes straight to the point that British literature has a tradition of "imagining the Other" so as to accomplish "self-achievement" in history (Xu, *Rudyard Kipling* 1). However, starting from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, the whole picture has completely changed and the Other has begun writing back. Just as Professor Xu pointed out, "British writers' personal writings are inseparable from the construction

of the British national identity. The construction of the British national identity is at once an internal and external process, in which the ‘Other’ is both the subject and object of imagining” (Xu, *Imagining* 114). That is to say, the second category of diasporic writers mentioned above are, to some extent, the “Other” who once being represented, but now have made their own contribution to the construction of the British national identity, from an “external” perspective.

Focusing on imperial diasporic writers, Chapter One, approaching from the “internal” perspective, explores their colonial complex and imagination of trans-racial community with a shared future. Nevertheless, Professor Xu also pointed out that imperial diasporic writers, compared with the writers in the mainland Britain, are also somewhat of an external perspective. Whereas, Chapter Two, Chapter Three and Chapter Four, approaching from the “external side,” explore how the writings of colored immigrants from the British colonies and their descendants have completely changed the “whiteness” of British literature into a more inclusive, namely “color”ful, theme park of multiculturalism. In other words, “the colonial history and the post-colonial history of the (former) British colonies are counted in the construction of the British national identity” (Xu, *Rudyard Kipling* 17). In the Conclusion part, Professor Xu adopts Professor Nie Zhenzhao’s concept of “brain text” and comes to the conclusion that British diasporic literature, through its reflecting, writing back and rewriting of British colonialism, has shouldered the function for questioning the post-colonial ethics and resisting imperialist cultural hegemony.

Representing one of the most comprehensive studies regarding of British diasporic literature, *From Rudyard Kipling to Zadie Smith* is the first published monograph on British diasporic literature in China. Beyond any doubt, the publication of Professor Xu’s book would begin to attract more attention to this field. It is not a book intended for common readers or for popular science, so there is no detailed analysis of specific concepts, genres or approaches. Rather, it is a book for professional academics, especially for new beginners.

### **British Diasporic Literature as an Independent Academic Field**

To sum up, *From Rudyard Kipling to Zadie Smith* makes outstanding contributions in the following three aspects:

Firstly, modern and contemporary British diasporic literature has been systematically studied as a relatively independent academic field in this monograph, which means it could possibly break through the limitations of previous classifications. Before this, related research findings are included in the fields of either ethnic literature or travel literature.

Taking Professor Shi Haijun's *Literature Between India and Britain: A Post-colonial Perspective* (2008) as an example, V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie are researched as diasporic writers. As a matter of fact, the phrase "literature between India and Britain," to some extent, illustrates the word "diaspora" perfectly. Professor Shi discussed Indian diasporic literature in the category of the ethnic (Indian) identity and explored modern (especially postcolonial) Indian literature comprehensively. However, such kind of classification is unable to demonstrate British empire's effects on other continents besides India. Likewise, *Identity Construction in Diaspora: On Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (2007), written by Professor Zhang Deming, studied how Caribbean people with diasporic experience construct their own identity. This monograph sheds light upon the early methodology of diasporic literature research, however, it focuses on identity crisis and literary narrations mainly. "Diaspora" is treated as an approaching element or research perspective, rather than an independent research field. Besides, *From Island To Empire: A Study of Travel Literature in Modern and Contemporary Britain*, another monograph written by Professor Zhang Deming, focuses on the travel narrations, geographical discoveries and the early imperial thoughts of the British literati before the formation and the early period of the British Empire, and thus does not cover researches on cultural hegemony at the height of British empire.

In *From Rudyard Kipling to Zadie Smith*, not only does Professor Xu research the imperial diasporic writers like Rudyard Kipling, Lawrence Durrell and Doris Lessing, but also brings together writers from other continents (such as India, Caribbean, Africa) and ethnic groups affected by the British empire. In Chapter Two, Professor Xu researched V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, and pointed out their writings, including *A Bend in the River* (1979), *Midnight's Children* (1981), *Half A Life* (2001) and *Magic Seeds* (2004), are ethical criticism of colonial heritage, not only revealing the problems left over from colonial history that India, as well as other newly independent countries, was facing after decolonization, also illustrating a dialogue "between yesterday's colonial history and today's post-colonial status across time and space" (Xu, *Rudyard Kipling* 72). In Chapter Three, Professor Xu researched Caryl Phillips and pointed out that Phillips presented a literary panorama of the black diaspora across time and space. Not only did he trace the transatlantic racial diaspora of black Africans, but also the diaspora (from the mainland Europe to the colonies) of white Europeans.

In addition, *The Nature of Blood* (1997) Professor Xu focuses on in Chapter Three, is one of Phillips' few novels on the theme of Jewish diaspora and suffering. Professor Xu indicated that Phillips, a Caribbean diasporic writer, adopted Jewish

experiences to reflect the situation of black people being exploited, discriminated and oppressed in European and American society. In Chapter Four, Professor Xu explored ethnic writers like Sam Selvon (a Trinidad-born writer), Hanif Kureishi (half-Indian and half-English) and Zadie Smith (half-Jamaican and half-English), attempting to uncover the social realities of racial integration between coloured immigrants from the Caribbean and the South Asian subcontinent and the white British.

Approaching from writers' diasporic experiences, instead of the ethnic identities, both the white diaspora from the empire to the colonies and the ethnic diaspora from the (former) colonies to the mainland Britain, or those who kept travelling between the (former) colonies and the mainland Britain, can all be included in the discussion and thus the mechanism of British colonial cultural hegemony can be fully explored. On the basis of the distinctions between travel literature and diasporic literature, ethnic literature and diasporic literature, Professor Xu aims to reveal the internal logical interactions between modern and contemporary British diasporic literature and British colonial cultural hegemony, which is the first of its kind in China.

### **British Diasporic Literature and Intersectionality**

Secondly, another notable feature of *From Rudyard Kipling to Zadie Smith* is interdisciplinary research methods Professor Xu adopted. Based on the historical, political and cultural studies of literature, Professor Xu also adopted the research methods of sociolinguistics, political economy and ethical literary criticism in his new monograph. His insightful use of interdisciplinary research methods will definitely become beneficial to future researches of foreign literature in China.

In Chapter One, Professor Xu researched Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) in the context of the intersectionality between economics and literature. For years, *The Grass Is Singing*, one of the most widely studied works of Doris Lessing, is mainly researched from the perspective of either (eco)-feminism or colonialism in China, and both the depth and breadth of study need to be further improved. Specifically, Professor Xu explained the racial tensions on South Rhodesian farms, along with the economic tensions, through a thorough analysis of imperial trust. That is to say, Mary's death or racial problems in South Rhodesia would be better understood through the changes of economic orders on farms.

According to Professor Xu, the imperial trust from 1920s to 1940s, represented by the British South Africa Company, has brought the South Rhodesian white settlers' farms into the chain of global economy and industry and

thus initiated a series of changes in the economic and racial orders on the farms. Professor Xu held that “[t]he change of economic order is reflected in the shift in planting choices, from grain crops, such as mealie, to economic crops, such as tobacco, whereas the change of racial order is embodied by the contentious racial relationship between white farmers and native blacks” (Xu, *New Orders* 101). Therefore, Dick’s bankruptcy and Mary’s death seem to have resulted from the symbiotic change of “new orders” in economy and racial relationship on the South Rhodesian farms. For me personally, Professor Xu’s analysis of economics-in-literature, especially how an inconspicuous planting choice would shape racial conflicts in South Rhodesia and thus looking at Mary’s death in a brand-new perspective, is truly enlightening.

Besides *The Grass Is Singing*, the text analysis of *The Atlantic Sound* (2001) is also carried out through interdisciplinary research method. With the guidance of post-colonial psychoanalytic theory, Professor Xu explored the almost irreversible psychological and spiritual damage done by colonialism or imperialism to the (descendants) of the colonized, as well as to the (descendants) of the colonizers who were liable to be neglected. The mental disorder of the colonized caused by the colonizer does not disappear along with the end of colonialism. In contrast, the incidence of mental disorder in the post-colonial period has expanded, and both descendants of the former colonizers and the former colonized are (potential) cases.

Furthermore, Professor Xu also adopted psychoanalytic criticism to illustrate the abandonment neurosis of Othello in *The Nature of Blood* (1997). As a prequel to Shakespeare’s *Othello*, the first-person narrative of Othello in *The Nature of Blood* reveals the racist causes of the tragedy in which Othello kills his wife and then kills himself. Professor Xu pointed out that the feeling of “being abandoned” was the trigger for Othello’s violent act of killing his wife and then committing suicide. Othello did not realize that it was not his wife who abandoned him, but the white Venetian society.

Except for those mentioned above, Professor Xu also analyzed the discussion of biology and biotechnology in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) in Chapter Four. In Professor Xu’s opinion, with the help of cross-pollination and genetic control in biotechnology, Smith tried to reveal the racial and cultural problems in British society. For the coloured immigrants, London is a laboratory for cross-pollination and genetic control of alien cultures. For white Londoners, alien cultures are the cultural tumors that need to be excised. Eliminating the cultural tumors in fact means to use the technology of genetic control to cleanse ethnic cultures, that is, the western cleansing of Eastern and Arab cultures. Although Professor Xu’s

monograph has not yet developed a relatively complete theoretical framework that can be used to solve the specific problems of diasporic literature, his attempt to do text analysis in the context of interdisciplinary research methods is quite inspiring.

### **Re-digging and Re-evaluation**

Last but not least, the third notable feature of *From Rudyard Kipling to Zadie Smith* is Professor Xu's re-evaluation of marginalized diasporic writings and his empathy with the underprivileged or marginalized groups, but not in a cheap, emotional way. Diasporic groups are quite diversified and Professor Xu sets a brilliant example in how to present a restrained and rational analysis of the damages or effects British Empire has done to the diasporic communities, including both the white and the coloured, the male and the female, the mainstream and the non-mainstream.

Professor Xu re-evaluated and confirmed the value of adventure novels written by Anglo-Indian female writers in Chapter One. In the very beginning, Professor Xu revealed that adventure novels written by male writers like Rudyard Kipling, were filled with colonial heroism and well-received by scholars. However, adventure novels written by female writers like Maud Diver were undervalued and being categorized as inferior romances. Anglo-Indian women are depicted as the cause of the British Empire's ruin in adventure novels represented by Kipling, whereas Maud Diver tried to provide a positive image of female imperialist in India. In *Captain Desmond, V. C.*, Diver created Honor Meredith, a nearly perfect British female image with a robust personality and great determination in garrison and emphasizes female presence in British Empire's colonial business. One thing needs to point out is that Professor Xu presented the progressiveness in Diver's writings, but also revealed her restrictions. Diver's writings still work for the imperial ideology. Both Kipling and Diver are resisting against and holding a hostile attitude toward trans-racial marriages, hybridity and Eurasians in Anglo-Indian colonies.

In Chapter Three, Professor Xu researched Caryl Phillips' *The Lost Child* (2015) which is a bold challenge against the Heathcliff narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and reveals Phillips' attempts to present the postponed influences that the colonial history from the eighteenth century has worked on the British society in the twentieth century. Through the analysis of Phillips' re-digging into Heathcliff's identity mystery, Professor Xu clearly showed how the once being colonized wrote back and took part in constructing the British national identity. Phillips' rewriting of classic British literature, from a marginalized perspective, is effective in deconstructing the cultural hegemony of the British Empire.

## Conclusion

The ability of close reading can test the quality of a critic, which requires the critic to have rich imagination, sharp insight and extraordinary knowledge. Centered around the keywords of “diasporic literature,” “British empire” and “British national identity,” Professor Xu fully demonstrates the depth of foreign literature studies one can achieve and the humanistic concern that a scholar should have. Through scientific classification and thorough analysis, this monograph shows the diversity and complexity of the British diasporic writings and reveals the fact that modern and contemporary British diasporic literature has completely changed the racial nature of the British literary landscape, thus formed a multicultural theme park of British literature.

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