

Within the conventions of postcolonial literary analysis and criticism, a main focus has been continually set on interpersonal relations and interactions between different characters, mostly when such characters belong to opposing cultural groups. Such encounters between colonizer and colonized, or between members of the colonized group with differing attitudes towards the colonizing hegemony, represent the often contradictory, occasionally turbulent, always uneasy motion of power through the local postcolonial contexts. Naturally, people – or other characters with human features – have always been the main carriers of plot and narrative, hence the critical focus on them appears readily acceptable. However, the cultural impact of colonial forces extends, in time and scope, beyond the point of conquest and settlement, and could be felt in subtler yet no less pervasive manifestations. One such manifestation could be found in the inanimate objects produced and employed by both indigenous and foreign cultures, and in the varied purposes these items are used for. These items, beyond their intended practical uses, can also be symbolic of their respective cultures, and of the intercultural encounters that have reshaped them and their functions.

In this paper, I explore the postcolonial perspective of short literary texts, as it expresses itself in the commodities and artefacts that provide narrative pivots for these stories. I see the symbolic aspect of inanimate objects in various postcolonial contexts as a particularly fruitful and as yet underexplored departure point for analysis in literature, as well as in adjacent social and cultural disciplines. In this regard, the most prominent of these disciplines is material culture studies, a relatively new field of research derived from anthropology and dedicated to inanimate objects prevalent in different societies and cultures. While I do not attempt to frame this paper as any sort of anthropological analysis, as it is focused on literary texts, I do find it useful to borrow some key insights from the world of material culture and apply them to my own analysis.

The benefit of material culture as a prism for postcolonial criticism is highlighted by Peter van Dommelen and Michael Rowlands (2012) in their contribution to a book about the relation between materiality and cultural exchange. Using examples from disparate historic periods and locales, van Dommelen and Rowlands stress the value of examining artefacts as part of an analysis of colonial or postcolonial situations. They situate material culture, as both a discipline and a facet of society, "at the heart of social interaction, because people exchange 'things' as they interact with each other" (20). Materials and artefacts thus serve as means of

communication and tools for cultural dialogue, even in cases when this dialogue is overwhelmingly and aggressively dominated by one side. Such an understanding of inanimate objects needs to be placed within a local context, in order to understand both the different meanings and properties assigned to objects by the cultural groups exchanging them, and the very nature of this exchange (22). This immediate, tangible aspect of intercultural relations has, according to van Dommelen and Rowlands, been largely absent from postcolonialist thought: "The tendency of postcolonial studies to focus on the textual, if not literary, dimension of colonialism has repeatedly been criticised as a one-sided turning away from the colonised realities on the ground" (21). Focusing on the colonial reality, the daily habits and practices of people within particular colonial contexts, may thus provide further insight into the type of encounters between settlers and indigenous communities and characterize the power struggle between these groups, while avoiding simplistic and generalized understandings of these situations.

Although in this paper I remain indebted to textual representations of colonial encounters, the perspective offered by van Dommelen and Rowlands is nonetheless helpful to my analysis, which focuses on practical, symbolic and narrative functions fulfilled by inanimate objects in four short stories taking place in distinct intercultural contexts. The stories I examine are: *Transcendence and the Fax Machine* (2007) by Leung Ping-kwan; *It Used to Be Green Once* (1986) by Patricia Grace; *A Real Durwan* (1999) by Jhumpa Lahiri; and *Native Country* (1965) by Nadine Gordimer.

These stories, while dissimilar in their time of writing and their sociocultural and geographical settings, all give a central role to objects which function as catalysts of narrative change and progress, through the interactions of characters with them. These objects also serve as unofficial emblems of the dominant or subordinate cultures that had produced them, even when conflict between these cultures is not explicitly present in human form in the stories. As such, they draw attention to what van Dommelen and Rowlands refer to as the "physical co-presence and immediate juxtaposition of both people and objects" (24) in colonial and postcolonial situations. In this light, these objects remain as residues or echoes of colonialism, still placing the characters in relation to a source of hegemonic power, a civilizing force whose influence is felt even in its seeming absence. This paper thus reflects