

ELLEKE BOEHMER

Colonial & Postcolonial Literature



OPUS

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MIGRANT METAPHORS

ELLEKE BOEHME



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Colonial and Postcolonial Literature

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From the reviews:

'a sustained, intelligent and refreshingly sceptical discussion about what constitutes the focus of post-colonial literary studies . . . This is an excellent introduction.'

THES

'a first rate account of colonial and postcolonial writing, which can be recommended to students both as an introduction to the field and as a summary of one present state of criticism'

Wasafiri

When I next saw the picture of Columbus sitting there all locked up in his chains, I wrote under it the words “The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go”. I had written this out with my fountain pen, and in Old English lettering—a script I had recently mastered. As I sat there looking at the picture, I traced the words with my pen over and over, so that the letters grew big and you could read what I had written from not very far away.

Jamaica Kincaid, ‘Columbus in Chains’,
Annie John, 1985

Gone the ascetic pastimes, the Persian
scholarship, the wild boar run to ground,
the watercolours of the sun and wind.
Names rise like outcrops on the rich terrain,
like carapaces of the Mughal tombs
lop-sided in the rice-fields, boarded-up
near railway-crossings and small aerodromes.
‘India’s a peacock-shrine next to a shop
selling mangola, sitars, lucky charms,
heavenly Buddhas smiling in their sleep.’

Geoffrey Hill, *A Short History of
British India* (III)

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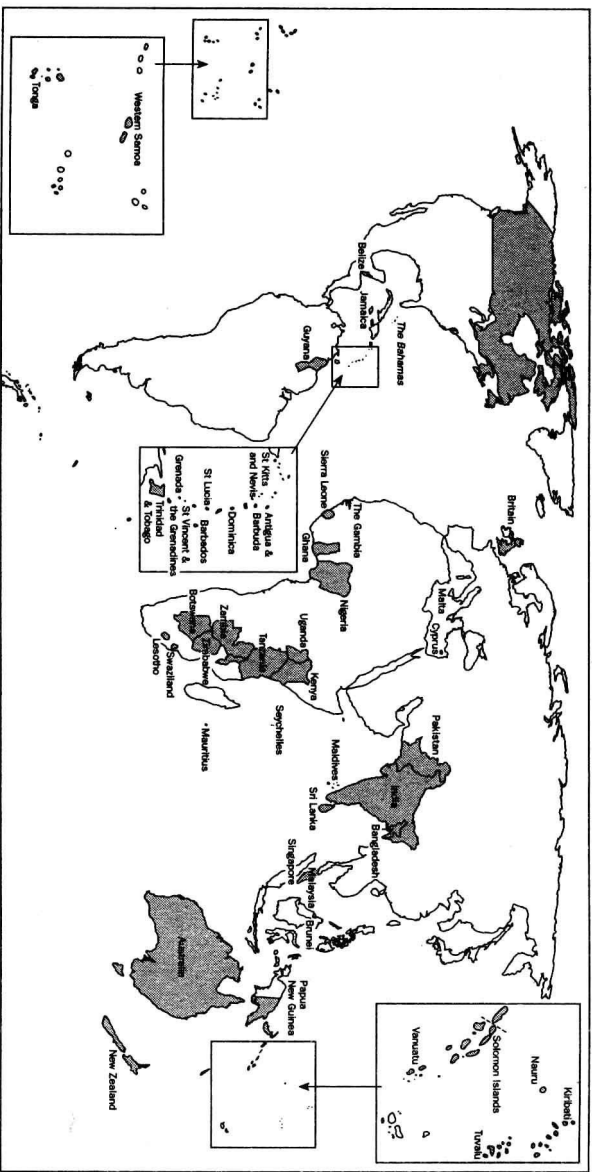
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MAP 3 The Commonwealth in 1994
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Introduction

This is a book about the writing of empire, and about writing in opposition to empire. It looks at a historical series of imaginative acts involved with colonization and its aftermath. The subject is peculiarly large. And the project of critical overview is itself, ironically, almost imperialistic in scope. Indeed what could be more global, or more vast, than the writing of and against empire, unless it is the attempt to generalize about that writing?

Our subject, 'colonial and postcolonial literature', would on a superficial reading seem to embrace the majority of the world's modern literatures. If we agree that the history of Europe for the past few centuries has been profoundly shaped by colonial interests, then there is a sense in which much of the literature produced during that time can be said to be colonial or post-colonial, even if only tangentially so. Geographically anyway, the terrain potentially covered by our title reaches across the time-zones of the globe. Historically, it extends back five hundred years or so to the days of European mercantile expansion, Columbus's landing in America, and the exploration of the coast of Africa past the Cape of Good Hope. But some might feel that even this wide definition of the colonial is too constricting. Marlow in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness', for example, draws attention to the similarities between the British colonization of Africa and the conquering of Britain by imperial Rome many centuries before. According to this view, *Beowulf* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* could be read as postcolonial texts.

So I shall begin by drawing limits. This study is chiefly concerned with literature written in English, which even if only to a small extent narrows the field. It is on the British Empire that our attention will be focused. The last two hundred years have witnessed both the moment of greatest expansion of that

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Empire, and its demise. In the late Victorian age the projection of British authority abroad was particularly powerful and far-reaching. The period also saw unprecedented dominance of world trade and communications systems by European powers. It is this period which outlines the boundaries of discussion: the century of British colonialism on a grand scale, or high imperialism, and the decades of anti- or postcolonial activity which followed.

It is difficult to proceed much further without indicating more clearly, if in a preliminary way, what words like *colonial*, *imperial*, and *postcolonial* mean. In this book, imperialism can be taken to refer to the authority assumed by a state over another territory—authority expressed in pageantry and symbolism, as well as in military power. It is a term associated in particular with the expansion of the European nation-state in the nineteenth century. Colonialism involves the consolidation of imperial power, and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands.

Colonial literature, which is assumed to be literature reflecting a colonial ethos, usually lacks more precise definition, partly because it is now not much canonized, and partly because it is so heterogeneous. In general, texts described as colonial or colonialist are taken to be those, like *King Solomon's Mines* or Kipling's poems, which exhibit a tinge of local colonial colour, or feature colonial motifs—for example, the quest beyond the frontiers of civilization.

To be more explicit about what it is we are discussing, I make a distinction in this book between the terms *colonial* and *colonialist* when applied to literature. Colonial literature, which is the more general term, will be taken to mean writing concerned with colonial perceptions and experience, written mainly by metropolitans, but also by creoles and indigenes, during colonial times. Controversially, perhaps, colonial literature therefore includes literature written in Britain as well as in the rest of the Empire during the colonial period. Even if it did not make direct reference to colonial matters, metropolitan writing—Dickens's

novels, for example, or Trollope's travelogues—participated in organizing and reinforcing perceptions of Britain as a dominant world power. Writers contributed to the complex of attitudes that made imperialism seem part of the order of things.

As we shall see, colonialist literature in contrast was that which was specifically concerned with colonial expansion. On the whole it was literature written by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European lands dominated by them. It embodied the imperialists' point of view. When we speak of the writing of empire it is this literature in particular that will occupy our attention. Colonialist literature was informed by theories concerning the superiority of European culture and the rightness of empire. Its distinctive stereotyped language was geared to mediating the white man's relationship with colonized peoples.

Rather than simply being the writing which 'came after' empire, *postcolonial* literature is that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives. As well as a change in power, decolonization demanded symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings. Postcolonial literature formed part of that process of overhaul. To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization—the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination. Postcolonial literature, therefore, is deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under empire. Especially in its early stages it can also be a nationalist writing. Building on this, *postcoloniality* is defined as that condition in which colonized peoples seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical subjects. Following more recent usage, the postcolonial must be distinguished from the more conventional hyphenated term *post-colonial*, which in this book will be taken as another period term designating the post-Second World War era. Of course, neither term need apply only to the English-speaking world, nor only to literature.

Postcolonial writing in English also goes by the names of new writing in English, world fiction, and Commonwealth literature,

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the Commonwealth being a loose cultural and political amalgam of nations which before 1947 formed part of the British Empire. Recently, distancing himself from the implications of 'coming after' in 'postcolonial', the writer Ben Okri offered the description 'literature of the newly ascendant spirit'.¹ However, the term postcolonial still draws support for its usefulness as an umbrella term, a way of bracketing together the literatures written in those countries which were once colonies of Britain. The United States is excluded because it won independence long before other colonial places, and its literature has therefore followed a very different trajectory. Ireland too is believed to represent a different case because its history has been so closely and so long linked to that of Britain. However, as its resistance struggle was in certain other colonies taken as talismanic by nationalist movements, occasional references to Ireland will be made in the course of this study. Despite these restrictions, at times the sheer spread of what we name postcolonial can be a problem, such as when, say, the contemporary novel in Canada and calypso in Trinidad are both described in this way. In postcolonial criticism, admittedly, the tendency is sometimes to stress the similarity of texts written in the former colonies of the British Empire, at the expense of recognizing their differences.

Another problem is that definitions of the postcolonial tend to assume that this category of writing is diametrically opposed to colonial literature. We are said to have on the one hand postcolonial subversion and plenitude, on the other, the single-voiced authority of colonial writing. The main difficulty with a warring dichotomy such as this is the limitations it imposes, creating definitions which, no matter how focused on plurality, produce their own kind of orthodoxy. Thus the postcolonial tends automatically to be thought of as multivocal, 'mongrelized', and disruptive, even though this is not always the case. Similarly, on the other side of the binary, the colonial need not always signify texts rigidly associated with the colonial power. Colonial, or even colonialist writing was never as invasively confident or as pompously dismissive of indigenous cultures as its oppositional pairing with postcolonial writing might suggest.

It is worth recalling also that initiatives which we now call postcolonial first began to emerge *before* the time of formal independence, and therefore formed part of colonial literature.

This book is committed to looking at literature in the broad context of imperial and post-imperial history. But it does not take the mimetic view that literature simply reflected political and social developments. On the contrary, empire is approached as in the main a textual undertaking—as are the movements which emerged in opposition to empire. Throughout, my focus is on the modes of literary interpretation which distinguished colonial and anti-colonial experience. An enormous range of different colonial and postcolonial writings might legitimately have been included in the study. But because of the interest in the figural—in efforts to imagine empire and resistance to empire—the analysis generally concentrates on that writing which is consciously *formed* or wrought, and in which the transforming powers of invention and fantasy are predominant: literature, that is, in the sense of novels and poems, and also, though to a lesser extent, letters, plays, essays, and travelogues.

As may be obvious, one of the starting assumptions of this book is that cultural representations were central first to the process of colonizing other lands, and then again to the process of obtaining independence from the colonizer. 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. The belief here is that colonialist and postcolonial literatures did not simply articulate colonial or nationalist preoccupations; they also contributed to the making, definition, and clarification of those same preoccupations. Symbols from well-known stories, for example, were enlisted by Europeans in their attempt to make sense of strange and complex worlds beyond the seas. The myriad writings of empire, not poems and novels only, but more functional texts such as law reports, journalistic articles, and anthropological journals were often ornately figural and full of literary allusion. Nor was the colonial system alone in its collaboration with imaginative writing. In the post-colonial period, too, as Chinua Achebe has said, 'stories define us'.

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Nationalist movements have relied on literature, on novelists, singers, and playwrights, to hone rallying symbols of past and self through which dignity might be reasserted. The well-known image of the oppressed speaking out of silence has meant a willed intervention by colonized people in the fictions which presumed to describe them.

The approach taken in this book is roughly chronological, and, if I can put it this way, both emblematic and thematic. The aim is to look at symptomatic patterns of perception in which writers participated, and to which they may also have contributed in their work. To survey the broad field, but also to give a sense of its immense diversity, discussion tends to oscillate between the general and the particular. An effort has been made in each case to focus on those aspects of the literature which are illustrative of wider developments. Throughout, compromises have had to be made between the listing method, which broadly reflects diversity and number, but gives little sense of particularity or detail, and closer readings of key texts, which offer the detail but can miss the general shape of things.

As probably goes without saying, the commentary offered is supported by postcolonial critical discourse. Terms and issues highlighted in this criticism—colonial alienation, mimicry, hybridity, and so on—are related to relevant texts and groups of texts in what is hoped will be an illuminating way. But the book also diverges at certain points from what has become the more standard approach in postcolonial studies. Influenced in part by post-structuralism, in part by political developments in the Western academy, postcolonial critical discourse is a proliferating set of reading practices which has developed over the past fifteen years or so, following the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), with the intention of analysing aspects of colonial and postcolonial writing. Until now, apart from a few surveys of Commonwealth literature, and the remarkably synoptic book, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), postcolonial discussion has by and large confined itself to sophisticated theoretical commentary which, though often insightful, can tend to be rather general, or indeed generalizing, in its scope. Because of

this generalizing reach, and the emphasis on textual resistance specifically, there is also a tendency in some postcolonial criticism for historical and political context to be neglected. This is paradoxical given that both colonial and postcolonial literatures find their defining parameters in history.

In this book, an attempt is made first to introduce more texts and contexts into the discussion of colonial and postcolonial issues, in other words, to exemplify further. The second aim is to consider broader developments than are usually covered in the critical essay format in which postcolonial analysis most often appears. Attention will be directed to developments across time, to transformations and disjunctures as well as to connections and interrelations between different writings. Invoking a concept of diachrony or historical change, this kind of approach goes somewhat against the grain of the recent interest among theorists in difference, individuality, and specific moments. However, based on the idea that there were links between writings in different parts of the Empire, and at different times in the colonized or ex-colonized world, this account is intended to be more expository than are many critical studies in the field.

My object, in sum, is to expand some of the discrete observations of postcolonial theory into a longer *durée*: a narrative about the writing that accompanied empire, and the writing that came to supplant it. By implication, therefore, what follows is also in part a story about the making of the globalized culture of the late twentieth century; about the entry of once-colonized Others into the West. We shall see how imperialism disseminated European influences across the world, so bringing vastly different cultures into proximity. In the pages of postcolonial literature we shall also observe how these different cultures have continued flamboyantly to mix and mingle with one another, a development which has permanently transformed the English literary canon, and which has blown the English language, as once was, to the four winds.

So far I have fixed limits and definitions in an effort to bring some order into what is a veritable universe of writings. But a disclaimer is still necessary. The literatures of empire and of the