

Defining Imperialism and Colonialism

In his seminal study, *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward W. Said points out the unprecedented extent of European domination during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

Consider that in 1800 Western powers claimed 55 percent but actually held approximately 35 percent of the earth's surface, and that by 1878 the proportion was 67 percent. . . . By 1914 . . . Europe held a grand total of roughly 85 percent of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths. No other associated set of colonies in history was as large, none so totally dominated, none so unequal in power to the Western metropolis. As a result, says William McNeill in *The Pursuit of Power*, "the world was united into a single interacting whole as never before." (8)

Although Said uses the word *imperialism* in his title, he offers a number of different terms, including *colonies*, to describe Britain's means of control over the lands it governed. Many people use the words *imperialism* and *colonialism* synonymously, especially since in both cases the territories controlled are called *empires*. It is useful, however, to distinguish between these two terms.

Some theorists regard imperialism as territorial expansion from a center outward, driven by ideology, and resulting in a coherent geographical entity. The Roman and Ottoman Empires are typical examples. The criterion of coherent geography as an essential aspect of the definition disappeared when European countries (Spain, for example) were able to conquer and communicate with distant territories via sailing ships. The primary distinguishing factors in imperialism, then, are its practice as a policy of state and its ideological motivation (Young 25–29).

Colonialism, in contrast, is a less homogeneous practice than imperialism and tends to develop without a coherent plan or driving ideology; rather, it comes about for commercial motives and therefore frequently presents problems of centralized control for the government of the colonizing power. Furthermore, it is helpful to distinguish between two types of colonies: settler colonies, consisting of emigrants from the home country who take most of the land and dominate economically and politically (for example, Australia and Canada); and administered colonies, whose main goal is economic exploitation (for example, India and the Congo). In adminis-

tered colonies, Europeans dominate politically and economically but do not settle a large portion of the land (Young 15–16).

Using the above definitions, England was a colonial, not an imperial, power from the seventeenth to about the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The year 1876 serves as an arbitrary but highly indicative date for this transformation, for in this year Queen Victoria was proclaimed "Empress of India." As noted in the next chapter, "The Colonial and Postcolonial Short Story," there was also an interesting coincidence in literary and political history during this time period: The height of British consciousness about its colonies and their political, economic, and military value coincided with the emergence of the British short story and one of its first great practitioners, Rudyard Kipling. His stories of India, three collections of which were published in 1888, made the Empire—and the sacrifices and dangers of those who kept it—an everyday reality to ordinary Britons. Moreover, Kipling and many authors who followed him kept the question of Empire before the British public, sometimes extolling it, sometimes questioning it, but almost always romanticizing it as a locus of exotic adventure.

The intersection of culture and conquest is thus one subject of this book. To an extent unmatched by any of its nineteenth-century competitors, Great Britain's colonial enterprise involved cultural as well as military conquests. All empires bring the conquering nation's culture with them, of course, but Britain made cultural domination an integral part of its colonial policy. As Marlow says in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness":

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . . [Ellipses in original.]

By the late nineteenth century, then, Britain's colonizing impulse (based on trade and economic exploitation) had transformed into an imperial (ideologically motivated) one. In addition to its goal of conquering and exploiting other peoples, Britain added an attempt to "civilize" them, using education, Christian missionary work, technical and infrastructure improvements (like railroads, bridges, and telegraph systems), and even political and social reforms to do so. The idea, as Marlow and many others saw it, was to bring to conquered peoples the advantages of "progress."

The British Empire's redefined sense of colonialism was eventually adopted by the United States. Americans are often shocked and even hurt to have their country's policies labeled as "imperialist" by other countries. Americans see themselves, as did the British before them, as bringing the light of civilization and the benefits of democracy and liberty to those within their sphere of influence. Admittedly, the United States has engaged in relatively little direct military conquest, but its political,

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economic, and cultural domination—as well as its overt and covert support for “friendly nations” and client states—has had much the same effect as outright conquest. U.S. (and by extension, Western) consumer goods and culture are inescapable, and they are reshaping the world. To cite Said once again:

American attitudes to American “greatness,” to hierarchies of race, to the perils of *other* revolutions . . . have remained constant, have dictated, have obscured, the realities of empire, while apologists for overseas American interests have insisted on American innocence, doing good, fighting for freedom. (*Culture and Imperialism* 8)

Since World War II, and especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States has only strengthened its leadership role in the world. At the same time, the English language has extended its international reach, pushed by both U.S. influence and the influence of other English-speaking countries. For these reasons, and for a host of related ones, the term *imperialism* as used in this book includes cultural and economic forces that impinge on the lives of those who believe their own languages, cultural institutions, and values are threatened or already controlled by Western (that is, European and American) culture. In many of the stories collected here, the postcolonial legacy entails not only the remnants of British control but also the very real pressure of the United States in particular and the Western powers in general, as a *de facto* imperialist presence. Many of these influences, of course, are willingly adopted by other countries: One need think only of the enormous influence of U.S. popular music, styles of dress, and ideas about self-determination and liberty to see this aspect of the phenomenon. But from the point of view of those trying to preserve their indigenous cultures, to find alternatives to capitalism, or to base their political and social structures on traditional, local ways, such influences (however gladly embraced by parts of the population) can be seen as an unwarranted imposition—that is, as imperialism.

Whether colonial and imperial practices are ultimately beneficial or harmful is open to debate. But one point the stories in this book constantly bring to the fore is how those who have experienced colonialism and imperialism react. Learning to see these issues from their point of view is crucial to understanding the phenomenon of postcolonial studies and benefiting from reading postcolonial texts.

Postcolonial Theory: A Primer

Nearly everyone who picks up this book has studied English literature in some form, and most of us know—or think we know—what it is. English literature is the material collected in big anthologies that include works from “*Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf,” as the saying goes. It’s the poems, novels, plays, essays, and stories written in England by English men and women. It’s sometimes equated with British literature to include works by Scottish, Welsh, and Irish authors, but to exclude, say, U.S. or Canadian literature.

As commonsensical as the above seems to be, the term *English literature* or even the more inclusive term *British literature* is not without ambiguity. *Beowulf*, for example, is written in Old English, a Germanic dialect so unlike Modern English that it requires specialized study to comprehend. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is more or less readable by today’s students, but the works of his contemporaries—the Gawain-poet and William Langland, for example—are almost as impenetrable as *Beowulf* because they are written in English dialects that did not become, like Chaucer’s, “standard English.” Beyond the question of language is that of nationality. Are the Irish and Scottish ballads “English”? Are writers such as Jonathan Swift, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, and George Bernard Shaw English or Irish? Robert Louis Stevenson was born in Scotland, Joseph Conrad was born in Poland, and Doris Lessing was born in Persia and grew up in Southern Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe). But all of these authors are considered “English,” or at least “British.”

The problem of what constitutes English literature has been complicated even further by the spread of English through the expansion of the British Empire, which at its height governed about one-fifth of the world’s population. The rise of the United States and Canada as world powers in the twentieth century also contributed to the spread of English as the language of commerce, education, and diplomacy. As a result, by the end of World War II there was a growing body of “world literature in English,” or what many at the time called *Commonwealth literature*. The term arose in part because a growing body of literature was being written in English by inhabitants of the former British Empire, some of whom remained loosely tied with the “mother country” through the British Commonwealth (which included Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, among other countries).

The ambiguities and complications outlined above pale in comparison, however, to the difficulties, controversies, and continuing problems associated with the relatively new term *postcolonial*. In fact, debate arises over its very spelling: Should the term appear as *postcolonial* or *post-colonial*? One widely used text is titled *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin), whereas Elleke Boehmer

does without the hyphen in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Some argue that the hyphenated spelling refers to the historical period, “after colonialism,” while the unhyphenated word denotes the body of literary theory and practice used to describe this quite new area of study. This is the usage we will follow, employing synonyms such as “after the colonial period” for the historical era and using the unhyphenated *postcolonial* to refer to the literature and theory relating to the contemporary discipline of postcolonial studies.

But spelling the term is only one tiny part of the contentious arena called “post-colonial studies.”

Post-colonial theory involves discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being. None of these is “essentially” post-colonial, but together they form the complex fabric of the field. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies 2*)

How does all this differ from the theory and practice of studying Commonwealth literature? In part, the differences between the two reflect the general movement of literary and cultural studies since the mid-1960s. Much of the theory and practice of Commonwealth literary study reflected the humanistic and New Critical ideas of the 1930s and 1940s. Most of the energy of these critics was directed at showing that literatures from the former colonies demonstrated the same “lasting and universal” qualities as the canonical works of English literature, for example, the works of John Milton, Thomas Hardy, or T. S. Eliot. Critics under this dispensation argued for the appreciation and understanding of Commonwealth literature on the grounds that it was in the “great tradition” (to use F. R. Leavis’s term) and that it merited study for these reasons.

Postcolonial critics and theorists, by contrast, focus much more directly, sometimes even exclusively, on the regional historical, literary, aesthetic, and political conditions that produce a given work of literature. Postcolonial criticism is thus a more explicitly political endeavor than New Criticism, which attempts to identify and discuss “objective” aesthetic and thematic aspects of literature. The most important influence or determining factor of concern to postcolonial critics is colonialism itself, particularly the ways by which colonial practices imposed European culture and appropriated indigenous rights, authority, and culture. A lasting effect of colonialism was to undermine the ways in which Indians, Africans, Caribbeans, and others viewed themselves and understood their cultures—replacing indigenous ideas of identity and value with those derived from European models and practices. A blatant form of this is the inferiority colonized peoples were made to feel as a result of political and cultural subjugation. The implicit and often explicit message of European missionaries, for example, was that indigenous religions were “heathen,” “barbaric,” “unenlightened,” and hence inferior to Christianity.

One aim of postcolonial study, then, is to “decolonize” the minds of colonized peoples, to question the political, psychological, linguistic, and cultural effects of colonialism. To read the literature of previously colonized people (that written after the mid-nineteenth century) is to look for ways in which colonialism is consciously or unconsciously reflected in the literary work. Postcolonial criticism also emphasizes the racist and culturally imperialist aspects of how English literature portrays the colonial experience; for example, Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” and Stevenson’s “The Beach at Falesá” are often analyzed from this point of view.

We may say, therefore, that postcolonial theory offers at least two broad approaches to the various literatures in English. One of these is to examine works by authors from decolonized countries for evidence of their response to the colonial experience and its aftereffects. The other is to read or reread the literature of the colonial period to ask whether it challenges or supports colonialism, or whether it contains subtle or obvious reflections of imperialist attitudes and values. In either case, we are looking at the literature for its social and political discourse, the conditions under which it was written and published, and the underlying assumptions, biases, values, and ideas of the cultures from which it arises.

EDWARD SAID AND THE BEGINNINGS OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

It will help to clarify these points by turning briefly to the critic often considered the founder of postcolonial discourse analysis, Edward Said, the late Palestinian scholar and professor at Columbia University. Said’s *Orientalism* argues that Western societies constructed their “knowledge” of “the Orient” in a way that justified colonial domination. In fact, he argues, Western scholars, explorers, missionaries, and travelers did not investigate Eastern cultures so much as they imposed on them previously held assumptions, using what they observed to reinforce and verify these assumptions. Thus, according to Said, not only the whole idea of “the Orient” but also virtually everything that was claimed to be true about it was in whole or in part an imaginative construct, a fantasy, by which the West defined itself in opposition to the East, legitimized its power, and justified its superiority (4–24). In a subsequent book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said extended the ideas put forth in *Orientalism* to countries outside the Middle East and also focused on Western fictional depictions of these countries. His analyses of Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness,” Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, and Verdi’s opera *Aida*, among many others, demonstrated the ways in which even the most elevated cultural products may be complicit in the colonial enterprise, in treating one set of people, ideas, values, or institutions as superior to another. Said is a subtle, thoughtful, and perceptive critic who values the aesthetic achievement of the works he analyzes while also insisting that they perpetuate and reinforce racist and imperialist ideas.

Even sympathetic critics of Said’s work point out that, for all its brilliance and influence, it overlooks certain phenomena. For one thing, his critics argue that a literary text (or any text for that matter) seldom conveys only one message. Often a

work embeds ambiguities and contradictions that undermine its dominant idea, so that even apparently pro-imperialist works like those by Kipling may contain ideas and passages that show the dark side of empire. In addition, some claim that Said ignores the fact that even within imperialist countries there were writers, politicians, and commentators who opposed colonialism. English Prime Minister William Gladstone (1809–1898) is an example of one such opponent. Moreover, critics argue, Said overlooks the way in which colonized people reacted against their conquerors. An early and very influential book that emphasizes the resistance of colonized people is *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). This book focuses on the ways in which writers from previously colonized countries are reshaping the English language to express new cultural realities and identities. The stories in this anthology that incorporate non-English words and expressions, experiment with syntax and style, and “creolized” English can be analyzed using the tools of *The Empire Writes Back*. Of course, authors can “write back” in other ways as well, by advocating resistance to colonial power, using folk and other native sources as the basis for their work, emphasizing the value of indigenous traditions and cultural practices, opposing Eurocentric ideas, and so on. Many of the stories in this anthology express some form of “writing back.”

NEW FORMS OF COLONIALISM

But of course writers from previously colonized countries are not concerned exclusively with issues of European colonialism and its aftermath. A blind spot in early postcolonial theories was that they focused almost entirely on literature that dealt directly with colonialism and its legacies. The years after World War II (1939–1945), however, brought independence to most previous colonies (India in 1947; Kenya in 1963, for example). Sadly, independence did not always produce good government or economic prosperity for those newly liberated. One possible cause of the problems that have plagued newly created countries, particularly in Africa, is that the colonial powers drew national boundaries arbitrarily, with little or no concern for geographical features, ethnic populations, or religious differences. A basic idea behind the European notion of “the nation” is that those within national boundaries share certain commonalities of language, culture, values, religion, and ideals. The new nations created out of former colonies were often arbitrary groupings of peoples, some of whom had long histories of opposition or hostility to one another. Worse, colonizers had sometimes exploited these differences in a strategy of “divide and conquer,” but then left the newly independent countries to deal with the consequences of this divisive tactic. One continuing debate, therefore, is whether such lingering conflicts as the border dispute between India and Pakistan or the periodic outbreaks of civil war in new African countries are the direct results of colonial legacies or the results of forces not connected to colonialism.

These issues are complicated by continuing pressures for Westernization. The relentless dissemination of Western culture, primarily from the United States, Europe, and others like Australia and Canada, is sometimes called *cultural imperialism*. It has poured new ideas, values, products, lifestyles, and practices into non-Western

countries. Unfamiliar ideas and cultural practices have always accompanied colonists and settlers, of course, and some were adopted voluntarily or developed indigenously. But the aggressive export of secularism, feminism, and science, not to mention the music, films, clothing, products (such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola), and many other Western cultural practices and ideas were like new wine in old wine skins—with all too predictable results. Indigenous medicine, family structures, clothing styles, food, literature, religion, folk ways, languages, living patterns, and social organizations have often been altered or obliterated. This approach has been extended by some postcolonial critics (for example, Spivak and Chatterjee) to include Western skepticism, rationality, and science. According to them, these habits of mind amount to “epistemic violence” on Third World countries, replacing indigenous ways of knowing with Western ones. Only by rejecting such Western practices, the argument goes, can former colonies fully regain their cultural heritages.

A related but different phenomenon is *globalization*. Often defined simply as the impact of giant, multinational corporations, globalization as a concept involves more than simply the pervasive influence of companies like General Motors, Shell Oil, or Microsoft. The term refers also to the general blurring of national boundaries, whether that means the ability of social activists, news organizations, non-governmental organizations, and scholars to work nearly everywhere in the world, or the cultural integration that results when travel and communication barriers are erased by air travel, the telephone, and the Internet. The outsourcing of U.S. jobs to Latin America, India, and Indochina is one manifestation of globalization, as is the rise of India and China as economic “superpowers.” Postcolonial theory forces us to assess the impact of Western culture and globalization on traditional peoples and cultures and to ask if the result is loss or gain—and for whom.

But direct and indirect colonial influences and current cultural effects are not the only or perhaps even the most important factors affecting previously colonized countries. Since the end of World War II, newly independent states have been the focal point of global power struggles. Until 1989, the so-called Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States dominated politics and economics in emerging nations. Governments were supported or toppled, popular movements encouraged or discouraged, economic and social reforms supported or not depending on whether an emerging nation was in the U.S. or Soviet camp. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the emphasis has shifted to “the war on drugs,” “the war on poverty,” and “the war on terrorism,” but the stakes and tactics have remained much the same. Acting both overtly and covertly, the United States and other Western countries have intervened directly and indirectly in the domestic policies and economies of former European colonies, using such instruments as military aid, trade agreements, subsidies, and loans to earn the support, loyalty, or cooperation of these countries. The result is often called *neocolonialism* because the combined effects of these efforts (some of them well meaning) are to reinstate many of the features of old-style colonialism. The term can also refer to the fact that in some previously colonized countries, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia, native elites have stepped into the power vacuum left by colonizing Europeans and effectively run these countries and shaped their cultures in ways that are little different from those of the colonial past.

LITERATURE AS “MEDIATION”

Many of the stories in this anthology reflect the immediate and lingering issues of national unity, civil war, and economic and cultural tensions. Stories dealing with the horrible outbreaks of violence following the partition of India and Pakistan and those growing out of civil strife in Africa are obvious ways in which literature can reflect, comment on, and critique such situations. The postcolonial term for literature's participating in such issues and commenting on them or advocating a particular point of view is *mediation*. For example, the continuing tensions between settler colonists and First Nation peoples in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and the Caribbean are part of the cultural legacy of colonialism. *Mediation* means that literature does not simply reflect these issues but participates directly in them by advocating a point of view, opposing other points of view, or critiquing the situation. Postcolonial literary theory makes us aware of these mediations and also provides tools for analyzing literature. Critics like Frantz Fanon, Partha Chatterjee, and Homi K. Bhabha theorize about what literature *should* do under such circumstances. All of them observe that after independence, educated elites (for example, in Africa, India, and the Caribbean) could use their political and economic leverage to impose their will and ideas on those who lack such power: neocolonialism. Having themselves absorbed Western ideas and values, these elites may be no more sensitive to the culture of ordinary people than were the Europeans. Moreover, they may use the symbols of nationalism (the flag, money, national anthems, clothing styles, and so on) and cultural products like literary works to further their own political and social goals. Postcolonial theory, therefore, urges readers to be alert to the ways by which cultural divisions and power relations are mediated by literature.

One such issue facing previously colonized countries involves the place of women in society. Traditional societies in India, the Middle East, Africa, and the Caribbean assigned specific roles to women, roles that by Western standards are sometimes considered unequal or even degrading. Early in the colonial period, Christian missionaries attempted to change some practices—for example, the custom among Brahmins in India of expecting widows to throw themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres (a practice known as *suttee*). Missionaries also opposed (unsuccessfully) the practice of polygamy, which was widespread in Africa (for example, in Basutoland and among the Turkana of Kenya). But even without pressure from missionaries, colonialism, industrialization, and urbanization significantly altered male-female relations, whether intentionally or not. For instance, a particularly egregious practice by South African mine owners was the requirement that men move from their rural villages to the mines without their wives and children, thus separating families and concentrating young men in camps where infidelity and prostitution became serious temptations. Similarly, cities needing workers became magnets for single men and women seeking employment, and new styles of living that undermined traditional village life, separated extended members, and upset traditional patterns of courtship and marriage altered society and created new roles for women.

Gender issues have become especially acute since the mid-1960s with the emergence of worldwide feminism. Some postcolonial critics argue that nationalism itself

is a source of female oppression: In harking back to the pre-colonial past for traditional ideas and social structures, nationalism can reinforce or even reinstate policies and practices that relegate women to second-class citizenship, or, conversely, manipulate traditional ideas of womanhood into bogus symbols of national identity. The promises of education, hopes for upward mobility, and desires for increased roles for women in business, government, and the professions often bring women into direct conflict with men, who are reluctant to give up their traditional privileges. Postcolonial feminist critics—Partha Chatterjee, Chandra Mohanty, and Gayatri Spivak among them—point out that women can be twice oppressed: by neocolonialist political structures and by traditions of patriarchy. But to what extent can the ideals and goals of Western feminisms (note the plural) be applied in non-Western societies? Can the imposition of feminist ideas on Third World countries upset traditional gender and family relations in ways that themselves constitute a new form of colonialism? The dilemma expresses itself in a myriad ways, but one controversial and especially visible flashpoint is the issue of female circumcision, which in the West is often called “female genital mutilation.” Women in societies where female circumcision is traditionally practiced argue that it is an important rite of passage marking the end of girlhood and the entrance to womanhood. Opponents claim that it constitutes a serious health hazard, reinforces patriarchy, and robs women of sexual pleasure. This issue is both a vexing political topic and one sometimes mediated in literature. It is mentioned here as representative of the dilemmas faced by First World critics and theorists—and Western aid agencies and medical authorities—when they attempt to respond to Third World practices. The unease felt by some women writers in Africa over the importing of Western feminism has led to their adopting the term *womanist* to define their position—a position that attempts to assert women’s equal rights and value without necessarily adopting the rhetoric and goals of Western feminism(s).

This leads to yet another aspect of feminism as a part of postcolonial theory, one raised in particular by the influential theorist Gayatri Spivak. She points out that postcolonial theorists and critics tend to treat Third World people as a single entity, as if all are alike and share the same concerns. She warns that we risk reducing Third World “subalterns” to a homogenous “construct,” much as early Western commentators did in creating “the Oriental mind.” Spivak’s argument is dense and complex, based in turn on other complicated arguments about consciousness and selfhood, so it cannot be summarized here. However, it can be said that Spivak raises questions about the representation of oppressed groups and about who, if anyone, can speak on their behalf. (After all, most published writers in whatever country come from the middle class, not from the peasantry or the urban poor.) Representations of oppressed people in literature may not be accurate, and our attempts to understand these representations may induce additional distortions and misunderstandings. This is particularly true of women, Spivak asserts, because of the disproportionate emphasis given to men and their writings. Can we, she asks, ever hear the voices of women in the literature we read? Have women’s voices been drowned out by those who attempt to speak for them? At the very least, the reader and interpreter of litera-

ture must be fully aware of the assumptions, prejudices, preconceived ideas, and limited perspectives that he or she brings to reading any work of literature.

POSTCOLONIALISM AND LANGUAGE

Language is a key issue in postcolonial theory and literary practice. Many writers and theorists argue that the colonizing country—in this case, Great Britain—imposed not only its institutions, values, modes of dress, and ideas on its colonies, but also the very essence of its communication system: language. Under colonial rule, facility with English became essential to get ahead or lead a successful life, and hence many colonized people were forced (or chose) to learn English for the same reasons one needed Latin under the Romans. Along with the English language came the British system of education and British literary modes, standards, and tastes. For writers in formerly colonized countries, an important question is whether to write in English—the language of the oppressor—or to write in a native tongue.

From the point of view of writers in previously colonized countries, the choice of the language in which to write presents both literary and nonliterary problems. As a “world” language, English is an attractive choice since it potentially reaches a much wider audience than, say, Urdu, Farsi, or Yoruba. In India, which has some fifteen “official” languages, not to mention numerous other languages and dialects, or across the African continent with its great multiplicity of tongues, English can bridge linguistic divides; it can serve as a kind of pan-Indian or pan-African medium. English is a tempting choice, then, for many native writers because it can be read not only within the author’s geographic area but also throughout the world. Writers such as R. K. Narayan, Ezekiel Mphahlele, and Chinua Achebe have embraced it willingly. But what is lost by choosing English? Many literate people in the author’s country or continent may not know English, especially since English fluency tends to be a middle-class accomplishment. Moreover, is English capable of expressing the author’s ideas, of reflecting the author’s culture and experience, or of accurately conveying the dialogue of the story’s characters? However fluent the author may be in English, the language itself may lack the capacity to convey accurately the writer’s vision, to communicate the texture and nuances of the culture, to express the rhythms, tones of voice, and subtle connotations of words and expressions that are essential to literary effects.

But language is not just a practical or literary issue; it is also political. Even at the local level, it involves choices. Should children be educated in English, their native language, or both? Clearly there are advantages to learning English, but what will happen to indigenous languages and to the oral and written traditions of these languages if English is the exclusive or dominant language in the schools? Ngugi wa Thiong’o speaks eloquently of growing up in Kenya speaking Gikuyu and absorbing the culture of his people and the expressiveness of their language through the stories told by adults. But at a colonial school, Gikuyu was forbidden as the language of “stupid people.” He concludes by saying:

In other words writers in African languages should reconnect themselves to the revolutionary traditions of an organized peasantry and working class in Africa and their struggle to defeat imperialism and create a higher system of democracy and socialism in alliance with all other peoples of the world.

Ngugi—and many others who share his opinion—see the imposition of English as another aspect of imperialism or neocolonialism, and therefore something that should be resisted, not only in the name of culture but also in the cause of genuine democracy. He has ceased writing in English and has returned to his native Gikuyu.

Yet another reason for resistance to English lies in the assumptions, ideals, and prejudices buried in the language itself. Hierarchies of light-dark, black-white, male-female have often been pointed to as endemic to English and hence inherently demeaning to people of darker skin color and to women generally. Nor is this feature always subtle: Hate words, racial smears, cultural insults, and such seemingly neutral terms as *primitive*, *pagan*, and *uncivilized* carry overtones that place European values and practices above those of other people. One form of postcolonial analysis, therefore, is to ferret out such linguistically loaded terms and to assess their place and impact in a given work of literature. Alternatively, critics can suggest ways of avoiding words with such negative connotations and substitute more subtle, less loaded expressions.

The relation of spoken dialects to “received standard English” (that is, the so-called proper English of educated English men and women) raises yet another issue sometimes addressed by postcolonial theorists: the relation between oral and written literature. Strictly speaking, literature is something written down, so that oral tales, legends, stories, myths, riddles, poems, and even epics are not literature at all. But all cultures have their own oral traditions and folklore, and for centuries the stories passed by one generation to another constituted the only “literature” some languages and cultures possessed. Nor should it be assumed that oral traditions are short or simple forms, for some of the most sophisticated products of the human imagination existed solely in oral form for centuries before finally being written down. The Hebrew Bible and the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are obvious examples. Indeed, it was not until Christian missionaries developed scripts for many African, Indian, and Caribbean languages that the oral materials could be written down in their original languages. But should the products of oral culture be put in the same category with works written on paper and published? Are they legitimate subjects of literary inquiry? The issue is complicated by the fact that oral forms often lie behind written ones, just as the folktale, the parable, and the short narrative poem lie behind the modern short story. Among emerging nations, where illiteracy is still common and written forms are unavailable to large portions of the population, oral forms may well be more culturally important than written ones. Moreover, written forms may well incorporate oral genres or features: The Indian short story, for example, often exhibits the digressions, exaggerations, miraculous events, and mythical characters that characterize popular materials. For reasons of space, this

anthology deals only with stories that began life in written form, but those who wish to explore the rich oral traditions of any or all of the countries included here will find many collections and translations to assist in their search.

LITERATURE AND DIASPORA

One issue remains—the phenomenon known as the *literatures of diasporas*. *Diaspora* is the term originally applied to the scattering of the Jews after the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C.E. Recently the term has been applied to any racial or ethnic group that has experienced a dispersion of its peoples to various parts of the globe. Thus, it is possible to speak of the black diaspora (largely due to the slave trade), the Indian diaspora, and even the Irish diaspora. The phenomenon is not new by any means; people have always migrated and emigrated. But the decades since World War II have seen an extraordinary increase in this movement of peoples: North Africans into France and Spain; Turks into Germany; Indians, Pakistanis, and West Indians into Britain, Canada, and the United States; Asians into Europe and North America, and so on. An important aspect of this movement is that peoples have moved in such numbers that they form tightly knit communities in their adopted countries and hence retain a sense of being part of the old country as well as participants in the new. They experience not only culture shock but also a sense of belonging to a previous community. Such divided loyalties are often felt strongest among adults who migrate, but the children born of these immigrants are also torn in their loyalties, being pulled on the one hand toward the language, customs, dress, religion, and mores of their parents’ culture and on the other hand propelled toward assimilation into the new country’s ways.

Postcolonial writers and theorists ponder the effects of such displacement—on the individuals concerned and on the writings they produce. Concepts such as *home*, *belonging*, *personal identity*, *marginalization*, and *hybridity* are debated as theories of postcolonial identity. For example, some experience a life that seems constantly to exist on the borders of different nations, but these borders may not sharply divide so much as they blur and mingle. Old ideas of identity no longer fit; the self is not single but multiple. For the writer, as for any individual, such an ambivalent and shifting position can be frightening or liberating; it can bring confusion or new ways of seeing and expressing. (Indeed, it can be both frightening and liberating, debilitating and creative.) One response is to attempt to define some essential qualities that are particular to the black, Indian, or Asian experience; on the other hand, writers may emphasize the variety of individualities within a given community. Postcolonial theory attempts to understand and explain these complex phenomena and the writings they produce. An obvious problem created by diasporas and their literature involves the very issue we encountered at the beginning of this chapter: that of a writer’s national identity or a nation’s literary identity. To what country do we assign diasporic writers such as V. S. Naipaul, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Salman Rushdie, and Doris Lessing? To what country (if any) do they themselves believe they belong? And what

happens to the concept of British, U.S., Canadian, or Jamaican literature under the pressures of the restless movements of people from place to place? Is it even possible to speak any longer about U.S., Australian, or British literature? Or should we follow Rushdie's advice and just speak of literatures in English, without regard for national identities?

There are no obvious or easy answers to these or to the host of new and exciting questions raised by postcolonial literature and the theories devised to analyze and (one hopes) to illuminate it. Postcolonial theory does not provide a set of tools for analysis so much as it raises a host of questions that can help us dig into the literature (and into our own preconceived ideas about it). Postcolonial theory challenges us as readers to see the world differently, to look at history, literature, language, and culture in new ways. The theories are not a substitute for the literature but a way of entering into it. Reading the literature itself and thereby entering vicariously the lives and cultures out of which it springs must remain primary. And, of course, short stories are only one small part of this total literature. Like this introduction, this book is only a primer, a starting point; but like any good primer, it can open whole worlds of exciting ideas and new experiences.

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