

Edward O. Ako: From Commonwealth to Postcolonial Literature (2004)

[*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6.2 (2004): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss2/1>>.]

It can be argued that one of the major additions to the curricula of Departments of English in Europe, the Caribbean, the United States, Australia, etc., in the last two decades is what has been called variously “commonwealth” or “postcolonial literature.” Our own Department of English at the University of Yaounde I has not escaped from this trend. The number of students enrolling to take higher degrees in the field called “Commonwealth Literary Studies” more than quintupled especially from the moment that Cameroon was admitted into the Commonwealth of Nations along with Mozambique: Cameroon was admitted into the Commonwealth of Nations in 1998. The query as to why the term “post-coloniality” has found such urgent currency in the First World but is in fact hardly ever used within the excolonized worlds of South Asia and Africa can be explained perhaps by the fact that it is considered as a cognate term with commonwealth. The reservations expressed elsewhere on the possible “offensive” nature of the term are, in my opinion, “willingly” ignored. The following discussion represents a brief tour-de-force of taxonomy to initiate a conversation on these rather vague and sometimes confusing concepts. It will perhaps be more rewarding if we first examine the relationship between empire and English literature, in other words, the ideological uses to which English literature was put. I am concerned with colonial and colonialist literature: as far as I am able to determine, Elleke Boehmer is one of the few critics who makes a distinction between colonial and colonialist literature, see her *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* 4-5, 50-51. Next, I examine the concept of commonwealth literature and the controversies surrounding it, and lastly, I discuss selected aspects of the concept of postcolonial studies, the differences between common-

wealth and postcolonial literature, and the concerns or characteristics of postcolonial literature.

If it is true that Britain used military might to subdue a good part of the world especially in the last part of the nineteenth century, military victory constituted not the winning of the war, but of a battle and it were cultural texts to complete what military might had started. Thus, literary texts which were produced during this period and which can be described as colonial or colonialist texts, reflected the colonial ethos, and contributed to the complex of attitudes that made imperialism seem part of the order of things (see Boehmer 2-3). In other words, it was clear that to assume control over a territory or a nation was not only to “exert political or economic power, it was also to have imaginative command” (Boehmer 5). It is in the self-representations of the British and the representations of the Other, that the ideological uses of English literature can be seen most clearly. The best illustration is in the introduction of English literature into the Indian educational system: After the battle of Plassy in 1755, the British East India Company began to administer the various native Indian states as colonies. As Gauri Viswanathan has noted, a high proportion of those who came over from Britain to serve as administrators were Scots who found it easier to succeed without English patronage abroad than at home. The Scots had the responsibility of training a civil service from among the Hindu and Muslim populations and one of the principal subjects taught the newly Europeanised natives was English literature. It was expected to convey the values and standards of the conquerors: The British had conquered India with ships and cannon; they were, however, “to rule it with Shakespeare” (Viswanathan 17). And talking about the Scots, it would be a major oversight not to note that Adam Smith—better known as the author of *The Wealth of Nations*—was actually the founder of English as an academic discipline (see, e.g., Eagleton).

At the time that Adam Smith introduced lectures on English literature in Scotland, this discipline was regarded in Oxbridge as an un-academic discipline and not worthy of serious inquiry. Rather, what held sway in lecture halls were classical studies: Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit. If classical studies constituted the academic menu of the upper classes, religious studies were the main menu of the lower

classes. However, by mid-century, religious studies which were used to control the lower classes, was fast losing its grip as a result of scientific discoveries and social change. It was therefore imperative for another social institution to be put in its place to replace religion and the church as disseminators of value, tradition, and authority. As Terry Eagleton notes, George Gordon in an Oxford inaugural lecture said: "England is sick, and English literature must save it. The churches, having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function" (23). Of particular significance, however, is the fact that English as an academic discipline "was first institutionalised not in the universities, but in Mechanics' Institutes, working men's colleges, and extension lecturing circuits" (Eagleton 52). The reason for this was because it was expected that the "softening" and "humanising" effect of literature could be used to cement the relations between the social classes. English literature was therefore to serve as a kind of opium whose role was to ward off what Mathew Arnold saw as the anarchy that would engulf and disrupt social relations in England (Eagleton 65).

If English literature was institutionalised in Mechanics' Institutes and in other vocational colleges as an instrument for the transmission of "moral" values to the lower classes, it becomes clear that it could become an even more effective weapon in the "softening" of conquered peoples. And it is precisely with this in mind that courses in English literature were introduced in Indian schools as far back as the 1820s and formalised with the passing of the English Education Act of 1835. Yet, as Viswanathan notes, "what is now known as the subject of English literature, the British educational system had no firm place for it until the last quarter of the nineteenth century" (434). Thus, Shakespeare, Addison, Bacon, Locke, and others became part of the literary curriculum of Indian schools, curriculum functioning here as discourse (in this context, I propose that it would be most advantageous to carry out a study of the literary texts used in Cameroon secondary schools between 1948 and 1968. The focus here will be on curriculum as discourse and will examine, other than Shakespeare's texts, the works of Jerome K. Jerome, R. M. Ballantyne, Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Mark Twain, etc. These were compulsory texts in secondary schools in the 1950s and 1960s). Again, we are reminded that

"a vital if subtle connection exists between a discourse which those who are to be educated are represented as morally deficient and the attribution of moral and intellectual values to the literary works they are assigned to read" (Viswanathan 62). Clearly then, English literature, or better still, colonialist literature played the role of the "surrogate Englishman." As Eagleton so well puts it, English literature presenting "the Englishman in his highest and most perfect state, becomes a mask for economic exploitation, so successfully camouflaging the material activities of the coloniser that one unusually self-conscious British Colonial official, Charles Trevelyan, was prompted to remark, 'The "Indians" daily converse with the best and wisest Englishman through the medium of their works, and form ideas, *perhaps higher ideas of our nation than if their intercourse with it were of a personal kind*'" (Viswanathan 66-67; my emphasis).

This use of literature as a "mask of conquest"—to use the title of Viswanathan's book—was only part of a larger scheme. In his widely anthologised "Minute on Indian Education," Thomas Macaulay indicated clearly the role of education in India when he declared thus, "we must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, *but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect*" (430; my emphasis). This category, "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste" is what Frantz Fanon calls "black skin, white masks" and V. S. Naipaul calls "mimic men." In the Native American context, this is what Black Elk calls being an apple, red outside and white inside. This leads us to the overall issue of representation in the making of empire. Boehmer states in her *Colonial and Post-colonial Literature* that "in writings as various as romances, memoirs, adventure tales or the later poetry of Tennyson, the view of the world as directed from the colonial metropolis was consolidated and confirmed. So, it also followed almost automatically that resistance to imperial domination—especially on the part of those who lacked guns or money—frequently assumed textual form" (Boehmer 14). Some of the textual forms that emerged as "resistance" to imperial domination are what are called variously Commonwealth literature, New English literatures, Literatures in English, Third World Literature or Post-colonial Literature, with other cognate terms also used, such as World

Fiction, World Literature written in English, multicultural literature, minority literature, resistance literature, etc.

For some, the idea of Commonwealth Literature is quite straightforward because it is the literature produced by countries which are former colonies of Britain or had the status of dominions. For others, it can be extended to cover countries which, although not former British colonies, are now members of the Commonwealth of Nations. For yet others, matters are not that simple. There are those who argue that the very notion of Commonwealth Literature is in itself condescending, narrow and misleading (see, for example, Tiffin in her “Commonwealth Literature: Comparison and Judgement”). And for some the designation is *dépassé*, something of an anachronism. In a study commissioned by the Commonwealth Secretariat and entitled *Learning from Each Other: Commonwealth Studies in the 21st Century*, the authors are not concerned with whether Commonwealth Literature exists or not. Rather, for them, the issue is how to broaden the concept to embrace literatures in indigenous languages. In the section entitled “Intellectual trends in Commonwealth Studies,” the authors ask, “How can the study of Commonwealth literature more fully embrace literatures in languages other than English, and reflect the increasingly complex varieties of English used?” (19). In my view, the question would make sense in terms of examining the varieties of English used, the attempt at nativization etc. It would be inappropriate, however, to think of calling the literature in the indigenous languages Commonwealth Literature especially as some of these literatures pre-date the historical situations that brought about what is today known as the Commonwealth. It appears to me that it would be more appropriate to call Sanskrit, Igbo, Yoruba, Hindi: Khosa, Kikuyu, Hausa, Maori, and Zulu literatures by their names rather than by the designation of Commonwealth Literature. Perhaps if these works are translated into English, then they could fit into this category as in the case with Ngugi wa Thiongo’s works rendered from Gikuyu into English. Nor can, say, Wolof literature be considered francophone literature. The authors were, of course, aware of the fact that many scholars were not comfortable with the designation. They note that this is “particularly in the field of literature” where some scholars “shy away from the term ‘commonwealth’ and prefer to use such terms as postcolonial” (16).

They note that the very concept of “commonwealth” derives from “egalitarian principles of popular sovereignty, rights and freedoms. Commonwealth studies potentially offer democratic and all-inclusive forms of social analysis, pointing to reconstructed societies and to communities beyond colonialism” (16). They add, rather problematically, that the term “post-colonial is far more constrained than ‘commonwealth’ even though the former may in theory (but frequently does not in practice) encompass a wider field geographically” (16).

For Salman Rushdie, however, the problem is of a different nature. In an essay entitled provocatively “Commonwealth Literature Does not Exist,” he attempts to define what “they” say Commonwealth Literature would be. He says that there is “a body of writing created, I think, in the English language by persons who are not themselves white Britons or Irish or citizens of the United States of America” (63). If this is true of Commonwealth Literature, it is certainly not true of postcolonial literature as it embraces the United States of America. He further notes that “it is also uncertain whether citizens of commonwealth countries writing in languages other than English-Hindi, for example—or who switch out of English, like Ngugi, are permitted into the club or asked to keep out” (63). For Rushdie, the idea of Commonwealth Literature is just an attempt to create an exclusive literary ghetto. He further adds that the “effect of creating such a ghetto was, is, to change the meaning of the far broader term ‘English literature’ which I’d always taken to mean simply the literature of the English language—into something far narrower, something topographical, nationalistic, possibly even racially segregationist” (63) [...] “Commonwealth literature was invented to delay the day we rough beasts actually slouch into Bethlehem. In which case, it’s time to admit the centre cannot hold” (71). While Rushdie echoes Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* here, there is also a reverse movement from the periphery to the centre. If for Rushdie the term is “narrow” and “segregationist,” for Michael Gorra, it can only be used in the past tense. In his *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* Gorra states that “the first books of what we then called ‘commonwealth’ literature often opposed British novels to works from India or Africa—E. M. Forster—R. K. Narayan, Joyce Cary—Chinua Achebe” (4).

This is the same kind of sentiment that is voiced in Deepika Bahri's essay where she notes that the "cognate terms 'commonwealth' and 'Third World' have all but disappeared as prefixes from the body of literature now largely designated 'post-colonial,' succumbing, on occasion, to the appellation, 'new literature in English' [...] the 'new' differentiates the writing from 'old and established,' while the Anglo-phonetic character of the term gives it continuity and position with the old and established" (Bahri 64). In *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin reject the term "commonwealth" because, they argue, it rests "purely on the fact of a shared history and the resulting political grouping, while New Literatures in English" is considered Eurocentric and condescending towards the new in comparison with the old even if it de-emphasizes the colonial past" (23). But if the term commonwealth is considered inappropriate, what are the advantages that postcolonial has or seems to have? In fact, why has it gained currency? If the term "commonwealth" is mired in controversy, the term postcolonial has not fared any better, even if it now seems to have carved a niche for itself, especially, although not exclusively, in the Western academy (on the designation of postcolonial, see, for example, Appiah; Mishra and Hodge; McCallum; McClintock; Shohat; Bahri notes that the compound word first appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1959 as did the unhyphenated word in the *American Heritage Dictionary* (Bahri 65). But before we get into the problem of the meaning(s) of the term, it is necessary to explore a few aspects of the historical circumstances that brought about what is today called postcolonialism: In my view, postcolonial theory deals with problems of migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, caste, class race, gender, place, and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, literature, philosophy, and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being. If Edward Said's seminal 1978 work *Orientalism* and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's 1989 *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* helped to usher in what is today known as postcolonial studies, the Algerian and Vietnam wars, the Black Power Movement in the United States of America, the rise of the Women's movement, and anti-war radicalism etc., set the

social agenda (see, e.g., my "The African Inspiration of the Black Arts Movement). Aijaz Ahmad states in his *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* that it was in the crucible of the Algerian Revolution and Vietnam War that "at least some of the intellectuals of the contemporary West learned to question their own place in the world, and hence to question the hegemonic closure of the texts upon which their epistemologies were based" (58). It was during that period of what is called loosely the generation of 68 that parallels could and were made between the situations in Indo China and Algeria, the Nazi occupations of the IIInd World War, and the plight of blacks in American urban ghettos.

The mobilization of millions of radicals (black, white, and women), Hispanic-Americans, and Mexican agricultural labour workers was so massive that, over a decade or more, questions that had been ignored for a very long time, were put on the social agenda (Ahmad 60-61). Ahmad notes that it was during this period that, "colonialism and imperialism were addressed (now), for the first time in the history of U.S literary criticism" (62). The Vietnam War brought up, "strictly within the field of literary studies, the question of how colony and empire had been represented in western literatures" (63). In effect, there was a call for a re-reading of the established canon (and the canon wars erupted in the US and Canadian academe). Thus, the vocabulary of colonial racism in Shakespeare, Austen, Eliot, Shelley, Tennyson, Gide, and John Perse was studied exhaustively. In other words, the activism continued, but in different ways and in different modes. Ahmad puts it thus, "after the movements of the 1960s were over—dominant strands have been mobilized to domesticate, in institutional ways, the very forms of political dissent which those movements had sought to foreground, to displace an activist with a textual culture ? and to reformulate in a postmodernist direction questions which had been associated with a broadly Marxist politics" (90).

I now attempt to present my definition of postcolonial literature, to locate it geographically if that is possible, and above all, to determine if the proposition that in many ways "the term 'postcolonial' is far more constrained than 'commonwealth,' although the former may in theory (but frequently does not in practice) encompass a wider field geographically" (Symons Report 16). In *Once More with Feeling: What is*

Postcolonialism? Bahri notes that “it is used not merely to characterize that which succeeds the colonial, but also the chapter of history following the Second World War, whether or not such a period accommodates the still-colonized, the neo-colonized, or the always colonized” (55). Alluding to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others, she notes that the present moment in these nations is not “post”: the “colonial” in any genuine, or even cursory sense, as covert mercantile neo-colonialism, potent successor to modern colonialism, continues its virtually unchallenged march across the face of the earth, ensuring that the wretched will remain so, colluding in, as they did before, but now also embracing, the process of economic and cultural annexation, this time well disguised under the name of modernization” (59). Unaddressed in the “post” in postcolonialism is the problem of the hierarchical relationships that exist between ethnic groups in the settler colonies as well as the different economic and cultural contexts of, for example, the Maori in New Zealand, the Aborigines in Australia, those between black and white South African writers (see Bahri 84). Of particular concern too, is the problem of gender relations. Since men and women were affected differently by the experience of colonialism while gender relations were utilized on a discursive level to conceptualise the relationship between colonizers and colonized, how does one deal with the problem of gender in this formulation? On the problem of gender and class, Ahmad reminds us that, “nationalism in the present (century) has frequently suppressed questions of gender and class and has itself been frequently complicit with all kinds of obscurantisms and revanchist positions” (38).

Other than gender, the categories of caste and class also have to be addressed, as these groups experienced colonialism in various forms and in varying degrees. Ahmad notes that the Subaltern Studies Group in India set out to formulate a corrective to “elitist nationalist Indian historiography in order to investigate afresh the ways in which subaltern classes were affected by and reacted towards the colonial encounter” (84). What this means is that there were differences between and within colonies which makes it impossible to present postcolonialism as a simple binarism. Arun Mukherjee makes this point when she notes that “the postcolonialists’ generalisations about all ‘postcolonial people’ suggest that Third Worldism and/or nationalism bind the people

of these societies in conflictless brotherhood, that the inequalities of caste and class do not exist in these societies and that their literary works are only about ‘resisting’ or ‘subverting’ the colonizers’ discourses” (27).

Peter Hulme, in pleading that America not be excluded from the category of postcolonial nations, argues that “postcolonial” should not be used as a merit badge; the adjective implies nothing about a post-colonial country’s behaviour. As a postcolonial nation, the United States continued to colonize North America, completing the genocide of the Native population begun by the Spanish and British. Or, to use a more recent example, “postcolonial” is not a description that should be awarded to Indonesia when it became independent from the Netherlands and taken away again when it invaded East Timor. A country can be postcolonial and colonizing at the same time. [...] As time passes, and we keep reading Fanon, perhaps the similarities between American countries in their postcolonial phases and African and Asian countries in theirs will come to seem at least as important as their differences. I am in favour of more and more analyses of the different forms of imperialism and colonialism, of more and more analyses of different local situations, and of determined efforts to avoid the ismization of the adjective “postcolonial.” But if—as seems inevitable—“postcolonial studies is the name that is going to hang over the gate, then let us use the word in a way that includes America (Hulme 122-23).

In the light of the above selected observations, Stephen Slemon’s definition of postcolonial literature seems to me to be the most comprehensive as it embraces all the possible categories of subalterns and more. In his essay “Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World,” he notes that “the term post-colonial is an outgrowth of what formerly were ‘commonwealth’ literary studies”—a study which came into being after “English studies had been liberalized to include ‘American’ and then an immediate national or regional literature: Australian, Canadian, West Indian” (105). He further notes that the term has “a valency of subjectivity specifically within Third and Fourth World cultures, and within black, and ethnic, and First Nation constituencies dispersed within First World terrain” (105). To this should be added the notion that the postcolonial is also “a cultural

marker of non-residency of a third-world intellectual cadre, as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power, as an oppositional form of “reading practice” (Slemon 45). It is clear to me that the term “postcolonial” not only encompasses a wider field geographically in ways that the term “commonwealth” does not, since it deals with a re-reading of English, French, and American canonical texts, the literatures of Africa, India and the West Indies etc., as well as the problems of gender, caste, and class as they are posed in these societies and are represented textually.

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