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# UNIT 1 NAMING THE DISCIPLINE

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this Unit is to define 'New Literatures in English'. You may have heard of Courses in Commonwealth Literature, Postcolonial Literature and New Literatures in English. What do these different categories mean? How are they different and how far do they overlap? What bearing do social, economic and political forces have on the construction of these categories? These are some of the questions that we will address in the course of our discussion in this Unit.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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A language that is not renewed, that does not develop, can easily die. English at the moment is being enriched by the new usages of overseas writers. But this is not why one reads Narayan or Khushwant Singh of India, Soyinka or Achebe of Nigeria, Patrick White or A.D. Hope of Australia, Janet Frame or Dan Davin of New Zealand, A.M. Klein or Earle Birney of Canada, Itrait Husain or Zulfikar Ghose of Pakistan, Edgar Mittelholzer or Sam Selvon of the Caribbean, or any other of the excellent writers now writing throughout the Commonwealth. True, one reads them because they tell us about the way their countries are evolving; true, one reads them because they enrich our pleasure in the English language, but in the cold light of judgement one reads them for the supranational qualities in their work. One reads them because they bring new ideas, new interpretations of life to us. One reads them, in short, because they are good writers. The standards of judgement are not national standards. Standards of the critic must be cosmopolitan; only the best should be praised. (Norman Jeffares Lecture delivered to members of the Commonwealth Literature from 9-12 September 1964 at the University of Leeds.)

That the study of literatures in English produced by non-British authors was valued, ever since it originated out of the cross-cultural contact between the colonisers and the colonised has not always been true: For example, Edmund Gosse's valuation of a

volume of Toru Dutt's poetry from its unattractive appearance: "A hopeless volume it seemed, with its queer type, published at Bhowanipore, printed at the Saphikasambad Press!" (qtd. In Narasimhaiah, 1978:xv). Gosse, the nineteenth century novelist, poet, biographer and critic reinforces the attitudes of English men of letters who judged works originating out of peripheral colonial territories like India in this negative manner. Once he opens the "hopeless" looking volume he is amazed at the quality of Dutt's poetry, open to British influence but reflective of the local setting. From the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, certain factors contributed towards an interest in the study of literature from the erstwhile colonies, many of whom had gained or were shortly to gain independence around this time. These together with the UK comprised the British Commonwealth Association of nations differing greatly amongst themselves and yet linked by strong political, social, economic, cultural and linguistic ties arising out of a shared, albeit varying, colonial experience. One of these was the creation of an English-educated intelligentsia who, by the very nature of their training, were steeped in European traditions of dissemination and assimilation of knowledge. This does not mean that they accepted it uncritically but it does imply that, at least in some cases, the choice of a language for conveying their ideas carried a cultural baggage which was difficult to get rid of.

The writers mentioned by Jeffares all belong to the class just described. The works they produce not only reflect or "tell us about the way their countries are evolving" but also critique and question it. So not only do they provide vivid accounts of local colour in a language inflected with those localisms which "enrich" English, but rather they create a "linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world" and is different from a "standard code, English" (Ashcroft *et al*, 1988:8) (Please note the use of english with a small 'e'—an english spoken by non-natives and part of what has been called 'World Englishes', This is different from English with a capital 'E' and spoken by native-speakers of the language). The distinctiveness of these works contributes to the thematic, linguistic and formal diversity of what came to be called New Literatures in English. The authors listed by Jeffares (notice all of them are male, except Janet Frame) constitute a 'canon' of sorts. There is a debate on what makes works worthy enough to be included in the 'canon,' what are the parameters adopted for judging their work, can any implications be drawn from what is excluded from the canon, is the latter to do with literary or extra-literary reasons. It is in taking cognizance of these and related concerns that the term Postcolonial is useful, particularly since most recent theorisations about literatures from the Commonwealth countries prefer to use this term.

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## 1.2 FRAMING COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE

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### 1.2.1 Origins

When tracing a chronology of events leading up to the establishment of Commonwealth Literature as a discipline it is common to ascribe the beginnings to universities in the United Kingdom. In the 1950s some courses in American, Commonwealth, Irish, and African literatures were offered in "a few provincial UK universities." The value judgement implied in the word "provincial" is unmistakable and it is no wonder that Dennis Walder, from whose account of the Commonwealth project this phrase is taken, should also denigrate other formerly colonial countries for including "little clusters of 'local' texts . . . into the syllabuses of English Departments . . . often with patronizing disclaimers" (1998:61). Walder's survey gives a new turn to the disjuncture between the metropolis and the periphery, the former usually taken to refer to the origin/centre of colonial power and the latter the regions over whom that power was exercised and continues to be exercised in neo-colonial forms. Thus if London was the metropolitan centre then countries in Asia or Africa colonised by the British were the outposts or the periphery of the British empire. The former is typified as cosmopolitan and the latter as provincial is colonial

discourse. You might wonder how this applies to academia and the beginnings of Commonwealth Literature. I am suggesting that such typifications are also read into Western academia which one might suppose would be characterised as uniformly metropolitan from a certain perspective. As Walder's use of the word "provincial" and his view of local texts included in syllabi at the University of Cape Town in South Africa indicates, the centre of Commonwealth literary studies lay elsewhere. Indeed he glorifies the first school of Commonwealth Literature founded at Leeds University in 1964 where "some of the best [works] found their way onto the Leeds syllabus" (Walder, 1998:62). Peripheral origins in other universities in the U.K. are not listed by Walder. Hence it is useful to have another view of the origins as given by Anna Rutherford in the Foreword to a collection of essays on the field arising out of a conference held at Aarhus University in Denmark. Rutherford perceptively pre-empted the question which might be asked "What business have the Danes with the Commonwealth?" The answer lies in the founding of possibly the first Institute of Commonwealth Literature at Aarhus in 1958 by Professor Greta Hort (Rutherford, 1972:7).

I have given these two instances of the institutional-temporal origins of Commonwealth Literature to point out how institutions are instrumental in determining new areas of study. But that academic curricula are influenced by political, social and economic factors is also borne out in the case of Commonwealth Literature becoming an object of study in the 1950s and 1960s. Many erstwhile colonised countries gained their independence at this time. India and Pakistan emerged as nations in 1947, Nigeria and Kenya in 1960 and 1963 respectively, the West Indian federation was formed in 1960. In Walder's view the literary and cultural expression of "nationalist strivings" during the process of decolonization produced writings in English which had a major impact internationally (1998:59-60). This can be one reason for their inclusion in university curricula in the U.K. But it is also useful to remember that post-war Britain, especially the 1950s and 1960s, experienced a large scale arrival of migrants belonging to its former colonies in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. While this produced hysterical political responses like the Immigration Act of 1968 as a strategy for excluding non-white settlers from any sense of national belonging, it also served as an opportune moment for appropriating 'black' cultural production under the term Commonwealth Literature.

### **1.2.2 Critiques**

It is an accepted form of critical scholarship that concepts and terms which become dated are held up to interrogation. This is what has happened in the case of 'Commonwealth Literature.' At the time when the term gained currency the U.K. had a powerful international presence, not the least because it had been the single largest colonial power till about a decade or so before the 1960s, and its former colonies had recently come together under the umbrella Commonwealth. Even within this contradictions abound. In an essay entitled "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist" Salman Rushdie observes, "South Africa and Pakistan, for instance, are not members of the Commonwealth, but their authors apparently belong to its literature. On the other hand, England, which, as far as I'm aware, has not been expelled from the Commonwealth quite yet, has been excluded from its literary manifestation" (1991:62). Rushdie's characteristic flippancy should not obscure the seriousness of his purpose in commenting on the naively political origins of literary labels with limited efficacy.

As early as 1970 William Walsh, appointed as professor to the first Chair of Commonwealth Literature at the University of Leeds, commented on his usage of the term in a book length study of selected Indian, African, Caribbean, Australian, New Zealand and Canadian authors. Walsh professes an awareness that it "may be objected to by those who take a more exact political view of the Commonwealth than I take here." Writers, he feels, may wish to see themselves as arising out of a particular "historical tradition" and "national context" and not as contributors to the literature of an "amorphous Commonwealth" (1970:10). Almost twenty years later

the conception of this amorphousness is contemptuously phrased thus, "this bunch of upstarts, huddling together under this new and badly made umbrella" (Rushdie, 1991:63). I am suggesting that the amorphousness of the concept, leading to confusion as to what can or cannot be included under this label, is the least serious objection which can be raised against it. Remember that most of the Commonwealth countries derive many aspects of their political, legal and educational systems from the British model. The similarities between the British and Indian legal systems are a case in point. So when the term is adopted for the literatures of these countries it implies as if even the forms of cultural expression derive from and are assessed by conceptual and critical models originating in a country formerly exercising control over, but now supposedly on an equal footing with independent nations. The easy appropriation of the 'common' literary 'wealth' of these nations by the British academia can be critiqued on these grounds.

A celebratory view of 'Commonwealth Literature' and wholesale approbation of the two words in conjunction is taken by that veteran of Commonwealth literary studies in India, C.D. Narasimhaiah. This is evinced in statements like the following: "The Commonwealth offers possibilities for an intelligent meeting of the East and the West . . ." (Narasimhaiah, 1978:xxix). The hierarchization implicit in this meeting which was the direct consequence of colonisation leading to imposition of the English language in countries now part of the Commonwealth as well as the irony inherent in the nomenclature of this political body are issues not taken into account. In a more recent work Narasimhaiah uses a phrase of Chinua Achebe's to label Commonwealth Literature "the heirloom of . . . [a] multiple heritage" (1995:25). It can be argued that the "heritage" spoken of here was imposed rather than inherited in most cases. There is a hierarchization implicit in this imposition which means that Commonwealth Literature is "positioned *below* English literature 'proper' . . . or . . . places English Literature at the centre and the rest of the world at the periphery" (Rushdie, 1991:66). Recall the concept of the centre and the periphery which I explained in the section titled 'Origins' and try and understand Rushdie's statement in the context of the academia. Valourisation of Commonwealth Literature does not obscure the fact that literature falling within this rubric is still considered a category within English Literature with most British universities offering a token selection of texts comprising a study of this area.

### **1.2.3 Continued Usage**

From the sustained critical assaults on the term I have outlined in the previous section it would be natural for you to assume that the term has now passed out of usage. However, this is hardly the case as the title of C.D. Narasimhaiah's book *Essays in Commonwealth Literature: Heirloom of a Multiple Heritage* published in 1995 indicates. Even with an awareness of the political and cultural problematics it continues to be used although with a greater degree of self-reflexivity. I shall cite a few instances of this. When the first conference on the field was held in 1964 one of the recommendations made was that a journal of Commonwealth literature including critical articles and annual biographies should be established (Press, 1965:214). This led to *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* edited by Arthur Ravenscroft of South African origin. The journal is well into its third decade of publication and is a useful source of information about recent literary and critical publication from the various Commonwealth countries.

My other example is the international body Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS). The success of the Leeds Conference, which has already been discussed in some detail, led to the formation of the ACLALS which organised its first conference in Brisbane, Australia in 1968 on the theme of national identity. Its second conference focussed on literature of the West Indies and was held in 1971. The body organises a triennial conference and has regional branches affiliated to it such as India-ACLALS, South Pacific-ACLALS and European-ACLALS. Significantly the theme for the 12<sup>th</sup> triennial conference to be held in July 2001 in Canberra, Australia is 'Resistance and Reconciliation: Writing in the

Commonwealth.’ One of the questions to be debated in this conference is how have “recent theoretical perspectives confirmed or challenged notions of a Commonwealth, and Commonwealth writing.” What is this symptomatic of? I would say that it is in the spirit of combative engagement that a body like the ACLALS question its very founding principle while also adhering to it.

### 1.3 APPARENT NEWNESS, UNDERLYING CONTINUITY

#### 1.3.1 Defining Newness

Commonwealth literary studies, as explained in the previous section, took as their object of study literatures of the newly independent nations. Colonisation in one form or the other was responsible for the use of English in these regions which already had an established tradition of orature/literature in languages other than English. Thus the English language literature produced was a “new” addition to the body of literature already existing in various languages in countries like India, Kenya, Nigeria, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. However, this is not how the newness of such literature is perceived. As in the term ‘Commonwealth Literature’ the assimilationist model is at work in the term ‘New Literatures in English.’ Indeed when discussing the former Rushdie voiced the suspicion that quite possibly it “is no more than an ungainly term for the younger English literatures” (1987:65-66). When assimilated into the existing body of English literature, seen as the repository of universal human values, the new or younger literatures in English are perceived as “enriching” or invigorating it. Let us see what forms such a critical stance has taken in explicatory studies using this phrase or variants of it.

Bruce King in his introduction to *Literatures of the World in English* acknowledges that there are “different national literary traditions with values and histories of their own” but that “each literature is a part of world English literature, and shares in the heritage of British writing” (1974:20-21). King’s liberal humanist critical stance fails to mask the contradictions inherent in the above formulation. If each literary tradition reflects its own “values” then clearly the heritage of British writing will have values markedly different from other national literary traditions, not the least because a different set of material and political conditions are constitutive of it. Thus the “nostalgia” for a “long-established English tradition” which King sees expressed in the various national literatures is not simply an “ideal of a more ordered, settled, complex society” as he assumes (1974:20). The inculcation of this ideal and appreciation of the literature reflective of it was part of the colonial agenda, to form “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,” as Macaulay put it in his *Minute on Indian Education*. Having outlined the problems in King’s critical formulations on the newly emerged literatures in English it must be said that his definition of it is nothing if not inclusive. I am citing it in detail so that you can contrast it with other, more selective, definitions:

A new English literature may express a culture which has grown up with the settler communities, it may be a continuation of indigenous cultural traditions, or it may be some mixture of the effects of colonization, including the bringing together of various races into one nation.

(King, 1974:2)

In a later work entitled *The New English Literatures: Cultural Nationalism in a Changing World* published in 1980 King focussed on literatures from six countries—Nigeria, India, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the West Indies and on authors from each of these.

Recent European publications using the concept of newness proffer other, less inclusive, definitions. Terminological inconsistency too abounds as in a work edited by M.T. Bindella and G.V. Davis entitled *Imagination and the Creative Impulse in*

in Post/colonial Literatures in English' series. While the collection includes readings of African, Indian, Canadian and Australian texts and literatures, the editors are firm about what constitutes New Literatures:

From the European perspective at least, the new literatures in English deal with "new" countries where new immigrant populations have settled and new national identities have come into existence. The new literatures thus reflect *par excellence* the historical processes by which such societies have been created and the development of consciousness through which new lands have been inscribed in the collective imagination of emerging countries.

(Bindella, 1993:5)

Thus the literatures of Nigeria, India and Zimbabwe are discussed because they are "new" nations and those of Australia, Canada, New Zealand because they have been populated by "new" immigrants. The West Indies fits both categories since not only does its population comprise those who are immigrants but also because it has recently become a nation, or rather, a federation of nationalities. The focus on new lands "inscribing" themselves on the imagination of emerging countries makes the emphasis on Canadian, Australian and New Zealand literature inevitable which is why, in my opinion, this is a less inclusive definition than King's.

### 1.3.2 Variants of Newness

European critics have tried to pull Commonwealth Literature and New Literatures in English away from being a mere "supplement to British Literature. One of the reports read out at a symposium on 'Imagination and the Creative Impulse in New Literatures in English' called for "a new integral model of organisation which would take account of the comparative, contextual and multicultural aspects of the subject, thus accommodating the New Literatures in a reformed structural pattern of International English Literature" (Bindella, 1993:11). This structural pattern is free of the associations of assimilation and hierarchization implied by the already critiqued nomenclature. Not only is it flexible enough to include English-language literature from countries not falling within the Commonwealth umbrella but also chosen to highlight the possible interconnections between the literatures of various nations (inter-national).

This is the purpose of another recent collection of essays initially read out at a conference of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (EACLALS) on the theme 'Nationalism vs. Internationalism. Subtitled '(Inter) National Dimensions of Literatures in English' it sees these literatures as a form of globalisation (Zach, 1996:xiv). In the same collection Bruce King's essay uses the globalised American cultural model mentioned in the Introduction to make the facile generalisation that "Commonwealth literature is itself multicultural: an overseas colony is by nature multicultural. . . . Multiculturalism is as much Nigerian, West Indian, Malaysian or Indian as North American, European or Australian" (1996:15). Taken in a loose sense this is true but it obscures the power relations operating between different cultural groups in the countries listed, in some of which race is a determining factor. Neither in society nor in literature does the parity which is assumed to underlie multiculturalism operate as it is ideally meant to. King is aware of this and to theorise the contestatory relations in a multicultural Commonwealth he uses the American model of the "cultural wars in the United States" (1996:16). What is disturbing is the unifying force he attributes to the English language as a medium of communication which can resolve the intra- and inter-national problems in both multicultural nations like Nigeria and India and a multicultural body like the Commonwealth (King, 1996:15).

In discussing these variants of "newness" my purpose has been to prepare the ground for a political versus non-political stance in the area variously described as Commonwealth Literature or New Literatures in English. Some aspects of this stance are scrutinised briefly in the next section.

### 1.3.3 Contentious Concerns

I have dwelt at length on the variation of the term discussed so far. This section is about the overlapping set of concerns addressed by commentators preferring to align themselves with either of the two: Commonwealth literary studies or the study of New Literatures in English. Let me begin by pointing out their convergences as well as divergences on the role and function of literature. The newly emergent literatures should aspire to develop “supranational qualities” since good writing possesses “human and universal qualities” (Jeffares, 1965:xviii); they are the best means of “pooling the resources of many cultures . . . and of breaking the national barriers so as to make them available to all of us in the hope of supplementing each others deficiencies and correcting the warps” (Narasimhaiah, 1978:xxx). Literature as the bearer of universal values and serving as a means of the betterment of the human condition is a liberal humanist view which became outmoded once it was accepted that literature is not a pure entity uncontaminated by the political, the social and material modes of production. Jeffares and Narasimhaiah’s statements would lead one to believe that the best kind of Commonwealth literature is that which is ideologically neutral. More recent commentators, even while pointing out the dangers of “universalism,” fall into the same trap while discussing the works of “Third-World” writers. The study of these, according to Zach and Goodwin, “counteracts feelings of superiority, dispels stereotyped notions about other nations, broadens too narrow aesthetic views, and inspires respect for people of a different creed and colour and for their cultural achievements” (1996:xiv). This, as is apparent, accords criticism a transparency and idealism which is as fallacious as the idea of a lack of a political stance in literature.

However even this political stance has not been without its attendant problems. Literatures falling under the rubrics discussed so far have been valued, or in the opinion of some, like Rushdie, overvalued, because of the nationalist politics they convey. As expressions of anti-colonial nationalist consciousness they have been “ghettoised” under either Commonwealth Literatures or New Literatures in English. One of the rules for life inside the ‘ghetto’, is that “literature is an expression of nationality” (Rushdie, 1987:66). A recognition of this is apparent in recent criticism such as King’s writings on the Commonwealth novels where he states explicitly that those novels which use “representative characters for a national or racial allegory” have won international acclaim (1991:6). Not only does this lead to an ignorance of the other influences, besides anti-colonial resistance, which go into the making of these literatures, but also this focus on national allegories written in English serves to obfuscate the validity of literature written in the local languages, whose concerns may converge and/or diverge from the former. As you can see both the valuation of literatures for their supranational, universal characteristics as well as for their representation of nationalistic concerns are contentious concerns. This leads either to the adoption of New Critical methodologies for analysis or to overtly political, but covertly essentialist, form of categorising and critiquing literary production in the countries under discussion.

What kind of literature from these countries gets read internationally, by whom and in what ways depends on the expression of nationality. Gordon Collier questions the assumptions which make both critics and readers choose certain texts above others which are “more internationalist in their origins and less obviously rooted in the more conspicuous determinants of place” (Bindella, 1993:8). These works then come to constitute a canon of Commonwealth Literature or New Literatures in English which in itself is a paradox of sorts since the inclusion of these literatures within English Literature was, at least in some senses, intended to broaden the horizons of what was seen as limited and insular. The selective principle involved in choosing the best that has been known and thought in the Commonwealth is perceived as a “problem” by Norman Jeffares since it is difficult to decide “what novels one would wish more people to read, as ‘touchstones’ perhaps, as the equivalent of anthology poems” (1972:10). You may be aware that when Matthew Arnold spoke of “touchstones” he referred to the best literary works ever produced. A new work could be compared

with these classics to determine its value. The reference to Matthew Arnold's touchstone method of criticism underlines the need to contain the study of these relatively new literatures within the critical and institutional framework of the study of English literature, an enterprise in which Arnold played a pivotal role. To historicise the introduction of Western forms of knowledge, a specific discipline of which was the study of English language and literature, to study its impact on the minds of the colonised, the kinds of resistance it engendered and its continuing effect on these societies after their emergence as independent nation-states, are some areas of study. Let us deal with some of these and related objectives under another term in the next section.

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## 1.4 ENABLING POSTCOLONIAL ENGAGEMENT

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### 1.4.1 Political Theory/Theoretical Politics

The semantic basis of the term 'post-colonial' might seem to suggest a concern only with the national culture after the departure of the imperial power. It has occasionally been employed in some earlier work in the area to distinguish between the periods before and after independence ('colonial period' and 'post-colonial period'), for example, in constructing national literary histories, or in suggesting comparative studies between stages in those histories. . . . We use the term 'post-colonial,' however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. We also suggest that it is most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted.

(Ashcroft *et al.* 1989:2)

The quotation given above is from *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* which made post-colonial the catchphrase in academic circles. I have quoted from it at length to indicate that the authors of this book, although aware that the term has been used previously ("occasionally been employed") in other kinds of discourse, appropriate it for a cross cultural discussion of literary texts to which they give the grand name "cross-cultural criticism." It is this literary-cultural postcoloniality which Aijaz Ahmad takes issue with when he points out that the first major debate on the idea of postcolonialism was initiated in 1972 by Hamza Alvi's article "The State in Postcolonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh" which appeared in *New Left Review*. When the term came to be used in the 1980s, Ahmad observes, it was with no memory that it has originated "not in cultural theory but in political theory, with the object of inquiry at that time being not 'post-colonial literature' or the 'postcolonial intellectual' but the 'postcolonial state'" (1995:280-81). The depoliticizing of the term and its use to label periods, authors, texts and intellectuals, has resulted in the containment of literature and its criticism from the social, political and material processes which influence it. Only one of these processes, colonialism and only one of its effects, discursivity is the object of attention in a de-politicized literary and cultural usage of postcolonial theory. This is why reservations have been expressed against what Ashcroft *et al.* call, "a continuity of preoccupations" in the "culture" (notice the singular) "affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day." Among others Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge have called for an "adequate materialist theory of postcolonialism" which can take into account how colonialism variously affected different cultures (1994:285). The account given by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* from the moment of colonization to the present day was ruptured decisively at various points when the former colonies became independent and hence it has also been suggested that the terms "neo-colonial" and "post-independence" are probably more suitable.



A sustained engagement with the term has led to a doing away with its hyphenated form (post-colonial) and adoption of the unhyphenated term (postcolonialism) as more reflective of the continued operation of the material, social and linguistic forms of colonialism in politically independent countries. Please do not think that the critiques take away the efficacy of the term postcolonial. On the contrary it is only when a discipline is critiqued that it can remedy the lacunae which creep in due to inadequate or selective theorisations like the discursive approach to postcolonialism taken by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*. Judged by any standards this is an important book for readers of postcolonial literatures, but it needs to be supplemented by other readings, some of which have already been suggested.

#### 1.4.2 Textual/Revolutionary Oppositionality

One of the foundational texts of postcolonial theory is Edward Said's brilliant account of the construction of the Orient by Western discourse. In Said's words, European culture "was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period . . ." (1995:3). Said's work is part of what has now come to be called colonial discourse analysis. In directing attention to the discursive production of meanings, Orientalism is seen as representing "the first phase of postcolonial theory" (Gandhi, 1999:64). This textual oppositionalism can be compared and contrasted with that of Frantz Fanon. Fanon gives a description of the phases which native cultural producers go through in their relation with the colonial culture: a period of "unqualified assimilation," followed by a stage in which the native is disturbed and "decides to remember what he is," and finally "the fighting phase" in which he will "shake" the people. In the fifties and sixties Fanon wrote about native absorption of and opposition to the colonial culture as the Other with reference to Algeria and Haiti. This is a kind of oppositionality different from the one generated by Said's enterprise of diagnosing how the West absorbed and represented the Orient as the Other in the nineteen seventies.

In the work of the Kenyan activist and writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o there is an awareness about the materialist basis of textuality as well as a commitment to its revolutionary potential. To this end he has repeatedly pointed out the stereotypical depictions of Africa, its environs and its people by imperialist writers like Rudyard Kipling, Rider Haggard, Elspeth Huxley and others. In addition, he counters such representations in his novels and criticism which focus on the struggles of the proletariat against their colonial or neo-colonial masters. He has also called for an abolition of the English language and its literature and an adoption of African languages and literatures in the interest of forging a positive self-image of the African in a seminal work entitled *Decolonizing the Mind*. The promulgation of such ideas has not been without a price, Ngugi was held as a political detainee for a year in post-colonial Kenya and has now been living in exile for a good many years in New York. It is to this aspect of exile, also referred to as diasporic, that I will now turn.

#### 1.4.3 Diasporic Intellectuals and High Theory

The career graphs of diasporic intellectuals like Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak attest to the institutionalisation of postcolonial theory in Western, particularly the U.S. academia. Their origins in the third world as well as their theorisations about their own positionality enable them to occupy a location which is comfortably marginal to the centre. In their own very different ways the members of this holy postcolonial trinity have drawn attention to figures ignored by high theory: the migrant at the interstices of cultures (Bhabha); the gendered subaltern (Spivak); the stereotyped oriental (Said). One of the frequent objections against this theoretical practice is its over-reliance on post-structuralist terminology and ideology with its focus on the decentering of meaning due to an inherent indeterminacy in discourse. For instance, in her most widely discussed essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak is self-reflexive about her role as the investigating academic whose object of inquiry is the female subaltern subject. It is no wonder then that given this hierarchization

the conclusion drawn is that the subaltern cannot speak, but one might add, that she is spoken for in the West by academic mediators like Spivak. This need not take away from the value of such theorisations, for they do deal with issues of race, gender, class and caste.

For many of their anti-imperialist critiques these theorists draw upon canonical texts by Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, to name a few. In reading these works oppositionally to recover the suppressed voices in them, whether of migrants, natives or women, Spivak and Said add a new dimension to literary and critical representation. In this respect Bhabha's readings of works by Frantz Fanon, Toni Morrison, Derek Walcott and others can be seen as an attempt towards establishing an alternative postcolonial canon even though the aim is to dismantle canons.

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## **1.5 LET US SUM UP**

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One of the issues touched upon in the three major divisions in this unit has been that of canonisation of authors and texts. Since we are dealing with literature, this focus was inevitable. However, I hope I have also been able to indicate that literature is not divorced from the social, political and economic context in which it originates. The terms 'Commonwealth' and 'Postcolonial' indicate these intersections. I have also tried to indicate that no longer can literature, criticism and theory be separated since literature is an ideological critique of society and much recent theory is creative. Although the section divisions may seem to indicate a progression from 'Commonwealth Literature' to 'New Literatures in English' to Postcolonial Literature' do remember that all three are currently in use. Finally, some of the predominant concerns only briefly touched upon in this unit such as history, nationalism, language, migrancy, ethnicity, feminism will be taken up in the subsequent units.

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## **1.6 QUESTIONS**

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1. On what grounds can the term 'Commonwealth Literature' be critiqued?
2. Analyse the term 'New Literatures in English' as a possible advance on 'Commonwealth Literature.'
3. What role have migrant intellectuals played in the institutionalisation of postcolonial theory?

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## **1.7 SUGGESTED READINGS**

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### **Commonwealth Literature**

- Jeffares, A. Norman (1965). 'Introduction' in John Press (ed.) *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture*. London: Heinemann, xi-xviii.
- King, Bruce (1991). 'Introduction' in B. King (ed.) *The Commonwealth Novel Since 1960*. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1-16.
- Narasimhaiah, C.D. (1978). 'Introduction' in C.D. Narasimhaiah (ed.) *Awakened Conscience: Studies in Commonwealth Literature*. New Delhi: Sterling, xv-xxi.
- Narasimhaiah, C.D. (1995). 'Why Commonwealth Literature?' *Essays in Commonwealth Literature: heirloom of a Multiple Heritage*. New Delhi: Pencraft, 12-24.

Rushdie, Salman (1991). "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist' *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta-Viking Penguin, 61-70.

Rutherford, Anna (1972). 'Foreword' in A. Rutherford (ed.) *Commonwealth*. Aarhus: Aarhus UP, 7.

Walsh, William (1970). 'Preface' *A Manifold Voice: Studies in Commonwealth Literature*. London: Chatto and Windus, 9-10.

### **New Literatures in English**

Bindella, M.T. and G.V. Davis (1993). 'Introduction' in M.T. Bindella and G.V. Davis (eds.) *Imagination and the Creative Impulse in New Literatures in English*. Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1-12.

King, Bruce (1974). 'Introduction' in B. King (ed.) *Literatures of the World in English*. London: Routledge, 1-22.

King, Bruce (1996). 'Thinking about Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Internationalism' in W. Zach and K.L. Goodwin (eds.) *Nationalism vs. Internationalism: (Inter)National Dimensions of Literatures in English*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg-Verl, 15-22.

Zach, W. and K.L. Goodwin (1996). 'Introduction' in W. Zach and K.L. Goodwin (eds.) *Nationalism vs. Internationalism*. Details above.

### **Postcolonial Theory and Criticism**

Ahmad, Aijaz (1997). 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality' in P. Mongia (ed.) *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Delhi: OUP, 276-93.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin (1989). *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. London: routledge.

Bhabha, Homi K. (ed.) (1990). *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge.

Fanon, Frantz (1990). *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin. (original French edition 1961)

Mishra, Vijay and Bob Hodge (1991). 'What is Post(-) Colonialism?' in P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds.). *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Columbia Up, 276-90.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986). *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey.

Said, Edward (1991). *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. (original edition 1978)

Shohat, Ella (1993). 'Notes on the Post-colonial,' *Social Text* 31/32:99-113.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1988). 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 271-813.

Walder, Dennis (1998). 'Theory,' *Post-colonial Literatures in English: History, Language, Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 56-83.