

Essays on Commonwealth Literature

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Subject-English

Abstract

Originating in the late 1950s and early 1960s during a period of decolonization, the category of Commonwealth literature is inseparable from the history of the Commonwealth of Nations. Encompassing Anglophone literature from the former British colonies, it paradoxically excluded literature from Great Britain within its purview. While an emphasis was initially placed on literature from the former settler colonies, Commonwealth literature scholars soon became attentive towards literary production from the former occupied colonies as well. Often critiqued for its marginalization of the literature studied (as separate from and therefore secondary to British literature proper), its lack of interest in literatures in languages other than English, and its lack of political engagement, Commonwealth literary studies has been largely incorporated into and become inseparable from postcolonial literary studies and theory in the last two decades.

Keywords

Course Design, Commonwealth Literature

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The term "commonwealth" has a long history. It was first used by Oliver Cromwell, after establishing the republican government in England in 1649. Literally it implied common good or public good; a body-politic in which power is with the people. It came into discuss as a form of government for nearly 300 years, till it was resurrected in the statue of Westminster 1931, when with the creation of the dominions, the British Empire was re-christened as the British commonwealth of Nations. Commonwealth literature concept came into practice in the mid-twentieth century, there are

various factors that were responsible for its growth in the nineteenth century. The concept began to evolve in the aftermath of the American war of Independence which had convinced the British statesman that they should formulate a new approach toward the emerging nationalism in the colonies which were destined to become independent states in due course. In order to forestall a violent break-up of the Empire, in the pattern of what happened to its thirteen colonies in America, Britain thought it imperative to follow a path of concessions and reforms, and develop self-governing institutions in the colonies. The distinctive feature of this new grouping was that they all were colonies of settlement, with close ethnic connections with Britain and had adopted the British pattern of political institutions. This institutional framework remained unchanged until independence was granted to India in 1947 and until India decided to stay in the commonwealth after becoming a republic in 1950. With the entry of India, the modern commonwealth acquired a new complexion and character and demonstrated its potential for evolution and growth. The association became multi-racial; and it was declared as a free association of independent nation where equality of status was fully recognised. The commonwealth is the British Empire in reverse. It is the flowering of independent entities out of the bondage of colonial dependency. The term literally meant "common well being". The commonwealth of nations, also known as the British commonwealth, has manifested a distinctive literary development marked by its cultural and historical diversity. The commonwealth is an intergovernmental organisation of 54 nations which were formerly part of the British Empire. The commonwealth aims to provide a framework of common values, facilitating co-operation between its member states in the field of democracy, human rights, rule of law, free trade and peace. In general, commonwealth literature is a vague term which defines English-language works written in the former British colonies or place which had the status of dominions. Also known as New English literature, it is a body of fictional works grouped together because of the underlying cultural history and certain recurrent patterns. As commonwealth comes from a wide variety of regions, they win fame in the Anglo-American world because of their exotic setting and character. In Salman Rushdie's essay "commonwealth Literature does not exist", it is defined as

"A body of writing created in the English Language, by persons who care not themselves white Britons, or Irish, or citizens of the United States of America"

In Australia, New Zealand and Canada on one hand, and in Asia, Africa and the west Indies on the other, the English language - whether as an inherited or an acquired language has been employed as the medium of creative expression in diverse cultural contexts, thereby achieving a texture and resonance not usually found in the purely Anglo-Saxon idiom and usage. While writing in English, the Indians, the Africans and the west Indians are writing in the language of the colonizer, in a language that in a number of way carries with it a distinctly English culture and ethos.

Commonwealth literature can be usefully studied under two different categories-

- (1) The literature written in those commonwealth countries where English is practically a native language for example in Australia, New Zealand and Canada.
- (2) The literature written in those countries where English is used as a second language (or even as a foreign language), for example, in India, commonwealth countries in Africa (Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe), the West Indies, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

The use of English in literature written in the first group of countries is radically different from that in second group. Language is an inseparable part of its matrix culture, and English likewise is an inseparable part of the British culture. In a similar cultural ambience, the use of English in creative writing will not be very different in general terms, of course, apart from certain individual and idiosyncratic variations. But in an entirely different cultural setting, for instance, in India, Sri Lanka, Philippines or Africa. The use of English cannot be widely different Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*(1938) is, for instance, a specifically Indian experience, and the idiom used to convey it is anything but the traditional English Idiom. R.K Narayan's use of English is beautifully and adequately adopted to communicate a characteristically Indian sensibility. Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*(1964) has created an absolutely African world and found the right idiom- very differently from any other English- to do so.

Most scholars and working in the area designated ' Commonwealth Literature' have arrived there from initial training and practice in 'English Literature'. An eminent twentieth- century North Atlantic poet and critic could see English literature as an organic part of European literature, 'the

several members of which cannot flourish if the same circulate throughout the whole body'. The literatures of those commonwealth countries that can conveniently be regarded as belonging to the third World are either very much concerned with the 'turning world', as in Africa and the Caribbean, or look back to great cultural phenomena unrelated to Europe's renaissance, as in India-despite Raja Rao's interest in the Albiherian heresy in the serpent and the rope. The really interesting literature in English on India begins with Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchables* and R.K Narayan's *Swami and Friends* in 1935, of Black Africa with Sol plaatje's *Mohdi* in 1930 and Amos Tutuola's 'The Palm-wine Drinkard' in 1952, of the Caribbean with Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* in 1928, or alternatively with C.L.R Jame's *Minty Alley* in 1936. There were earlier writings in verse and prose, but these titles are markers of the rising tide which proclaim that the Third World commonwealth literatures truly begin in the second quarter of the twentieth century, at least a decade after the end of the first of Europe's two holocausts. The high moral sentences that accompanied Allied gunfire in both of Europe's wars were taken seriously by the subject people of Europe's overseas empires, as was much of the political creed that toppled the Tzar of all the Russians. It would be futile to pretend that most of the writings that constitute the third world literatures in English are not concerned with political issues, even if often, indirectly, with cultural situations brought about by colonial political history. In the west, literature that is primarily about political concepts, about how political events act upon the lives of ordinary people, tends to be treated with suspicion, or at least reserve, and seems to have to pass a non-propagandist test more stringently than writings on other themes. Literature is art in the use of words. To distinguish between meaning and technique is itself to distort, for words both mean and are arranged to mean, and out of the interaction of the magnetic fields of these two modes of meaning as great literature. Yet the distinction is a useful piece of temporary scaffolding. The languages and literatures which feast at the high table of this gathering are those with relatively clearly defined literary traditions- France, Germany, Britain and USA. The pace at which the literatures which make up commonwealth literature have developed puts each of them in a different stage of continuity within these literatures is largely futile. The diversity in the literature is something to celebrate because it adds much to the richness of literature in English, The movement of commonwealth literature from the periphery of English literary studies toward the centre is made the more difficult by the fact that formal teaching of commonwealth is itself peripheral.

Combining the elements of magic and fantasy, the grimmest realism, extravagant farce, multi-mirrored analogy and a potent symbolic the astonishing energy of novel unprecedented in scope, manner and achievement in the hundred and fifty year old tradition of the Indian novel in English. Rushdie must portray reality, and in this endeavour fiction and nonfiction overlap boundaries Salman Rushdie, the writer of the three novels *Grimus*, *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* and a book on Nicaraguan journey *The Jaguar Smile*, emerged with the publication of *Midnight's children* in 1981 as a new phenomenon in the genre of fiction. The book was awarded 1981 Booker McConnell prize and literary critics compared Rushdie to novelists like Milan Kundera, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Gunter Grass, John Irving, V.S Naipaul. he has been hailed as a creator of epics. Starting with *Grimus*, a work in fantasy, Rushdie went on to create the real sub-continent condition in his phenomenal works *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*. His investigation of life led him to the uncovering of the true circumstances in India and Pakistan. Individual human personality, the novelist realised, proved meaningless in the present global situation. Be personified India and Pakistan for the true realisation of life in the two countries.

"True great realism depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects".

In his endeavour towards the adequate presentation of the complete human condition Rushdie adopts non-linear, non-naturalistic forms to meet the challenge of portraying reality. For Rushdie the 60s in Cambridge were euphoric years. Recalling them he said,

" There was the Vietnam war to protest about, student pioneer to insist upon, drugs to smoke, flowers to put in your hair, good music to listen to".

Something of the capriciousness of those years spill over in his first novel. *Midnight's Children* is a memory novel and therefore a semi-fantasy, nonetheless dealing with stark realities:

"Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimises, glorifies and vilifies also: but in the end it creates its own reality".

The historical perspective enables Rushdie to reminisce backward and forward re imagining himself in the persona of the protagonist through the life cycle and a series of historical moments.

In his essay "commonwealth literature does not exist". Rushdie describes the category 'commonwealth literature' as a ghetto created by those who practice English literature 'Proper'.

"Every ghetto has its own rules" and "One of the rule one of the ideas on which the edifice rests, is that literature is an expression of nationality". and that culture springs from tradition. He says that

"What we are facing here is the boggy of authenticity...(which) is the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism. It demands that sources, forms, style, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogenous and unbroken tradition".

An exoticized culture must always show its credentials in order to prove itself worthy of 'special attention'. While Western culture seems dynamic, progressive and developed. It is demanded of exoticized cultures to be original, pure, simple and preferably religious. The term postcolonial implies a kind of pre-colonial purity which has become corrupted because it could not resist the colonizers domination. It does not take into account that the process of colonization changes both the coloniser and the colonised and that cultural exchange is heterogeneous and not singular. Racial, cultural, linguistic singularity or purity is only unlikely but also a pathological pursuit. The exact characteristic of commonwealth literature also remains debatable. Recurrent motifs there are misuse of power, exploitation and alienation as well as post colonial society. Apart from the issues of shared characteristics, scholars debate as to which writers to be include in the commonwealth canon.

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