

ISSN : 2454-2423

Glocal Colloquies

**An International Journal of
World Literatures and Cultures**

Vol. 3

April 2017

Literary Colonialism and Cultural Differences: Institutions of Commonwealth Literature

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Abstract: A critical inquiry to the nature of literary colonialism is made difficult by the persistence of colonial consciousness. Literary colonialism sustains itself through masking its very nature; hides the ideology of control by appearing as a benevolent force for the colonized cultures. The attempt to understand the working of literary colonialism takes us to a crucial instance when the idea of Commonwealth Literature was instituted. The paper raises the issues and problems of Commonwealth Literature and thereby highlights the crises of literary colonialism. Literary colonialism ignores the irreducible cultural differences and works through a highly generalized account of the people and their experiences. This paper suggests that the literary articulation should affirm the specific cultural idioms and experiences that will speak of the future of their pasts, making the experience of the present an enriching one.

Keywords: *Literary colonialism, Commonwealth Literature, English Literature, British Empire*

The term Commonwealth Literature brings to mind the Commonwealth of Nations¹. It also reminds us of the Imperial British under which all the nations of Commonwealth were subjected to years of exploitation, suffering and colonization. Those days are gone. The nations are now presumably free. Still, we cannot ignore what the West Indian novelist George Lamming questions:

How a Britain without its Empire can still maintain cultural authority in post-colonial societies, and the ways in which Eurocentric assumptions about race, nationality and literature return time and again to haunt the production of post-colonial writing. (Ashcroft 1995:7)

The awareness of the continuing Imperial hold over its erstwhile colonies particularly through ‘literary colonialism’ has evoked the scholars and writers to denounce the category of “Commonwealth Literature”. In this paper, I will examine how the Commonwealth Literature has been a problematic category, and how ‘literary colonialism’ has been challenged by the writers and thinkers from the former colonies.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a sea change took place in the literary scenario. This was in response to the larger socio-political changes: *traditional* imperialism was coming to an end. John Mc Leod writes that ‘(i)n short, the twentieth century has been the century of colonial demise and of decolonization for millions of people who were once subject to the authority of the British crown’ (Mc Leod 2000: 6). A new mode of imperialism was soon to engulf the former colonies. The former colonies are never fortunate enough to disentangle themselves completely from the clutches of the Empire. After the end of colonization which is an overt type of imperialism², a more pervasive yet covert form of imperialism, known as neo-imperialism marked a new beginning of imperialism. Though there are varied forms of neo-imperialism, this paper will deal with literary colonialism in the wake of the coming of Commonwealth Literature.

Apart from the long-established genre – English Literature, a new genre engendered in the 1960s. More specifically, it was in 1964 at a conference in Leeds under the chairmanship of Professor Norman Jeffares that Commonwealth Literature was first inaugurated and formally recognized. The main objective was to have a collective and composite study of the varied literature of the nations that are under the umbrella term – Commonwealth. Meenakshi Mukherjee explains that “the institutional possibility of studying the literature of all the erstwhile Britain colonies as a composite unit was first envisioned there (Mukherjee 1993:33).

‘(T)here’ refers to Leeds. It is England. It is significant to note that such a project should start off in the land of the colonizer and not in the land of the colonized. It might well be argued that the intellectual superiority of the colonizer has made them a befitting agency for such a program. There is no doubt about the *intellectual debt* that the long-subjugated nations owe to the Empire. The literature of these nations especially the ones in English had come to the present position after

passing through the stage of blatant imitation. Take the case of Indian Writings in English, the early writings substantially indicate their dependency on British Literature for aspiration. The writers were struggling to 'mimic' the style and techniques used by the canonical writers of England. It was only after many years of apprenticeship that the Indian Writings in English could possibly claim a status of its own. Macaulay understood the influence of English Literature. In his speech before the Edinburg philosophical society, he declared: "The literature of Britain ...has exercised an influence wider than that of our commerce and mightier than that of our arms (cited in Mukherjee 2000: 24).

The establishment of the Association of Commonwealth and therefore the Commonwealth Literature has something more to do than being merely an act of intellectual debt. It can be perceived as a well thought political manoeuvre: an act of asserting dominance. In the mask of supporting the Commonwealth nations, England is ascertaining a slot for its own literature in the new world order – not of equality with others but as George Orwell says 'more equal than others'³ (Orwell 1987: 90) or as Rushdie says "'Commonwealth literature' is positioned below English literature 'proper'" (Ghosh's Letter). A dichotomy is thus established. The literature of Commonwealth becomes the Other of the literature of Britain whose superiority is assured by the borrowed use of the English language apart from the thematic concern, technique and styles. This is deterrent to the growth and progress of Commonwealth literature. Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it: "I think (Commonwealth literature) has more of a retrogressive and limiting connotation today than a positive integrative function" (Mukherjee 1993:33). So long as Commonwealth literature was under the shadow of the British literature, there was hardly any scope for finding its individual voice. It had to move out to find its own strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, it had to shed off the overpowering influence of the nomenclature – Commonwealth⁴.

Less than twenty years ago, Amitav Ghosh wrote a letter to the administrator of the Commonwealth Prize.⁵ In that letter, he made a request to withdraw his book *The Glass Palace* for the prize. In fact, the novel was 'a finalist for the overall contest' (Ghosh's Letter). He stated his reasons for the last moment withdrawal. Firstly, he was not aware that his book had been submitted for the contest. It was done by the

publishers. Secondly and most importantly, it was against his commitment, and also against the spirit of the novel. He writes in his letter:

I have on many occasions publicly stated my objections to the classification of books such as mine under the term “Commonwealth Literature”. Principal among these is that this phrase anchors an area of contemporary writing not within the *realities of the present day* nor within the possibility of the future, but rather within a disputed aspect of the past. (Ghosh’s Letter; italics mine)

Amitav Ghosh speaks of the ‘realities of the present day’ which Commonwealth literature fails to cater. Among many realities, one important reality is the assertion of the literature of each separate nation of the Commonwealth. Each nation is seeking for an identity of its own literature. John Press in the conference of Leeds (1964) observed that ‘the vernacular literatures of the commonwealth are, for millions of people, the most effective way of embodying their intimate hopes and fears and the values of their society’ (Rutherford 1971: cited 7). Though Press had put forward the significance of vernacular literature in the first conference itself yet sadly enough it remained ignored and marginalized as Anna Rutherford in her forward to *Commonwealth* pointed out: ‘little has been done about the other voices’ (Rutherford 1971: 7).

Commonwealth literature has always been used in singular term and never in plural to emphasise unity in diversity⁶ or as Achebe puts it ‘heirloom of multiple heritages’ (Narasimhaiah 24:1995). Claims of equality and all-inclusiveness in Commonwealth studies are made in a report issued by the Commonwealth Secretariat⁷. The claims of equality and all-inclusiveness are not wrong. In fact, the problem is that they are right. They are right in a particular condition which initially escapes critical assessment.⁸ The establishment of Commonwealth literature produces a significant outcome: the dichromic world of the literature of the erstwhile colonies is painted over to have almost a monochromic world predominated by British literature and thus, ironically establishes the claims. For Britain, all the erstwhile colonies are same, the Other – exploited and subservient. What Britain blatantly ignores is the fact that the nations ‘differ from each other a great deal in their culture, geography, ecology and memory’ and so are their literatures. The attempt

to homogenize is suicidal for them. Salman Rushdie sees this act of homogenization as an attempt to create an exclusive literary ghetto with the intention to ‘delay the day we rough beasts actually slough into Bethlehem’ (Rushdie 1995: 373). Further, he notes elsewhere that ‘the purpose of this literary ghetto – like that of all ghettos, perhaps – is to confine, to restrain. Its rules are basically conservative. Tradition is all; radical breeches with the past are frowned upon. No wonder so many of the writers claimed by “Commonwealth Literature” deny that they have anything to do with it’ (Rushdie 1995: 371). It is an act of segregation according to him. What troubles Rushdie is the adroit attempt to separate English studies from Commonwealth literature. He begins his seminal essay “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist” by addressing this issue:

...one was forced to conclude these two would be kept strictly apart like squabbling children, or sexually incompatible pandas or perhaps like unstable fissile material whose union might cause explosions. (Rushdie 1995: 366)

The imagery heightens the contrast between them that ultimately touches its zenith when he defines commonwealth literature as ‘unreal, monstrous creature of the imagination’; ‘the classical chimaera’ (Rushdie 1995: 368). The established binary opposition between British literature and Commonwealth literature stands wide apart – real/unreal. By this, Rushdie is pointing at the attempt of Britain to place their literatures (indigenous literatures of the former colonies) in the realm of fantasy and imagination where creatures such as chimaera are supposed to exist. In other words, the self-identity of the indigenous literatures is put at stake for the existence of chimaera wholly depends upon the imagination of other than itself.

Coming to the question of language, the establishment of commonwealth literature with its sustained emphasis on English has marginalized the numerous native languages spoken in the erstwhile colonies. Ghosh in his letter says:

As a literary or cultural grouping, however, it seems to me that "the Commonwealth" can only be a misnomer so long as it excludes the many languages that sustain the cultural and literary lives of these countries. (Ghosh’s Letter)

English language along with the literature has long been employed as an ideological tool. Gauri Vishwanathan in the Introduction to her *Masks of Conquest* tells us that the British conquered India by military supremacy but they ruled it by ‘a disciplinary branch of knowledge’ (Vishwanathan 10). In other words, the British had used English language and its literature as an effective ideological tool. Not only in a foreign land like India but in its own home, the language and literature are utilized to control and discipline the varied spheres of human life. In the chapter entitled "Rise of English" included in his work *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton quotes George Gordon:

England is sick and English literature must save it. The churches having failed and social remedies being slow, English literature has now – triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State’. (Eagleton 1983: 23)

The rise of America as a superpower in the international affair further promoted English. It served the purposes of Britain and America, which Rushdie rightly perceived: ‘this second impetus towards English could be termed as kind of linguistic neo-colonialism’. The response to this ‘linguistic neo-colonialism’ comes in the form of the nativization of the English language. For the writers from the margin, nativization of English becomes an act of empowerment; an act of taking hold of the centre. Three eminent writers from one of the erstwhile colonies, Australia brought out a text with the title – *Empire Writes Back* (1989) – suggestive of the shift in attention from the centre to the margin, in other words, indicative of subverting the pre-assumed traditional position. In their text, the writers raised the question of language

One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities. (Ashcroft et al 1989: 7)

Further, they wrote

Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which the conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’ and ‘reality’ become established. (Ashcroft et al 1989: 7)

These three writers like many others see the need for appropriating English language.⁹ There is the urgent need of ‘seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place’ (Ashcroft et al 1989: 37). Apart from appropriation, Bill Ashcroft and his co-writers considered the process of abrogation as equally important. In fact, both appropriation and abrogation go hand in hand. Abrogation, in this context, means the rejection of the Eurocentric tradition and fixed assumptions regarding English. Abrogation provides the much-needed space for recreating and remoulding the old English into a new one – ‘english’. The significant difference between english and English is that english effectively conveys the complex cultural expression of the people of former colonies.

The process of abrogation and appropriation has been so effectively pursued and put into effect in the erstwhile colonies that english refuses to be an alien language anymore. Moreover, with the ‘spirit that is one’s own’ (Rao 1971: 5) the response to the body ceases to be revolting and repulsive. Salman Rushdie in his essay “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist” writes about the Indian experience in particular but this is true for all the erstwhile colonies in general. Salman Rushdie notes that ‘the children of independent India seem not to think of English as being irredeemably tainted by its colonial provenance. They use it as an Indian language; as one of the tools they have to hand’ (Rushdie 1995: 369).

The heart of the crisis of Commonwealth Literature lies in the question of identity, and consequently in the struggle of power, authority and domination. Especially, in the case of Commonwealth Literature, identity centres around two highly discussed elements – name and nature of Commonwealth Literature. The term ‘Commonwealth’ has been widely criticized and disowned by the writers of the former colonies. They argue that the term carries a trace of Imperial hold over them. They assert that the employment of ‘Commonwealth’ brings back the corpse of British domination from the graveyard of the past. Amitav Ghosh in his letter reflects that undoubtedly, ‘the past engenders the present’ yet ‘the ways in which we remember the past are not determined solely by the brute facts of time: they are also opened to choice, reflection and judgment’. Denouncing and even replacing the term have not curbed the problem: the use of other adjectives to ascribe the literature of the former colonies has engendered similar points of contention. Though frequently

employed, Post-colonial Literature, Postcolonial Literature, Third World Literature, New Literature are terms laden with controversy, debate and unsettled issues. In the face of all these, the whole endeavour of the new voices rests on the basic premise which is well articulated by Salman Rushdie: *If history creates complexities. Let us not try to simplify them* (Rushdie 1995: 369; italics mine).

END NOTES

1. The Commonwealth of Nations or simply the Commonwealth is a free association of 53 independent and sovereign states, mostly the former colonies of Britain.
2. An informative discussion on the differences between imperialism and colonialism is provided by John McLeod in his *Beginning Postcolonialism* (p 7-8).
3. These words are taken from one of the seven commandments of *Animal Farm*. The commandment goes like this: ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS (Orwell 1987: 90).
4. Western tradition has it that in the Bible, in Chapter 2 of the book of Genesis, Adam gives names to the animals, and henceforth exercises control over them.
5. The letter was written on March 18th 2001. Please see <http://www.dosco.org/pages/info_features/features_spotlights/spotlights/ghosh/letter.htm>
6. Consider the title *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture*. The papers presented in 1964 Leeds Conference are compiled and published in a book form under this title. This is an attempt to show that the undercurrent view engendered from the conference is unity in diversity.
7. Please see Edward O Ako's paper "From Commonwealth to Postcolonial Literature" (p-4). <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1227&context=clweb>>
8. Later, the rise of the postcolonial discourses unveiled the ideological and hegemonic structure of institutionalization as that of the Association of Commonwealth.
9. A highly annotated work with regard to the nativization of English in Indian Writings in English is Raja Rao's Forward to his *Kanthapura*.

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