Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin. 1991 (1989). *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. London & New York: Routledge. “Introduction “ (pp. 1-13)

INTRODUCTION

More than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism. It is easy to see how important this has been in the political and economic spheres, but its general influence on the perceptual frameworks of contemporary peoples is often less evident. Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed and it is in their writing, and through other arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and dance that the day-to-day realities experienced by colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential.

WHAT ARE POST-COLONIAL LITERATURES?

This book is concerned with writing by those peoples formerly colonized by Britain, though much of what it deals with is of interest and relevance to countries colonized by other European powers, such as France, Portugal, and Spain. The semantic basis of the term ‘postcolonial’ 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 /2/ histories, or in suggesting comparative studies between stages in those histories. Generally speaking, though, the term ‘colonial’ has been used for the period before independence and a term indicating a national writing, such as ‘modern Canadian writing’ or ‘recent West Indian literature’ has been employed to distinguish the period after independence.

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. In this sense this book is concerned with the world as it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination and the effects of this on contemporary literatures.

So the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all postcolonial literatures. The literature of the USA should also be placed in this category. Perhaps because of its current position of power, and the neo-colonizing role it has played, its post-colonial nature has not been generally recognized. But its relationship with the metropolitan centre as it evolved over the last two centuries has been paradigmatic for postcolonial literatures everywhere. What each of these literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial.

POST-COLONIAL LITERATURES AND ENGLISH STUDIES

The study of English has always been a densely political and cultural phenomenon, a practice in which language and literature have both been called into the service of a profound and embracing nationalism. **/3/** The development of English as a privileged academic subject in nineteenth-century Britain – finally confirmed by its inclusion in the syllabuses of Oxford and Cambridge, and re-affirmed in the 1921 Newbolt Report – came about as part of an attempt to replace the Classics at the heart of the intellectual enterprise of nineteenth-century humanistic studies. From the beginning, proponents of English as a discipline linked its methodology to that of the Classics, with its emphasis on scholarship, philology, and historical study – the fixing of texts in historical time and the perpetual search for the determinants of a single, unified, and agreed meaning.

The historical moment which saw the emergence of 'English' as an academic discipline also produced the nineteenth-century colonial form of imperialism (Batsleer et al. 1985: 14, 19–25). Gauri Viswanathan has presented strong arguments for relating the 'institutionalisation and subsequent valorisation of English literary study [to] a shape and an ideological content developed in the colonial context', and specifically as it developed in India, where:

> British colonial administrators, provoked by missionaries on the one hand and fears of native insubordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education.
>
> (Viswanathan 1987: 17)

It can be argued that the study of English and the growth of Empire proceeded from a single ideological climate and that the development of the one is intrinsically bound up with the development of the other, both at the level of simple utility (as propaganda for instance) and at the unconscious level, where it leads to the naturalizing of constructed values (e.g. civilization, humanity, etc.) which, conversely, established 'savagery', 'native', 'primitive', as their antitheses and as the object of a reforming zeal.

A 'privileging norm' was enthroned at the heart of the formation of English Studies as a template for the denial of the value of the 'peripheral', the 'marginal', the 'uncanonized'. Literature was made as central to the cultural enterprise of Empire as the monarchy was to its political formation. So when elements of the periphery and margin **/4/** threatened the exclusive claims of the centre they were rapidly incorporated. This was a process, in Edward Said's terms, of conscious affiliation proceeding under the guise of filiation (Said 1984), that is, a mimicry of the centre proceeding from a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed. It caused those from the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become 'more English than the English'. We see examples of this in such writers as Henry James and T.S. Eliot.

As post-colonial societies sought to establish their difference from Britain, the response of those who recognized this complicity between language, education, and cultural incorporation was to break the link between language and literary study by dividing 'English' departments in universities into separate schools of Linguistics and of Literature, both of which tended to view their project within a national or international context. Ngugi's essay 'On the abolition of the English department' (Ngugi 1972) is an illuminating account of the particular

arguments involved in Africa. John Docker's essay, 'The neocolonial assumption in the university teaching of English' (Tiffin 1978: 26–31), addresses similar problems in the settler colony context, describing a situation in which, in contrast to Kenya, little genuine decolonization is yet in sight. As Docker's critique makes clear, in most post-colonial nations (including the West Indies and India) the nexus of power involving literature, language, and a dominant British culture has strongly resisted attempts to dismantle it. Even after such attempts began to succeed, the canonical nature and unquestioned status of the works of the English literary tradition and the values they incorporated remained potent in the cultural formation and the ideological institutions of education and literature. Nevertheless, the development of the post-colonial literatures has necessitated a questioning of many of the assumptions on which the study of 'English' was based.

DEVELOPMENT OF POST-COLONIAL LITERATURES

Post-colonial literatures developed through several stages which can be seen to correspond to stages both of national or regional consciousness and of the project of asserting difference from the imperial centre. During the imperial period writing in the language of the imperial **/5/** centre is inevitably, of course, produced by a literate elite whose primary identification is with the colonizing power. Thus the first texts produced in the colonies in the new language are frequently produced by 'representatives' of the imperial power; for example, gentrified settlers (Wentworth's 'Australia'), travellers and sightseers (Froude's Oceana, and his The English in the West Indies, or the travel diaries of Mary Kingsley), or the Anglo-Indian and West African administrators, soldiers, and 'boxwallahs', and, even more frequently, their memsahibs (volumes of memoirs).

Such texts can never form the basis for an indigenous culture nor can they be integrated in any way with the culture which already exists in the countries invaded. Despite their detailed reportage of landscape, custom, and language, they inevitably privilege the centre, emphasizing the 'home' over the 'native', the 'metropolitan' over the 'provincial' or 'colonial', and so forth. At a deeper level their claim to objectivity simply serves to hide the imperial discourse within which they are created. That this is true of even the consciously literary works which emerge from this moment can be illustrated by the poems and stories of Rudyard Kipling. For example, in the well-known poem 'Christmas in India' the evocative description of a Christmas day in the heat of India is contextualized by invoking its absent English counterpart. Apparently it is only through this absent and enabling signifier that the Indian daily reality can acquire legitimacy as a subject of literary discourse.

The second stage of production within the evolving discourse of the post-colonial is the literature produced 'under imperial licence' by 'natives' or 'outcasts', for instance the large body of poetry and prose produced in the nineteenth century by the English educated Indian upper class, or African 'missionary literature' (e.g. Thomas Mofolo's Chaka). The producers signify by the very fact of writing in the language of the dominant culture that they have temporarily or permanently entered a specific and privileged class endowed with the language, education, and leisure necessary to produce such works. The Australian novel Ralph Rashleigh, now known to have been written by the convict James Tucker, is a case in point. Tucker, an educated man, wrote Rashleigh as a 'special' (a privileged convict) whilst working at the penal settlement at Port Macquarie as storekeeper to the superintendent. **/6/** Written on government paper with government ink and pens, the novel was clearly produced

with the aid and support of the superintendent. Tucker had momentarily gained access to the privilege of literature. Significantly, the moment of privilege did not last and he died in poverty at the age of fifty-eight at Liverpool asylum in Sydney.

It is characteristic of these early post-colonial texts that the potential for subversion in their themes cannot be fully realized. Although they deal with such powerful material as the brutality of the convict system (Tucker's Rashleigh), the historical potency of the supplanted and denigrated native cultures (Mofolo's Chaka), or the existence of a rich cultural heritage older and more extensive than that of Europe (any of many nineteenth-century Indo-Anglian poets, such as Ram Sharma) they are prevented from fully exploring their anti-imperial potential. Both the available discourse and the material conditions of production for literature in these early post-colonial societies restrain this possibility. The institution of 'Literature' in the colony is under the direct control of the imperial ruling class who alone license the acceptable form and permit the publication and distribution of the resulting work. So, texts of this kind come into being within the constraints of a discourse and the institutional practice of a patronage system which limits and undercuts their assertion of a different perspective. The development of independent literatures depended upon the abrogation of this constraining power and the appropriation of language and writing for new and distinctive usages. Such an appropriation is clearly the most significant feature in the emergence of modern post-colonial literatures (see chapters 2 and 3).

HEGEMONY

Why should post-colonial societies continue to engage with the imperial experience? Since all the post-colonial societies we discuss have achieved political independence, why is the issue of coloniality still relevant at all? This question of why the empire needs to write back to a centre once the imperial structure has been dismantled in political terms is an important one. Britain, like the other dominant colonial powers of the nineteenth century, has been relegated to a relatively minor place in international affairs. In the spheres of politics and /7/ economics, and increasingly in the vital new area of the mass media, Britain and the other European imperial powers have been superseded by the emergent power of the USA. Nevertheless, through the literary canon, the body of British texts which all too frequently still acts as a touchstone of taste and value, and through RS-English (Received Standard English), which asserts the English of south-east England as a universal norm, the weight of antiquity continues to dominate cultural production in much of the post-colonial world. This cultural hegemony has been maintained through canonical assumptions about literary activity, and through attitudes to postcolonial literatures which identify them as isolated national off-shoots of English literature, and which therefore relegate them to marginal and subordinate positions. More recently, as the range and strength of these literatures has become undeniable, a process of incorporation has begun in which, employing Eurocentric standards of judgement, the centre has sought to claim those works and writers of which it approves as British.2 In all these respects the parallel between the situation of post-colonial writing and that of feminist writing is striking (see ch. 5).

LANGUAGE

One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all 'variants' as impurities. As a character in Mrs Campbell Praed's nineteenth-

century Australian novel Policy and Passion puts it, ‘To be colonial is to talk Australian slang; to be . . . everything that is abominable’ (Campbell Praed 1881:154). Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice. For this reason, the discussion of post-colonial writing which follows is largely a discussion of the process by which the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture.

In order to focus on the complex ways in which the English **/8/** language has been used in these societies, and to indicate their own sense of difference, we distinguish in this account between the ‘standard’ British English inherited from the empire and the english which the language has become in post-colonial countries. Though British imperialism resulted in the spread of a language, English, across the globe, the english of Jamaicans is not the english of Canadians, Maoris, or Kenyans. We need to distinguish between what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of the erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world. For this reason the distinction between English and english will be used throughout our text as an indication of the various ways in which the language has been employed by different linguistic communities in the post-colonial world.

The use of these terms asserts the fact that a continuum exists between the various linguistic practices which constitute english usage in the modern world. Although linguistically the links between English and the various post-colonial englishes in use today can be seen as unbroken, the political reality is that English sets itself apart from all other ‘lesser’ variants and so demands to be interrogated about its claim to this special status.

In practice the history of this distinction between English and English has been between the claims of a powerful ‘centre’ and a multitude of intersecting usages designated as ‘peripheries’. The language of these ‘peripheries’ was shaped by an oppressive discourse of power. Yet they have been the site of some of the most exciting and innovative literatures of the modern period and this has, at least in part, been the result of the energies uncovered by the political tension between the idea of a normative code and a variety of regional usages.

PLACE AND DISPLACEMENT

A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place. Indeed, critics such as D. E. S. Maxwell have made this the defining model of **/9/** post-coloniality (see ch. 1). A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or ‘voluntary’ removal for indentured labour. Or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model. The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention, or a mixture of the two. Beyond their historical and cultural differences, place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in english.

The alienation of vision and the crisis in self-image which this displacement produces is as frequently found in the accounts of Canadian 'free settlers' as of Australian convicts, Fijian–Indian or Trinidadian–Indian indentured labourers, West Indian slaves, or forcibly colonized Nigerians or Bengalis. Although this is pragmatically demonstrable from a wide range of texts, it is difficult to account for by theories which see this social and linguistic alienation as resulting only from overtly oppressive forms of colonization such as slavery or conquest. An adequate account of this practice must go beyond the usual categories of social alienation such as master/slave; free/bonded; ruler/ruled, however important and widespread these may be in post-colonial cultures. After all, why should the free settler, formally unconstrained, and theoretically free to continue in the possession and practice of 'Englishness', also show clear signs of alienation even within the first generation of settlement, and manifest a tendency to seek an alternative, differentiated identity?

The most widely shared discursive practice within which this alienation can be identified is the construction of 'place'. The gap which opens between the experience of place and the language available to describe it forms a classic and all-pervasive feature of post-colonial texts. This gap occurs for those whose language seems inadequate to describe a new place, for those whose language is systematically destroyed by enslavement, and for those whose language has been rendered unprivileged by the imposition of the language of a colonizing power. Some admixture of one or other of these models can describe the **/10/** situation of all post-colonial societies. In each case a condition of alienation is inevitable until the colonizing language has been replaced or appropriated as english.

That imperialism results in a profound linguistic alienation is obviously the case in cultures in which a pre-colonial culture is suppressed by military conquest or enslavement. So, for example, an Indian writer like Raja Rao or a Nigerian writer such as Chinua Achebe have needed to transform the language, to use it in a different way in its new context and so, as Achebe says, quoting James Baldwin, make it 'bear the burden' of their experience (Achebe 1975: 62). Although Rao and Achebe write from their own place and so have not suffered a literal geographical displacement, they have to overcome an imposed gap resulting from the linguistic displacement of the pre-colonial language by English. This process occurs within a more comprehensive discourse of place and displacement in the wider post-colonial context. Such alienation is shared by those whose possession of English is indisputably 'native' (in the sense of being possessed from birth) yet who begin to feel alienated within its practice once its vocabulary, categories, and codes are felt to be inadequate or inappropriate to describe the fauna, the physical and geographical conditions, or the cultural practices they have developed in a new land. The Canadian poet Joseph Howe, for instance, plucks his picture of a moose from some repository of English nursery rhyme romanticism:

> . . . the gay moose in jocund gambol springs,
>
> Cropping the foliage Nature round him flings.
>
> (Howe 1874: 100)

Such absurdities demonstrate the pressing need these native speakers share with those colonized peoples who were directly oppressed to escape from the inadequacies and imperial constraints of English as a social practice. They need, that is, to escape from the implicit body of assumptions to which English was attached, its aesthetic and social values, the formal and

historically limited constraints of genre, and the oppressive political and cultural assertion of metropolitan dominance, of centre over margin (Ngugi 1986). This is not to say that the English **/11/** language is inherently incapable of accounting for post-colonial experience, but that it needs to develop an 'appropriate' usage in order to do so (by becoming a distinct and unique form of english). The energizing feature of this displacement is its capacity to interrogate and subvert the imperial cultural formations.

The pressure to develop such a usage manifests itself early in the development of 'english' literatures. It is therefore arguable that, even before the development of a conscious de-colonizing stance, the experience of a new place, identifiably different in its physical characteristics, constrains, for instance, the new settlers to demand a language which will allow them to express their sense of 'Otherness'. Landscape, flora and fauna, seasons, climatic conditions are formally distinguished from the place of origin as home/colony, Europe/New World, Europe/Antipodes, metropolitan/provincial, and so on, although, of course, at this stage no effective models exist for expressing this sense of Otherness in a positive and creative way.

POST-COLONIALITY AND THEORY

The idea of 'post-colonial literary theory' emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing. European theories themselves emerge from particular cultural traditions which are hidden by false notions of 'the universal'. Theories of style and genre, assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value systems are all radically questioned by the practices of postcolonial writing. Post-colonial theory has proceeded from the need to address this different practice. Indigenous theories have developed to accommodate the differences within the various cultural traditions as well as the desire to describe in a comparative way the features shared across those traditions.

The political and cultural monocentrism of the colonial enterprise was a natural result of the philosophical traditions of the European world and the systems of representation which this privileged. Nineteenth-century imperial expansion, the culmination of the outward and dominating thrust of Europeans into the world beyond Europe, which began during the early Renaissance, was underpinned **/12/** in complex ways by these assumptions. In the first instance this produced practices of cultural subservience, characterized by one postcolonial critic as 'cultural cringe' (Phillips 1958). Subsequently, the emergence of identifiable indigenous theories in reaction to this formed an important element in the development of specific national and regional consciousnesses (see ch. 4).

Paradoxically, however, imperial expansion has had a radically destabilizing effect on its own preoccupations and power. In pushing the colonial world to the margins of experience the 'centre' pushed consciousness beyond the point at which monocentrism in all spheres of thought could be accepted without question. In other words the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the 'margin' turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious. Marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy. The impetus towards decentring and pluralism has always been present in the history of European thought and has reached its latest development in post-structuralism. But the situation of marginalized societies and cultures enabled them to

come to this position much earlier and more directly (Brydon 1984b). These notions are implicit in post-colonial texts from the imperial period to the present day.

The task of this book is twofold: first, to identify the range and nature of these post-colonial texts, and, second, to describe the various theories which have emerged so far to account for them. So in the first chapter we consider the development of descriptive models of postcolonial writing. Since it is not possible to read post-colonial texts without coming to terms with the ways in which they appropriate and deploy the material of linguistic culture, in the second chapter we outline the process by which language is captured to form a distinctive discursive practice. In the third chapter we demonstrate, through symptomatic readings of texts, how post-colonial writing interacts with the social and material practices of colonialism. One of the major purposes of this book is to explain the nature of existing post-colonial theory and the way in which it interacts with, and dismantles, some of the assumptions of European theory. In the fourth chapter we discuss **/13/** the issues in the development of indigenous post-colonial theories, and in the fifth we examine the larger implications of post-coloniality for theories of language, for literary theory, and for social and political analysis in general.