

Immigration, Border Crossing, and the Postcolonial Studies in Britain: An Interview with Elleke Boehmer

Huang Yiting & Elleke Boehmer

Abstract: Elleke Boehmer is Professor of World Literature at the English Department, University of Oxford. She is a founding figure in the field of colonial and postcolonial studies, known internationally for her research in Anglophone literatures of empire and anti-empire, while also being a novelist and short-story writer. She is the general editor of the book series, *Oxford Studies in Postcolonial Literatures* (OUP). Many Chinese scholars came to understand the postcolonial studies through her book, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (1995), when this field began to be introduced into China. This interview, conducted in two parts before and during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, addresses a number of important issues in postcolonial studies in the UK, such as the history of the postcolonial literary studies in Britain, the core issues the British scholars are currently concerning about, the relationship between colonial and postcolonial studies, the influence of the ethnic and immigrant writers on contemporary British literature, the prospects of the postcolonial studies, and the impact on it of the COVID-19 pandemic. While indicating “immigration” as the key topic all along, she emphasizes the importance of border-crossing in postcolonial studies and its methodological improvement on interdisciplinary studies.

Key words: postcolonial studies; immigration; border crossing; interdisciplinary studies

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标题：移民、跨界及英国后殖民研究：艾略克·博埃默访谈录

内容摘要：博埃默是牛津大学英文系世界文学教授，英国殖民与后殖民研究创始人，以英国文学中的帝国和反帝国研究享誉世界。同时，她也是一名作家。她还是牛津大学出版社的《牛津后殖民研究系列丛书》总编辑。在后殖民研究最初推介到中国时，许多中国学者就是通过她的著作《殖民与后殖民文学：移民隐喻》（1995）来认识后殖民研究的。本次采访包括两个部分，分别完成于新冠疫情爆发前和爆发高峰期，梳理了英国后殖民研究的一些关键议题，包括英国后殖民研究的历史、英国学者关注的核心问题、殖民与后殖民研究之间的关系、族裔和移民作家对当代英国文学发展的影响、后殖民研究的前景以及新冠疫情对该领域研究的影响等。博埃默教授始终认为“移民”是核心议题，强调后殖民研究中“跨界”，以及完善跨学科研究方法的重要性。

关键词：后殖民研究；移民；跨界研究；跨学科研究

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Huang Yiting (Huang for short hereafter): Dear Professor Boehmer, thank you so much for accepting my request for the interview! Shortly after I settled down in London, I came to realize how deeply and widely the people from former colonies have immersed themselves in the British society. It means that the postcolonial era not only allows people in former colonial countries have the opportunity to pursue their own educational pathways, but also forces colonial powers like Britain to reexamine and reposition themselves in such a great change of times.

However, British scholars in the field of the postcolonial studies are generally neither known to nor fully understood by Chinese scholars. Key figures from America, such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and G. Spivak, have garnered more attention in China. Though a number of British scholars' works have already been listed in the bibliographies in Chinese scholars' books and essays, what or how the British scholars in this field have carried on their studies remains unclear.

I believe, you are the best person to answer my question, for you are the founder of the postcolonial studies in Britain, and you have been considered throughout the past four decades as a leading scholar in this field. So, could you please introduce when and how the British scholars began with postcolonial literary studies?

Elleke Boehmer (Boehmer for short hereafter): It's a very, very multi-layered question that requires a layered historical narrative, because, as you say, it involves different scholars,

groups of individuals in different universities in the UK, often in the 1980s and 1990s, scattered singly, one here, one there, and coming together for certain conferences around shared topics, like migration, but with this number gradually gathering force. It took a long time, and it was quite a while before readers, compilations, and textbooks were published in this field.

To answer your question, I might refer you to an essay I wrote about this precise issue along with another scholar who was around at that time, still studying, Alex Tickell. It's called "The 1990s: An Increasingly Postcolonial Decade". This decade saw us moving forward from the kind of the commentaries of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak, which were at that point quite scattered within literary theory; they weren't postcolonial first for most. Said was an anti-orientalist, Spivak was a feminist Derridian, and Bhabha was a poststructuralist. So, we moved from the 1980s, when we had these singleton big figures like that, through the 1990s, the decade of consolidation of postcolonial literary studies, into the new century where there was no question that this branch of studies was very well established.

Alex Tickell and I were both at Leeds at that time, which was a big hub, a center for postcolonial studies alongside Kent. And that's partly because universities like the branches of the University of London, Oxford and Cambridge still felt themselves to be the custodians of certain traditional British writing, and they didn't quite know how to accommodate the postcolonial. They thought it was too new, too now, too contemporary, and detached from the test of time. It required some energetic people, like Tickell, like myself, and a number of others, to actually demonstrate that these things and these kinds of framework of awareness had been in place for a longer time, as far back as like Coleridge and Shelley. You know, Romantic poets way back in the early 1800s were writing about slavery, empire, and global things. So, it required some of us to back-project the postcolonial, to show that some of these things went back far further in time.

To round off on the essay in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*: we moved from the formation of the field of cultural studies by some singleton figures, largely poststructuralists, through to consolidation in the 1990s, when "mimicry" and "hybridity", "nation-narration", creolization, and diaspora became key issues and terms.

Huang: Ok, we should read your essay. Could you talk more about the history of the studies in the new millennium? Is it possible to divide it into some major periods or steps? How British scholars felt about or responded to the theories and concepts introduced by their American counterparts, and what are the major ideas they presented?

Boehmer: More and more English Departments and other departments from various universities took part in this. French Departments in some places were quite advanced. German and Spanish Departments less so. Departments realized that they couldn't continue to shut out the global and imperial history that has shaped European writing from the 1600s to

the present. You just couldn't do it.

So, let's take the University of Exeter or King's College London as examples. If you take a snapshot of those departments in the year 2000, there's maybe only one postcolonial figure working in the department. Now, twenty or fifteen years later, we take a snapshot, Exeter for example now has about three or four people, and also they have different specialists. One may be more Africanist, another more focused on Indian English writing, and another maybe more focused on Caribbean. You tend not to find two Africanists or two Indian English specialists in one department yet, although one day we might get there. Leeds certainly has already. We also now have any number of conferences per year, in different universities, on different postcolonial topics – migration, diversity, nationhood and identity, and so on. Back in the 1990s, there would have been one big conference per year.

As for the question about how British postcolonial scholars responded to the theories and concepts introduced by their American counterparts (e.g. Said, Bhabha, and Spivak) in the 1990s, they tended to be very receptive. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) which was more accessible than Spivak for many, was a core text in the field for many years. Said's work was of course crucial. It's recognized though that none of these US-located people were seen as American first and foremost: Said was from Egypt; Bhabha and Spivak from India.

Huang: What topics are the current British scholars in this field most concerned about?

Boehmer: What a good question! I think almost inevitably, it's a perennial topic, immigration: it doesn't go away, but it has been given a particular urgency and seriousness by Brexit. Britain's leaving of the European Union, Brexit, is motivated by populism and imperial nostalgia, and it is anti-immigration; whereas for postcolonial studies, immigration is good, a plus. It leads to interaction; produces cultural tolerance, understanding between different cultures, so it's good. But for Britain in the current climate, it's not. That is a struggle that postcolonials keep having to fight. So one of the impacts Brexit will have on postcolonial studies will be to give us more to talk about, and perhaps refresh the aims and ideals that brought us into the field in the first place, the interesting in migration.

Huang: The complication of this issue is a bit out of my expectation. Since China is still a developing country, the same as India, Chinese scholars in postcolonial studies are not only concerned about what these immigrant writers and critics have contributed to their adopted countries, but also care about what they can do for their native countries, so that we can gain some insights or beneficial references for our own development. And, to establish a timely suitable questionnaire for academic studies is always not an easy task. From this perspective, could you please explain more why "immigration" has become a core topic in British postcolonial studies?

Boehmer: I'm not going to argue the point whether immigration is or is not a problem in China. I think immigration is a worldwide problem. Because of climate change, there are

going to be more and more people on the move, trying to find higher ground, better ground, and less polluted ground. That's a big global development. Closer to home, Britain remains caught up in its imperial past, the legacies of empire. The fact is that, if something goes wrong in one of Britain's ex-colonies, people in Britain tend to experience the consequences. When Mugabe in Zimbabwe was repressing his people, there was an influx of Zimbabwean immigrants to this country. In another sense, Britain is still having to think about its global responsibilities. It's something China, arguably a developing country but with increasing global involvement and responsibilities, can do, too. There is a parallel there, and postcolonial scholars, who have particular regional expertise for Africa, or Caribbean, or India, often speak about these interrelated national issues in a very informed way.

So, if you, as a Chinese scholar, were thinking about what you can learn from British postcolonial discussions, that might be on the lines of national concerns and environmental concerns. There is a very strong global focus, as well as a local focus in British postcolonial studies, a dual focus from which Chinese scholars can arguably benefit. I think these are universal things: What is home? How do I cope with crisis, like climatic and environmental problems? Where do I belong? What is my language? They may be all problems in the snapshot of modernity. The split self feels pulled by the city and cannot go back to the country.

Huang: Yes, you have just reminded me that moving within China is actually a very important topic. People are moving from north to south, from west to east, due to the imbalance of development in different areas. And now not only more and more Chinese are travelling and living in foreign countries, but many foreigners are coming to stay in China. Postcolonial studies, in your opinion, is closely related to the question of modernity, the question of development, and in Britain people may also need to discuss the cooperation or negotiation between the former colonial powers and the former colonies.

Boehmer: Yeah, exactly. As well as differences of development within the country of Britain itself.

Huang: You have described briefly the history of postcolonial studies in Britain from the 1980s. Actually, as a leading figure in this area, your work itself has represented the frontier research over the years. Now, let's talk more about your own works. The first academic book you published is *Colonial and Postcolonial literature: Migrant metaphors* in 1995, and it is this book that turned you into a well-known figure in China. After I read this book, I realized that you have always been keenly interested in the legacy of the colonial literature and its influence upon the postcolonial literature. In the last two decades, you have published more works to illustrate the literary images in the colonial period. So, could you elaborate a bit more on the relationship between these two periods?

Boehmer: In the book, I explored the relationship between colonial and postcolonial literature, how the one grew out of the other. In the first two chapters of my book, I looked

at the influence or the impact of empire on the Victorian and early 20th-century novel and poetry, and then I talked about how British writers started acknowledging the fact that they can't alone speak for the postcolonial experience, or the developing world's experience. And then postcolonial writers begin to contribute to the British novel, they both write in deference to it yet against it. Someone like Naipaul is always writing with Conrad's influence in mind; Salman Rushdie, Laurence Sterne's. If you were very critical, you might say postcolonial writing has an echo relationship with colonial writing. But it's not just that; it's an echo with a kind of critical edge.

Huang: Could you talk more about how the colonial literary studies helps us to understand the postcolonial literary writings, especially those written by immigrant writers?

Boehmer: Something we have been taking for granted on these writers is that the majority write in English, and as Naipaul so very elegantly does his work, they have all had that British literary education at colonial schools, so that their formation as writers has been through the British colonial literature.

Huang: Usually, they are considered as half-British.

Boehmer: Yes, yes. So, colonial writing, e.g. Dickens, or Brontë, or Wordsworth, is very important for them. Like we often say, you can't write on a blank page, and you have to write with and through influence. What these postcolonial writers tend to do is that they take the influences from the British writers who seem almost convenient to them, or have most in common with them. For Naipaul, it is Conrad for Conrad was a truly global writer, as is Naipaul.

Huang: As a scholar specializing in Indian English literature, I am particularly interested in *Indian Arrivals, 1870-1915: Networks of British Empire* (2015), your latest book but one (the latest is *Postcolonial Poetics*). In *Indian Arrivals*, you analyze the social and cultural influences that colonial travellers and immigrants have made upon Britain as an empire. Could you please talk more about the contribution from Indian travellers in this period? Who is particularly important in this case?

Boehmer: What I try to say in the book is that British culture has been marinated, which I mean has been soaked in Indian influences from the beginning of the 19th century. Take shampoo for example, an Indian concept, an Indian word. So the influence even goes into the very heart of the language. It's often said that – I'm taking an analogy from linguistics now – when one language is impacted by another through invasion, for example, English by Danish through the Viking invasions, one main language made real impact on another when the words enter into a very domestic core. So, the English word for “window” is the Danish word “vinduet”, and in Germanic languages it wasn't English at all. It was different. It is “fenster” or something else. Here is the fact that Indian influences enter into the very heart of cultural influences, into the very heart of the home. Tea drinking, or shampoo for hair-washing, shows

how pervasive these influences were here, which is all about the prestige of the Indian Empire, in relationship with the British literature. It was also like a jewel of the crown, right? But then, I also talk about how the travelling Indians who were involved in metropolitan life in Britain in this period may have had an important impact on English writing through what is now called orientalism. As in Sarojini Naidu's work, all about perfume, evening, melancholic mood and low lighting, as you see in British 1890s' writing. It is all very influenced by India. There are many examples that we could use to show how important the impact of India was, especially the Indian travellers' impact on Britain at that time.

In fact, the writer that I was most struck by while writing the book was probably Sarojini Naidu because of her importance to Indian nationalism. Precocious, young, and pretty, she was eighteen when she first came to Britain, and she moved with a lot of energy and vitality. Called an Indian princess, she was much admired by the largely male poets of the 1890s, and she used her allure in a quite interesting way to develop her own work. She developed a set idea of India in a British imagination, and then became an Indian nationalist. First, she developed an orientalist view of India by writing poetry. But at the same time, she was developing an idea of a "United India" which didn't exist at that point, and she was doing that from abroad. Then, she went back to India and started to develop a platform of nationalism.

Huang: So, nationalism in India began from her?

Boehmer: Yeah, but not only her; it is she, Gandhi, and Nehru. All of them developed their idea of India united while abroad in Britain. That's very important and creative. The idea of being united in India is developed outside, which is very different from China, I think?

Huang: Yeah, that's an interesting question that needs to be scrutinized further. I know that you have made great effort in running a series of workshops with some British ethnic and immigrant writers for the purpose of enlarging their audience and finally trying to think over the questions about the British literary canon or mainstream literature. Could you please analyze how these writers and their diverse writings, particularly the immigrant writers from India, have contributed to the rebuilding of the British literary canon?

Boehmer: This is important. They haven't become canonized first and foremost through their own excellence, although it's a pity that it didn't happen. They became canonized through developments in the academy, the kind of developments we were talking about earlier at universities, like Leeds, Exeter, and so on in the 1990s. In other words, British university teachers of English began to see that you couldn't teach British literature any longer as a homogenous English category. Because it was international. You couldn't teach British writing without making some reference to empire, or to Achebe alongside Conrad, for example. These ethnic writers haven't yet entered the whole mainstream, but there is a perceived need for them to be more included. Literary studies are under great pressure in Britain. There are more and more students going into engineering, medicine, etc., and we are realizing that we

will increasingly lose relevance, even more rapidly than it's already taking place, if we don't offer the students books that speak to their experiences. So, these books still need to be more canonized. It's a process of changing minds and emotions. I hope that some of the writers will be recognized, like Kamila Shamsie, Shashi Deshpande, and Amitav Ghosh; I hugely admire them.

Huang: I love Amitav Ghosh. His novel is sophisticated enough to spread out a wide vision, but I am confused. Does he still belong to the group of Indian English writers like Arundhati Roy? He has migrated to New York in these years.

Boehmer: No, no, he married a *New Yorker* editor, and their children are there. Now, he lives six months in India, and six months in New York.

Huang: So, his life now is similar to Kiran Desai's.

Boehmer: Yeah.

Huang: It seems you consider Ghosh as the leader of the Indian writers now. Can you talk some more about him and Salman Rushdie?

Boehmer: Well, we could have held a two-hour discussion about Rushdie. I am still to this day a huge admirer of his *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*, but I think the fatwa and everything that happened to him put him on a different path and raised certain anxieties which was bad for his writing. A hundred years from now, when people look back, I believe that Amitav Ghosh will be seen as the towering figure of Indian English writing today.

Huang: Yes, Ghosh has become more and more popular in China, and scholars have also begun to discuss his works.

Boehmer: He loves China. One year I invited him to Wolfson College --- it's one of the modern colleges. It has a very nice landscape garden with lots of willows and water. I asked him to give a reading and have a dinner, and he looked at Wolfson and said, "So many of these British gardens take their model from China. Look here, here, and there, there. It's all Chinese." He really loves China and is familiar with its culture, as his Ibis trilogy shows.

Huang: Oh, we should try to invite him to China. But to turn back. Apart from being a leading scholar in postcolonial studies, you are also a highly-praised and experienced writer who is fully aware of the contemporary postcolonial context. As a scholar and writer, how do you view the status quo of the writing of ethnic and immigrant writers in Britain as a whole? Or is it impossible to summarize them as a whole?

Boehmer: To my mind, some of the most interesting and experimental works in English, sometimes focused on Britishness, come from outside the mainstream, from Black and Asian writers. Increasingly, when we read the writings of the British mainstream, like Ian McEwan, Alan Hollinghurst, what we see is a kind of impoverishment, a spiritual impoverishment of British literature, because it's a very middle class, very privileged voice, very metropolitan, and very white. So, it's limited. For a long time, those limitations haven't been perceived,

as this is what people were used to. Now it's different, there is diversity, there are lots of writers from different backgrounds, including from within the UK, Welsh writers, and Scottish writers. The limitations of the mainstream have become clearer. So that has been a really amazing contribution of the minority writers, to point subtly to the deficiencies of the mainstream, and to demonstrate that those you can't keep that going on without British literature becoming anorexic.

Huang: How do you assess the field of postcolonial studies at present?

Boehmer: Postcolonial studies has become far more mainstream than before, though it also has to compete for space with global studies and transnational studies. This will continue, judging from how far we have come. The postcolonial will become ever more established in English and French and other European language departments. The numbers of the people teaching in this area will grow. More mainstream scholars, like scholars of Virginia Woolf, will realize that they can't just become scholars of Virginia Woolf; they will need to be scholars of Virginia Woolf in her imperial and postcolonial contexts. There will be increasing focus on postcolonial writers in Britain, not just African postcolonial writers, or Caribbean postcolonial writers, but people writing in Britain, born in Britain, of diverse backgrounds. For this reason, Zadie Smith will become an ever more interesting figure. She was born British, yet has Caribbean background. Though she tends to be considered as mainstream British, she writes strongly on black and postcolonial themes.

Huang: Apart from Zadie Smith, are there any other writers you think will become brilliant in this writing field?

Boehmer: I think Kamila Shamsie will be. *Home Fire* is a spot-on novel, that showcased an immigrant family, in fact, a Pakistani family alongside with a British family, with a very complex relationship between them.

Huang: How is the postcolonial studies different from that in the US? And how do you respond to the comments Martin Puchner and David Damrosch made on the narrowness and limitations of the postcolonial studies and the need to shift to the more inclusive concept of world literature?

Boehmer: As for the first question, in Britain postcolonial studies is probably nowadays better recognized in academic institutions than it is in America, where it has to do competition with related fields I've already mentioned – transnational studies, comparative studies, world literature.

World literature critics like Martin Puchner and David Damrosch have talked about the narrowness and limitations of postcolonial studies and the need to shift to the more inclusive concept of world literature, but in fact their definition of the postcolonial is quite limited, as is their idea of world literature. Their world literature is mainly concerned with texts in translation and transmission, not with the host of other exciting topics in Anglophone,

Francophone, etc., literature that the postcolonial also deals with.

Huang: Could you talk more about what British scholars of postcolonial studies can share with Chinese scholars, although you have said some before?

Boehmer: Everybody, whether they talk about immigration, or development, or resources, tries to confront the problem of modernity, how we cope with that, how we build a home that is basic, comfortable, that we feel we belong to, while nonetheless being part of the modern world, digitized, interconnected, and so on. Isn't it the case that China is trying to find a way through those issues, as is Britain? Isn't it the case that China is also concerned with trying to establish a global role for itself? It's no longer, as you say, a sovereignty for two thousand years, quietly turned in to itself; instead, it is "China first". Now, we see the economic boom and globalization, and China concerned to establish global role for itself. Britain has had a global role for a long, long time and has made big mistakes, and maybe others can learn from those mistakes. It's important to consult with people who are dispossessed. Literature is a very sensitive instrument, and in literature you can pick up on dilemmas and conflicts about Britain's global role. Take Dickens's *Great Expectations* for example. Pip helps the convict Magwitch to escape, who then goes to Australia, and then in gratitude he earns a lot of money and sends it back for Pip's education, but Pip thinks it comes from another, more innocent source. If you want to read an imperial and moral story into that, it shows that the networks of empire have played a complicated global role. So, China arguably has a lot to learn from the British example and learn how not to make the same mistakes.

Huang: Yes, exactly.

In May 2020, I conducted the second part of the interview with Professor Boehmer via phone and asked her some more questions about the development of the British postcolonial studies under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Huang: As the COVID-19 pandemic rages on across the world, which topics do you think will become important in postcolonial studies?

Boehmer: What we should most confront now with the COVID-19 pandemic is the question of border crossing, specifically its implications and the heightened concern over it. In postcolonial studies, we've conventionally celebrated, encouraged, and been interested in border crossing, because border crossing leads to creatively mingling cultures, what Salman Rushdie called "bringing newness into the world". But of course from some points of view, the spread of the virus is a malign kind of border crossing, isn't it? It appears to testify to some of the dangers and terrors of globalization and the mass movement of peoples. Right-wing politicians have rushed, for example, in Austria and in the United States, to close down borders and to talk about the threat of foreign bodies, the foreign threat if you like. Therefore, it's ever more incumbent upon postcolonial studies to continue to speak up for

mingling, exchange, and crossing over. And why do I say that? Because it is only through sharing knowledge and information and ways of doing and technique that together we can get on top of this pandemic. Viruses and bacteria have always travelled between and across species and different cultures and countries through contact. This has always been the case. There is nothing new about it. The spread of virus has been accelerated by globalization and the fact that so many people – at least up until January 2020 – so many people were travelling by airplane for business, holiday, work, and pleasure. There isn't a reason to, from my point of view, close borders or reinforce division between people; we should exchange and share understanding and knowledge, including in the development of COVID-19 tests and vaccinations. In short, the postcolonial issues of migration and border crossing have become ever more of a concern. It's incumbent upon postcolonial scholars to find ways of continuing to speak positively about migration, including the flow of good information across borders.

Huang: And what about environmental protection?

Boehmer: Ok, it's a key question. It has been very interesting and sobering to see how the planes currently aren't flying in great numbers and economies have been closed down, not to say locked down. As a result, looking at the environment, we have seen some positive changes: the skies have been clearer, in a way we have not seen for decades. In relation to postcolonial literary studies, in this field we have always been interested in ecology, in protecting the environment so that everyone might sustainably have access to it. In postcolonial studies and postcolonial novels and poetry, we need to think about maintaining a reliable world, a sustainable world, and about supporting the books and the writers who do so. We need to make sure people will once again be able to exchange and mingle with each other as they did before, because that is a cultural good. Although, clearly, when that exchange takes place largely through moving around on airplanes, that is something we need to address and resolve. My next novel, *Faraway Close*, will explore this theme of how we mingle remotely; how we exchange with each other in meaningful ways while still being many miles apart. [See a recent article in *The London Magazine* for this.]

Huang: Do we need to improve our methodologies in order to solve these new questions?

Boehmer: I would say, yes. As we have seen across the past months since the crisis began, scientists, including humanities scholars from different disciplines, are trying to learn from each other's methodologies. They are sharing perspectives; they are developing, remotely, interdisciplinary techniques. In an interdisciplinary project I am working on, the Accelerate Hub, we are finding by bringing together narrative and medical approaches how much people still need to talk their way through their COVID-19 problems by telling stories. It's also clear that, when we think about people working from home, staying at home, trying to cope with some of the mental health consequences of the lock down, we need people from

different fields to cooperate and solve problems together. Through combined cultural activities, such as reading and singing remotely but together, people have been cooperating in positive ways. As to what this has to do with postcolonial studies: this is all about collaborating across disciplines, cultures and methodologies.

Huang: OK, so interdisciplinary studies is the key point.

Boehmer: Yeah, very much so.

Huang: How will these changes influence the postcolonial studies in the future?

Boehmer: Well, we were talking about the importance of interdisciplinary approaches, of drawing down from across cultures whether in the sciences or in the humanities to communicate with one another. The postcolonial is an area of study that has always been interdisciplinary, so this approach will only be strengthened into the future, into the post-COVID-19 world. The postcolonial arena has always encouraged historians, anthropologists, epidemiologists, and medical historians to come together and exchange methodologies. I don't know if you know Albert Camus, a French writer, his book *The Plague, La Peste*. I would call it a postcolonial book, as it is insightful of a pandemic situation (in Algeria) with potential global ramifications in the post-war context there, the very pre-independent context in Algeria.

Huang: This novel has been mentioned more than ever these days in China. It seems to have described many experiences we are having now, and we can learn so much from it.

Boehmer: Yes, we can learn so much. I have to clarify the reason I mentioned this book. It illustrates what I am trying to say about the interdisciplinary approach of the postcolonial that can fruitfully be developed in other fields. In this novel, we see the writer drawing from different types of knowledge, from philosophy and from medical science, from the history of plague, the history of Algeria and colonialism, in order to write his book. It's a very good illustration of how strong, adaptative, and creative, inter-disciplinary approaches as we find in postcolonial studies can be.

So we see that postcolonial studies is not only about migration, border crossing, and movement of people; it's also about national identity and translational identities, how we consolidate them, how they are useful, how they become destructive, and how they can be interactive. Including under the heading of nation narration, of the narratives of nations, if you like, postcolonial studies still has a lot to say to the present moment.

Huang: Great! Finally, would you like to say a few words to young Chinese scholars like me?

Boehmer: I reminded of something that the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe once said, "There is no one thing but something stands beside it". We've long heard from the philosophers and thinkers that no man is an island, and this is something that these times of COVID-19 pandemic have brought to the fore. We need to depend on each other and care for each other. As a new book by a Dutch philosopher Bregman informs us, when we look

at people imprisoned in isolated situations, far from killing each other, as we know from the situation in *Lord of the Flies*, people have actually cooperated. Cooperation shows that we are together, my existence depends on your existence, and yours on mine. That is what I would say to young scholars: our survival as a species depends on our cooperation with each other.

Huang: Ok, thank you again for all your answers. What you have said is really informative.

Boehmer: My pleasure. Sharing and cooperation are always what I pursue.

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