

VIOLENCE, POSTCOLONIAL FICTION, AND THE LIMITS OF SYMPATHY

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In this article, I consider the implications for fiction of Slavoj Žižek's argument that the violence of individual subjects is informed by "symbolic violence" (1-2), that is, the distortions concomitant on language's constitutive, rather than merely referential, relation to the world. Given that the medium of the novel is language, Žižek's contention raises serious questions about this genre's capacity to address violence. I argue that this problem is most apparent in those forms of realism that, in seeking to render language transparent, compromise their ability to recognize the violence of the symbolic order. While my argument in this connection has implications for fiction-writing in general, I confine my discussion to postcolonial fiction that focuses on the racialization of the human body, that is, its reduction to a sign in a discursive system.

My contention is that realism's inattention to the interplay between subjective violence and symbolic violence impairs the ethical efficacy of the emotion with which this mode of writing has traditionally sought to counter violence, namely sympathy. In constructing the reader as an autonomous subject, realism refuses to acknowledge that it actually engages his sympathy by positioning him in a discursive network of competing positions. It fails to realize, that is, that sympathy is intentional or directional, that one always sympathizes with someone else from one's position in language and culture, and therefore that language and the values it bears cannot not limit one's sympathies.

I should add that my argument is not against sympathy. Indeed, the capacity to relate affectively and feelingly, rather than simply rationally and conceptually, to other entities has genuine ethical potential. Through its proximity with the body, sympathy constantly intimates the possibility of responding to other bodies as singular entities, that is, in a non-conceptual way that does not reduce

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