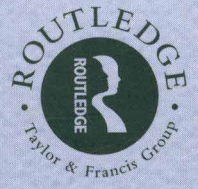
The Language of Postcolonial Literatures

An introduction

Ismail S. Talib



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London and New York

First published 2002 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

Typeset in Baskerville by
Prepress Projects Ltd, Perth, Scotland (www.prepress-projects.co.uk)
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Talib, Ismail S., 1955–
The language of postcolonial literatures: an introduction/Ismail S. Talib.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0–415–24018–2 (hardcover) – ISBN 0–415–24019–0 (pbk.)
1. Commonwealth literature (English) – History and criticism.
2. Nationalism and literature – English-speaking countries.
3. Nationalism and literature – Commonwealth countries.
4. Language and culture – English-speaking countries. 5. Language and culure – Commonwealth countries. 6. Postcolonialism – English-speaking countries. 7. English language – Commonwealth countries.
8. Postcolonialism – Commonwealth countries. 9. Decolonization in literature. I. Title.

PR9080.5 .T35 2002
820.9'9171241–dc21 2001051055

The Language of Postcolonial Literatures

This book provides a comprehensive introduction to some of the central features of language in a wide variety of postcolonial texts.

Many international works of literature in English cannot be divorced from their connection to British imperialism. In *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures*, Talib argues that this connection is being challenged by postcolonial writers. The book draws on a range of writers, from Jean Rhys and Derek Walcott to Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Nuruddin Farah and Salman Rushdie, to show how English has been shaped by and has had to contend with other languages in former British colonies. Exploring literatures from a range of countries, including India, Nigeria, Canada, Australia, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and the Caribbean, Talib shows how individuals retain cultural and national identity in the face of such changes. The book further demonstrates that language is one of the central concerns of postcolonial literatures.

The Language of Postcolonial Literatures is invaluable for anyone with an interest in the evolution and development of English and its use in contemporary world literatures.

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Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the help, example, precedence and inspiration of many people: creative writers from the postcolonial world, scholars of their writings and colleagues and friends.

In writing this book, I am immensely grateful to the following scholars for their valuable ideas, informativeness and resourcefulness in research: Helen Gilbert, Joanne Tompkins, Bruce King, Feroza Jussawala, Reed Way Dasenbrock, John Skinner, Dennis Walder, Robert Crawford, Jane Wilkinson, Stuart Hall, Graham Huggan, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, William Walsh, Elleke Boehmer, David Westley, N.F. Blake, Maya Jaggi, Ania Loomba, Ben Anderson, Marshall McLuhan, Richard Bailey, Stephen Slemon, Raka Shome, Peter Young, Bill Ashcroft and Michael Wilding.

I should also mention the following scholars and critics, whose ideas and observations have helped me to tie the various strands of the book together: Makarand Paranjape, Susan Van Zanten Gallagher, Kirsten Malmkjær, Denis Donoghue, D.S. Izevbaye, Biodun Jeyifo, Braj Kachru, David T. Haberly, Ali Mazrui, Sachidananda Mohanty, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Harish Trivedi, George Yancy, James Munson, Juliet Okonkwo, Kenneth Ramchand, Gauri Viswanathan, Anandam Kavoori, Paulina Alberto, James Wood, T.J. Cribb, Arnold Rampersad, Everett Emerson, Douglas Barbour and Paula Krebs.

This book would not have been realised without a number of friends and colleagues who have encouraged me and provided me with valuable suggestions or ideas, both before and during its writing. I would like especially to mention Ron Carter, who suggested that I should write a book of this nature some years ago. Kirpal Singh has been a faithful friend and inspiration throughout the writing of this book. I am immensely grateful to Bill Ashcroft and John McRae, who read an earlier version of the book and made some valuable suggestions. I would also like to mention colleagues or former colleagues at my Department in

Singapore who have helped me in various ways: Walter Lim, Barnard Turner, Anthea Fraser Gupta, Peter Tan, Koh Tai Ann, Rajeev Patke, Kay O'Halloran and Edward McDonald. Last (but certainly not least), I would like to thank Louisa Semlyen, Katharine Jacobson, Christy Kirkpatrick and the language editorial staff at Routledge, without whose untiring help and interest in the project this book would literally not have come into being.

Ismail S. Talib
November 2001

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1 English in (post)colonial contexts

England colonised and the importance of Latin

In the past, England has been a colony. For nearly four centuries it was ruled by Rome. The last time there was a successful invasion was in 1066, when it was conquered by the Normans. Although England might have been independent after the Norman conquest, 'it doesn't compensate for [its] shocking home record' up until then, as it was 'rolled by the Romans, Vikings and various Germanic tribes in quick succession' (Thompson 1998: 6; see also Carter and McRae 1997: 5–6; Hunter 1997: 543–5). One of the invading Germanic tribes introduced into England what was to become the English language. Thus, the language closely associated with England (or earlier versions of the language) only emerged after the Romans had left. The close connection of the English language to colonialism can thus be seen from two different angles: it spread throughout the world partly as a result of British colonialism, but was itself introduced into Britain as a result of invasion.

Latin and English language and literature

Latin continued to be a very important language in Britain long after the Romans had left. Indeed, it has a longer presence in Britain than English itself, which was only introduced after the Roman withdrawal. The continued importance of Latin, and the belief that it was more intrinsically expressive as a literary language (Jones 1953: 3–21), led many later English writers to write literature in that language.

Latin was a highly prestigious second language during the Norman French occupation (when contrasted with the lowly third language of English) and was used for religious and scholarly work. It was also used as the language for public worship until the middle of the sixteenth century. Indeed, so unimportant was English in England, especially in the first two centuries of Norman occupation, that there was a real danger that the language would simply die out (Dorian 1981: 2).

The belief that literature should be written in Latin remained long after the Norman French occupation. Among writers who wrote in Latin were famous English language poets, such as Andrew Marvell and John Milton. Milton even thought of writing what was to become his great epic poem *Paradise Lost* in Latin, but fortunately for the English language he changed his mind.

As a language that continues to be important after the collapse of the empire connected with it, English may now be playing a similar role to Latin. The English language and its literature today continue to grow after the demise of much of the British Empire, which is a situation that was seen earlier with regard to Latin. It is therefore ironic to note that English suffered earlier in its history as a result of the post-imperial importance of Latin. As Vincent Gillespie pointed out to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o on his visit to Oxford University, there are 'interesting parallels' between Ngũgĩ's concerns with the dominance of English over languages such as Ngũgĩ's mother tongue Gĩkũyũ, and 'those of people like John Trevisa and others who used to fight for the independence of English from Latin and French' (Ngũgĩ 1998: vii).

The English language, as Ngũgĩ (1998: vii) aptly reflects, has itself 'gone through a post-colonial phase'. The turning point came in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when there was 'a postcolonial/colonializing dynamic ... in which the English came to think of themselves and their language both as having been colonized and as potentially colonizing others' (Helgerson 1998: 289). From the seventeenth century onwards, the colonializing tendency gradually became more prominent, and today, even though the British Empire is no more, the language is still spreading across the globe.

The survival of Latin, however, unlike that of English, was partly sustained by a belief in the intrinsic superiority of classical languages. Because of their classical pedigree languages like Latin and Greek were, for a long time, regarded as intrinsically superior to other more recently developed languages, such as English. The supposed superiority of Latin led some seventeenth-century grammarians of English to think that English should be based on Latin grammar, in spite of some significant grammatical differences between the two languages. This view may seem anomalous today, but it became influential, and was to have an effect on the teaching of English grammar until the early part of the twentieth century. The supposed intrinsic superiority of Latin also led some poets in English to try to use quantitative metre for the writing of English poetry, in which metrical *feet* are measured in terms of long and short syllables. But the sounds of English resist the dominant metre of Latin poetry. The survival of English had a more practical bent, but as

will be seen later in this chapter, there have been views expressed, although less persistently than with regard to Latin, that it is intrinsically superior to other modern languages.

Ethnicity, nationality and language: a linguistic confusion

The word 'English' refers to both ethnicity and language. Its double meaning underlines a complication that is still with us. The word *English* also has a link to *nationality*, viewed in terms of residence, a sense of belonging to a community, or the citizenship of an existing political state. The last definition of nationality, at least at present, is questionable, as the political unit that matters with regard to citizenship is Britain and not England. In general, English literature is less often formally defined in terms of nationality. However, as will be seen shortly, nationality is in fact an important criterion in the attempt to define what *English literature* is. Whatever it is, the criterion of nationality to define English literature may not be helpful, but may actually increase the likelihood of more confusion.

The ethnic and linguistic split indicated by the word *English* is pretty obvious to us: although it is not common for an English person not to speak English at all, there is no logical contradiction if this happens. On the other hand, it does not mean that only an English person speaks English, as there are millions of non-English speakers of the language today. In any case, the word 'English' is arguably less confusing today than the words 'French' or 'Russian', which, in addition to language and ethnicity, are also defined in terms of citizenship. However, 'English' may suffer the same fate as 'Russian', as regards the additional definition of the word to refer to citizenship. The word 'Russian' to mean 'citizen of Russia' became a reality after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the same vein, the possibility that the word 'English' will refer to a citizen of England instead of Britain may be realised after the comprehensive devolution of Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

The distinction between language and ethnicity, or the decrease in the importance of language as a factor in defining ethnicity, may result in the search by the historically original speakers of the language for some kind of ethnic 'essence'. The identity of an ethnic group which carries the language's name becomes more difficult or elusive because its language has become internationalised. What results is an *identity* problem created by the split between race and language. In the case of the English, the identity problem may be linked to the search for the essence of 'Englishness', and the extent that it should be linked to the

language. This identity search is exacerbated by the decline in the political and economic power of Britain. As Terry Eagleton has noted:

> Englishness has never really needed to be defined before, at least in the good old Imperial days. I think the need for national definition is felt more by the underdogs, who have to define themselves against the dominant forces.
>
> (quoted in 'The Way We Are')

Effect on literary studies

The definition of the word 'English' is not merely a semantic consideration. In addition to its effect on political or cultural studies, it also has an effect on literary studies, for it touches on the question of what *English literature* is, and what should and should not be included within its reach. This, however, does not mean that its definition will draw the boundaries of English literature with extra clarity. John Skinner (1998: 7) has noted that the word 'English' lacks the distinction, for example, between ' "Arabic literature" (or literature written in the Arabic language) and "Arab literature" (literature written by Arabs)'. In a similar vein, Latin literature 'refers objectively to literature written in the Latin language rather than literature written by "Latins" ' (Skinner 1998: 25). Although ' "English literature" may yet come to refer primarily, if not exclusively, to literature written in the English language, rather than literature produced within a specific area or by a particular ethnic group' (Skinner 1998: 26), that time has not arrived. The central question that needs to be asked is whether the term English literature should be defined in relation to language, ethnicity, or nationality.

Today, English literature is seldom simply defined in terms of the use of language, as this would include all literature written in English across the world. It is also not defined in terms of the ethnicity of the writer, as this would exclude writers who are not ethnically English, such as Joseph Conrad, or, for that matter, writers such as Oliver Goldsmith and Walter Scott, who were Irish and Scottish. It would also have to include writers who are ethnically English but who do not reside in England, and hence embraces many writers from the British Commonwealth and the United States.

Thus, in the attempt to define English literature, the lowest common denominator is writers resident in England. However, there are immediate difficulties with this definition, as it has to be extended to include writers from the other British countries: Wales, Scotland,

Northern Ireland and, for a period in British history, the whole of Ireland as well. So, given what has been passed off as 'English literature' in schools and universities, all British writers are included. However, this definition is inadequate in one important respect, which was touched on at the beginning of this book. As Saldívar (1997: 159), citing Raymond Williams, has reminded us, 'In the English context, ... there were at least fifteen centuries of native writing in other languages: Latin, Welsh, Irish, Old English, Norse, and Norman French'. So it does seem that the linguistic criterion has to be brought back, but only with reference to writers who are resident in Britain. For writers writing in English but who do not reside in Britain, it is generally agreed that the term *literature in English* is more appropriate.

Relativity of power and dominance: a strand in postcolonial theory

This chapter began by saying that even England had been colonised, that the English language itself was introduced into Britain by invading forces and that people who were ethnically English were once reluctant to use their language, especially for the writing of literary works. These assertions were not made to excuse British imperialism in the past. Neither were they an attempt to excuse the continued dominance of the English language today. One reason for beginning with them is to highlight the relativity of power and dominance – be it linguistic or political. This relativity is an important strand in postcolonial theory, and will play a vital part in many of the arguments in this book. In this regard, what is once central is no longer regarded as such, and vice versa. With reference to the writing of literature in English, it has been argued, in another context, that the use of the English language by those originally on the 'margins' (for example, by writers of literature outside Britain) has now resulted in the appropriation and dismantling of 'the model of centre and margin' and 'the notions of power inherent' in being at the centre (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 83). Thus, what was at the margin of English is now at the centre.

Dominance of language and literature may be determined by extrinsic forces

Feelings of the inferiority of a literature may be justified if they are wholly based on the intrinsically negative value of the language and literature, which is always difficult to prove with any degree of objectivity. However, the belief in the inferior position of a language

and its literature is often determined by extrinsic factors. Specifically, the rise of the use of English and its literature has to do largely with factors external to both the language and its literature. The same can be said about the dominance of Latin and classical Greek language and literature several centuries before the rise of English, in spite of claims to the contrary.

Nevertheless, there were some Britons who believed in the intrinsic superiority of English by claiming that their language was 'the finest and purest spoken' (Alberto 1997). This view extended to English speakers outside Britain, such as the American poet Walt Whitman, who believed that 'the English language is by far the noblest now spoken – probably ever spoken – upon this earth' (quoted in Bailey 1991: 110). If it was not seen in such superlative terms, it was perceived to be a far superior language to the language of those who were colonised by the British. The missionary Cotton Mather, for example, believed that 'the English Tongue would presently give [the American Indians] a Key to all our Treasures and make them the Masters of another sort of Library than any that ever will be seen in their Barbarous Linguo' and that they 'can scarce retain their Language, without a Tincture of other Salvage Inclinations, which do but ill suit, either with the Honor, or with the design of Christianity' (quoted in Bailey 1991: 73). Moving to Africa in the twentieth century, it was claimed, in a report published by the British Colonial Office in 1953, that 'without the English language to generate a correct set of values in Africa, the continent would collapse into "moral confusion and lack of integrity" ' (Alberto 1997). Thus the teaching of English falls in line with the dubious civilising mission of colonialism (see p. 8).

However, although there have been many claims concerning the superiority of English (see also pp. 12–13), not many people have claimed that English literature itself is superior to other literatures in the world. The claim that European languages and literatures as a whole are superior to other languages and literatures is more often made. The latter claim came into prominence with Macaulay's notorious minute on Indian education (1835). In it, Macaulay (1952: 722) stated his belief in the 'intrinsic superiority of the Western literature', and that 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia'. Later scholarship has cast serious doubts on the basis of such judgments. It has been argued, for example, by Martin Bernal in his book *Black Athena* (1987) that certain important aspects of Greek civilisation itself, which was the first civilisation in Europe, were of African origin.

British expansion and the spread of English

There is no question that the spread of the English language had to do with the rise of British imperialism. This was not a unique situation, as the spread of other European languages around the world, such as Spanish and French, also had to do with the rise of Spain and France as imperial powers. The close relationship between language and empire was recognised right from the start of Western expansion. In 1492, for example, the Bishop of Avila said to the Castillian Queen Isabella, when she was presented with a book of Spanish grammar by medieval linguist Antonio de Nebrija, that 'language is a perfect instrument of empire'.

Britain and the British Isles

Before going further in the discussion on the relationship between English and the British Empire, a distinction must be made between Britain and the British Isles. *Britain* (soometimes known as Great Britain) is a political entity, whereas *the British Isles* is a geographical entity that includes England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Ireland (sometimes referred to as Southern Ireland), as it is an independent political entity, is not included when referring to 'Britain'. The term, the *British Isles*, is widely used, and will be used here, even if it is unfortunate that the word 'British' in the *British Isles* is taken from the root word 'Britain'. However, when the word 'British' is used by itself, it is an adjective derived from the word Britain, and hence is used to describe a political entity or someone's or something's association with it.

The rise of British imperialism

The British Empire began in the late sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century, sugar and tobacco plantations were established in the Caribbean and in the south-eastern part of what is now the United States. During the middle of the century, Britain expanded into India and Canada. At the end of the century, although it lost the American colonies – which were to form the United States of America – further colonies, such as Ceylon, British Guyana, Malta and the eastern coast of Australia, were added to the empire. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Britain expanded further into India, Africa, Asia and Australasia. Eventually, between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the British Empire was spread over about a quarter of the land mass of the world. At its height, it was one of the largest empires in the history of the world. After granting independence to the colonies, unity among the ex-colonies was

voluntarily maintained by the Commonwealth of Nations, which was founded in 1931.

The civilising mission of colonialism

Colonialism has been described by the colonists as having a civilising mission, in the sense that the colonised stand to benefit from it in educational and social terms. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is a classic text on the pitfalls in the belief in colonialism's 'civilising mission'. Although it refers to Belgian colonialism in Africa, it could quite easily have referred to British imperialism in general: the references to London in the novella make the association quite clear. There were many who believed in colonialism's civilising mission. To some, the belief was dubiously couched in Darwinian terms. In Krebs's (1997: 429–30) description of this tendency, there was the prevalent view that 'Africans were lower on the evolutionary scale than Europeans and in need of guidance, direction, and encouragement so that they could eventually reach the Europeans' level'.

Language and empire

Language had a part to play in the expansion of the British Empire and the continued unity of the British Commonwealth. The Empire was of course responsible for the initial spread of the language. During the rise of the British Empire, the associated spread of the English language had to contend not only with Latin but also with European languages of the other imperial powers, such as French and Spanish, which are still important international languages today. However, Britain, in comparison to France and Spain, had the biggest empire, and, furthermore, colonised the United States, which in its own right was to become an important force for the spread of English. Both these factors ensured that English was as widespread as the two other imperial languages. In some senses, the spread of English today may be more extensive than the two other languages. English is the main language of commerce and of science and technology, and more people study it.

English has been viewed as a potent force for the assertion of command and control in the Empire. Paulina Alberto (1997) made the claim, for example, that 'Britain's most powerful battle standard in its competition for the domination of new continents against local inhabitants was Standard English'. A case in point is the belief expressed in print by the British philologist William P. Russel in 1801. Russel argued that:

> ... if many schools were established in *different* parts of Asia and Africa to instruct the natives, *free of all expense*, with *various premiums of British manufacture* to the most meritorious pupils, this would be the best preparatory step that Englishmen could adopt for the *general* admission of their commerce, their opinions, their religion. This would tend to conquer the heart and its affections; which is a far more effectual conquest than that obtained by swords and cannons: and a thousand pounds expended for tutors, books, and premiums, would do more to subdue a nation of savages than forty thousand expended for artillery-men, bullets, and gunpowder.
>
> (quoted by Bailey 1991: 106–7)

Thus, educating the natives in English not only served the civilising mission but also – and more importantly perhaps – the imperial mission of exerting better control over them.

The fall of the British Empire

As noted earlier, the breaking up of the British Empire left a linguistic residue which may eventually last longer than the Empire itself. In the words of Minette Marrin (1998: 26), 'We may have lost an empire, but we have gained a lingua franca'. The continued significance of English after the demise of the British Empire has been mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. However, too much significance should not be attributed to the British Empire as a factor contributing to the spread of English, as 'the supremacy of English may have much more to do with the American empire than with the British' (Marrin 1998: 26). Nonetheless, the United States itself was once colonised by the British, and if it was not for this fact, English might not have been as important in the United States today. Thus, even if the focus is to shift to the United States, the historical importance of the British Empire in the spread of English cannot be denied.

The rise of literature in English and the Empire

English literature can be said to have spread together with the expansion of the English language. What began as the spread of English literature later resulted in the growth of literature in the language, written by non-English writers. The attempt to view these developments in a positive light did not end with the collapse of the British Empire. In fact, there is now a retrospective process, whereby the worldwide spread of literature in English is taken as a justification for British imperialism

in the past. Of course, we can quarrel with the 'argument' on strictly logical grounds. Nevertheless, Robert Hanks (1997: 25) has expressed the view that 'a strong point in ... favour [of the British Empire] is the vast body of literature in English that it produced.' He elaborates:

> [The status of English] as lingua franca of the largest empire the world has yet known means that writers and readers from opposite ends of the earth can be introduced to one another without worrying about what's getting lost in the translation – Flann O'Brien and Salman Rushdie can have a common audience. And these writers have the advantage, as it seems to be, of writing in a language that is both their own and not their own: they are native speakers, but they have, perhaps, an awareness of the language's individual quirks and an ability to work against the grain that come harder to writers who are simply English.

The above 'justification' for British imperialism is perhaps more commonly encountered in relation to the English language itself. Gaurav Desai (2000: 523), for example, who came from India and lectures on English literature in the United States, encounters not only awkward remarks about 'how well' he speaks English, but, on occasion, the further remark that 'the British really knew what they were doing when they taught Indians their language'.

English literature and the Empire

In the attempt to use the worldwide spread of literature in English as a justification for British imperialism in the past, it has been controversially claimed that 'one of the great tributes to the British Empire, and to the intrinsic quality of our literature, which obviously needed an empire to spread it, was that Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is written in English' (cited by Marrin 1998: 26). Roy was present when this sentiment was expressed by the historian Edward Chaney, and was not pleased at all. In Marrin's words (1998: 26):

> Arundhati Roy's novel is in English because English is her element. It is her first language; it is 'the skin on my thought', she says, and 'the way I think'. Clearly she loves it. Using English both in speaking and in writing obviously gives her immense joy. ... And yet she speaks English only because it was imposed on her; it was imposed on her forebears by conquest, imposed on her immediate family by all kinds of painful social and religious identifications and interests, and imposed on her by them.