

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 2

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Welcome back to the course on postcolonial literature. In our previous lecture, we discussed the various meanings of the term postcolonialism, and we also explored the various nuances of the two components – the term “colonialism” and the prefix “post” – that come together to form the word postcolonialism. In today’s lecture we will try to understand the relevance of the term postcolonialism within the field of literary studies.

But before we begin our discussion, it is important to note that the word postcolonialism, unlike the word “imagism” for instance, was not specifically coined to signify a particular kind of literature. In fact, the use of the term postcolonial, which can be traced as far back as the late nineteenth century, had little connection with the field of literary studies till the late 1980s. Till that time, it was used primarily as an adjective to refer to conditions or situations that occurred or existed after the end of colonial rule in places like America or India. In this context postcolonial meant post-independence and was almost always used with a hyphen separating “post” from “colonial”. It was only since the late 1980s and the 1990s that postcolonialism became an integral part of literary discussion, and it brought together two already existing areas of English literary studies – the first is the study of “commonwealth literature” and the second area is what I would refer to as “colonial discourse analysis” which is the study of “colonial discourse”. These two areas are therefore the roots of postcolonial literary studies, and to understand the present shape that the category postcolonial literature has come to acquire, it is important to know about the two constituent areas.

So let us start with commonwealth literature. The word commonwealth signifies a grouping of nation states which were once colonies of Britain. The British Empire which had reached its

peak in terms of occupied territory by the 1920s had started breaking up from 1940s. India was in fact one of the first countries to break away. Now the sovereign nation states which were emerging out of the British empire, and which shared a common history of British colonialism, voluntarily decided to form a confederation with the British monarch heading this group of states. This confederation of sovereign states which were once colonies of Britain came to be known as the commonwealth.

This grouping of nation still exists and this is a map which highlights in green the countries which are now the member states of the commonwealth. Now if you look at this map carefully, you will realise that not all countries which were once British colonies are now part of the commonwealth. For instance, one very prominent exception that we can see here is the United States of America — which is not a part of the commonwealth. If you remember your history, you will know that much of what constitutes the United States of America today was under British rule till 1776. Indeed, America still celebrates its independence day every 4th of July. But this erstwhile British colony does not feature in the list of commonwealth nations. It is an anomaly and there are many such anomalies which got compounded when the term commonwealth started getting used in the academia to designate a special category of literature.

The first major attempt to use the term commonwealth to denote a specific literary category was made in 1964 when the University of Leeds in England organised the first Commonwealth Literature Conference in an effort to bring under a single umbrella the significant amount of English literature that was coming out of erstwhile British colonies. By the time the conference was organised, R.K Narayan from India, V.S. Naipaul from the West Indian island of Trinidad, and Chinua Achebe from Nigeria were being regularly published in Britain and America and their names had become a familiar part of the English literary scene. The literature that they produced was vaguely referred to as the “new” literature in English. The attempt of the conference was to bring authors like Narayan, Naipaul and Achebe in the limelight and to

create a new field of literary studies around their work. This was to be the field of commonwealth literature – the literature that came out of the empire that was now fast dissolving.

Just like in the political group of commonwealth nations America remains conspicuously absent, in the category of commonwealth literature too the literature of America was never included. But what was even more curious was that the category of Commonwealth Literature did not also include British literature in spite of the fact that Britain, as the colonial metropolis was and still is very much a part of the Commonwealth of nations. The Indian born novelist Salman Rushdie while attending another conference on Commonwealth literature almost twenty years after the first conference at Leeds, noted that the category of Commonwealth literature was actually being used to group together the English literature that was coming out only from the ex-colonies of Britain and not from the metropolis itself. And this was being done so as to distinguish the former as a separate grade of literature that was inferior from British literature and therefore as something that needed to be studied separately.

What also concerned Rushdie was that within the field of Commonwealth Literature, the authors and their works were arranged in neat subgroups according to their nations of origin. It was thus expected that an author born in India will write only about India and his or her writings will represent an essence of Indianness that was unique and uncontaminated by anything else. Thus, for instance, a novel by R.K. Narayan was supposed to represent a traditional “Indianness” which was apparently distinct and different from the “Australianness” of the works of Patrick White and which in turn was conceived as distinct and separate from the “Africanness” of the novels of Chinua Achebe. In other words, though the category of commonwealth literature brought together writers from various places like Africa, Australia, India, and West Indies they were nevertheless strictly compartmentalised using national labels.

Now such an attitude to literature was problematic at two different levels. Firstly, the post sixteenth century colonial period was a time that was marked by tremendous amount of human movement. People moved around a lot either because they could afford to travel or because they were forcibly displaced due to economic and political reasons. Take the case of Salman Rushdie for instance. Rushdie was born in the Indian city of Bombay but went to England as a student and ultimately settled down there. His family in turn moved from India to Pakistan. Rushdie has written extensively on India of course, but he has also written much about Britain and about Pakistan. Does this make him an Indian author, a British author, or a Pakistani author? Which subcategory of national literature should his work be consigned to?

Now if it is so difficult to pin down authors to one particular country or another, then one can very easily understand that it is almost impossible to pin down cultures and literatures within the confines of one nation-state or another. As Rushdie himself has pointed out in a number of occasions, authors regularly transcend national boundaries and draw cultural influences from places far removed from their countries of origin. Thus for instance, the work of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore had exerted a strong influence on various South American authors after his works were translated by the Argentine writer Victoria Ocampo. On the other hand, the literary technique of magic realism developed by South American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez during the 1960s and 1970s tremendously influenced the works of very many Indian novelists including Rushdie. By not factoring in this interconnected nature of literary and cultural influences as well as the problematic relation of authors from ex-colonies with the land of their origin, Commonwealth literature was failing as a category through which works of authors as different as R. K. Narayan, Chinua Achebe and V. S. Naipaul could be studied together.

The attempt to read literature by using the national framework was also problematic in another way. The literature that a commonwealth nation like India produces is written in a number of

different languages. English is definitely one of them but it is far from being the only language in which Indian literature is produced. Though commonwealth literature used the concept of nation and national traditions to group together authors and their works, it never really looked beyond the texts produced in English. Now as the case of India proves, this results in a severely limited vision that is not in sync with the complexity of the literary landscape of a number of erstwhile British colonies. Thus commonwealth literature soon became an unworkable category both because it was not international enough and because it was not national enough. Not international enough because it did not take into account the cross cultural influences and the cross territorial affiliation of the authors coming from the once colonised parts of the world. Not national enough because it failed to take into account the wide verities of non-English literature that a commonwealth nation like India produces.

However, the most problematic aspect of the category commonwealth literature was the way it connected with the legacy of colonialism. The notion of a commonwealth headed by the British monarch is almost inevitably informed by a spirit of nostalgia for the bygone British empire. Indeed, the category of commonwealth literature can be interpreted at one level as an attempt to culturally keep together the colonial empire which was politically no more there. But political decolonisation was achieved by the nation-states that emerged out of the shadow of colonialism after a prolonged struggle, and authors who emerged from these new nation states were as much heir to legacy of anticolonial struggle as they were to the legacies that colonialism had left behind. It is therefore no wonder that the feeling of nostalgia for the colonial empire that lurked behind the term commonwealth would make the label of commonwealth literature unattractive to some of the very authors that it was supposed to describe. This aversion towards the category of commonwealth literature was perhaps best displayed when the novelist Amitav Ghosh refused to let his novel *The Glass Palace* be considered for the 2001 Commonwealth Writers prize. One major reason for this decision, as Ghosh cites in his letter to the award giving

committee, had to do with the nostalgic memorialisation of the colonial past that informed the idea of the commonwealth. According to Ghosh, such glorified memorialisation of the colonial empire was precisely what he was trying to resist through his novels like *The Glass Palace*. And this was true for many writers who were emerging from the ex-colonies of Britain. They were writing against the idea of the colonial empire and the category of commonwealth literature remained largely impervious to this element of anti-colonialism.

So by the 1990s, commonwealth literature as a literary category was losing favour because of these different reasons and postcolonial literature was emerging as the new label to designate the works emerging from the colonies. If we look at the kind of literature that was being grouped together using the term postcolonial, we will see that there is not much difference from the archive of the commonwealth literature. Authors like R K Narayan, Derek Walcott, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and Salman Rushdie, who were being read under the banner of commonwealth literature continued to be relevant even within the category of postcolonial literature.

However, though the literature has remained the same, the critical approach to this literature has changed significantly. As we will see later in this course, unlike commonwealth literature, the field of postcolonial studies is underlined by a keen awareness of the fact that both cultures, as well as human beings who produce these cultures, are incessantly travelling, crossing borders and intermixing with one another. Also it is worth noting that though postcolonial literature too concerns itself primarily with English literature, yet unlike commonwealth there is a genuine attempt to bring to the fore non-English literatures as well. For instance the Bengali author Mahasweta Devi is today a central part of the postcolonial literary canon. However, having said that one needs to admit that postcolonial literary studies still predominantly confines itself to English language and Devi's works are known primarily through their English translations. In fact, the moment somebody like the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o stops

writing in English and starts using his native Gikuyu language, his works also drops out of the radar of postcolonial literature.

However, the most radical change in the approach to literary texts that distinguishes postcolonial literature from commonwealth literature is the former's focus on anticolonial resistance. Whereas commonwealth literature was informed by a colonial nostalgia, postcolonial literature is informed by a highly critical approach towards colonialism. Indeed, postcolonial literature is not merely a grouping of literature that has emerged out of the ex-European, rather it is a grouping of literature which attempts to subvert and undo the effects of colonial violence. This critical attitude which informs the postcolonial studies today is the legacy of what I have referred to earlier in this lecture as "colonial discourse analysis". We will learn more about this concept of "colonial discourse analysis" in our next lecture. Thank you.