

The Literatures of the Commonwealth: Towards Significance

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I am very honoured to be addressing this distinguished audience. I am happy to be among friends and colleagues of long standing with whom I have shared my interests and enthusiasms for a few decades. And I am grateful to the Association for Commonwealth Studies—particularly to Professor Symons and the Conference Planning Committee—for inviting me and for making excellent arrangements to make my presence possible here today.¹

Unlike some of my worthy predecessors I never made an apology for writing poetry; my tactics as a child included burning the midnight oil over verses, hidden from the world in my room at night, and tucking them under my pillow, until any day that anyone would ask to see them. Considering I continue to do, more or less, the same now, I must not have grown up very much. And since I am speaking about it (rather than reciting it), I seek your patience as I put on my critical hat for the day.

Working on some late nineteenth century and early twentieth century English writing, recently I came upon a passage in Margaret Drabble's biography of Arnold Bennett that I would like to share with you:

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The yearning of the provincial for the capital is a quite exceptional passion. It sets in early, and until it is satisfied it does not let go. It draws its subjects into a strange world where trains and hotels take on an exceptional significance. Many suffering from it become travellers, but perhaps they are aware that travel is simply an extension of that first uprooting, a desire to repeat that first incomparable shock.²

I quote this passage for two reasons. The first is that it reflects almost nothing biographical about the present speaker—for I flew from one capital to the other, and am lodging here rather than over there for now (certainly not in Bennett's ritzy Grand Babylon Hotel). The second reason, in Mark Twain's words (or Pudd'nhead Wilson's), of 1894, is that "few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example."³ Drabble's passage posits an analogical relationship of the cultures and literatures of the Commonwealth that has been quite dominant for a fairly long time; i.e., the capital and the province, the city and the mofussil, the centre versus the periphery. Areas were thus designated not on literary grounds but on the strength of political and economic power wielded by those with the means of formulation and diffusion. The capital decided upon the norms and the standards everywhere else. Mercifully, too, it deliberated about and encouraged English writing when there was so little of it to be had.

Throughout the Commonwealth, postwar London has had a centripetal and generally benign role in terms of literary developments, even when these have led to the creation of other centres and stimulating of crosscurrents across various regions.

But who knows exactly of this “yearning”, “that first uprooting” that actually prompts us or makes us lodge here or there. Ostensibly plausible in practical, everyday terms, the uprooting can take place while crossing a busy street listening to the call of ever-distant green hillocks, or from defying the local oppression and constraint, or from inability to buy a postage stamp in a post office, or mowing one’s own lawn any Sunday afternoon.

Then, if one has experienced anything like twentieth century Prague, for Milan Kundera, as in the novel of that name, *Life is Elsewhere*. Dante leaves Florence. Henry James, T. S. Eliot, and V. S. Naipaul move to London. W. H. Auden moves to New York. Ezra Pound moves to Rapallo. Wole Soyinka keeps moving between Lagos and London. James Joyce moves to Paris. A whole generation of American writers and artists of early twentieth century is seen to have been lost and found in Europe. Rudyard Kipling moves from Bombay and Lahore (where I was born) to Vermont and then again to Lahore and later to Sussex. D. H. Lawrence wanders around in several continents to settle (and be buried) in New Mexico. We

must leave—by tonga, ox-cart, boat, train or plane—wherever, however we are placed, to find the shape of our yearning, in capital or province. Or, as R. K. Narayan convinced us, no one would see him leaving Mysore, and no one would easily find him in Mysore, as he is creating the world of Malgudi, which requires its creator's constant presence within it. Whether it is imaginative Malgudi, Wessex, Yoknapatawpha or counterfactual London, New York, and Islamabad, the nature of rooting and uprooting in literature is a mystery as good as human life.

Two qualifications are in order here.

(1) Most of these examples of movement of a creative order refer to the objective travel conditions of the twentieth century or earlier centuries. 21st century travel conditions—for travel of any kind—are far from propitious for the majority of people living on this planet; indeed, they are an ironic commentary on the age of speed and soft trade borders otherwise guarded by the most stringent of xenophobic codes and unfriendly procedures. The stupendous growth of communications therefore is not necessarily conducive to genuine cross-fertilisation of cultures and literatures as it is to the transfer of utility goods, a point to which I shall not return presently—having heard the rumour that now literature-sensitive detectors are being installed all over the place.

(2) Except for persons of Anglo-Saxon descent, or of Celtic descent, most other movement across the Commonwealth has been named as diasporic, or black, Asian, etc., or of hyphenated varieties. Such characterisation probably has both demographic and hierarchical foundations for certain forms of social accounting, but these are weak if not entirely irrelevant as descriptions of the literatures of the Commonwealth. Understandable to a degree as residual identity-markers, they are not literary or critical categories, and would be best left to demographers specialising in consanguinity or to dermatologists interested, say, in photobiology or photovoltaic effects and pigment studies. Writers, Critics, Literature and its students, all exist in society, whose proper and humane evolution is not necessarily helped by making pejorative or decorative distinctions while ignoring respectable differences among human beings as among their artistic creations.

To me, it is always exhilarating to recall that historic and visionary moment in 1964 when the first major conference concerning the literatures of former colonies of the British Empire was held in Leeds. Brilliantly conceived by A. Norman Jeffares and his colleagues there, it concluded with the auspicious birth of 'Commonwealth Literature', and it offered a detailed

report with recommendations to commence this new cultural and literary journey, the like of which no one had thought of before. Joseph Jones in the United States had been working along similar lines, for “English as World Literature”⁴ but had little of the magical *Commonwealth* resource—the name alone could put it all together in Britain and in every corner of the Commonwealth. Nevertheless, Jones established a remarkable journal in the United States, World Literature Written in English. In compiling the Proceedings of the Leeds conference the following year, John Press proved to be an editor of good judgement and circumspection, particularly in giving the relevant book the title Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture.⁵ The Journal of Commonwealth Literature was established in 1965, with Arthur Ravenscroft at the editorial helm. John Thieme, present here today, may have more to say about the journal. From 1965 on, the new discipline was on track, and an important dimension had been added to the study of literature, particularly to ‘English Literature’. The Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, convened around the same time, drew a large following of academics and writers; its regional branches in nearly every continent have been quite active. Serious publishing of both creative and scholarly work began to be undertaken on a much larger scale than before by major publishers in Europe and America,

as well as in Australia, Asia, and Africa. The journals focussing on Commonwealth literature and language studies proliferated.

The logical impact that all the creative output and the critical activity was expected to have began to be felt, slowly but surely, by the academic institutions—in terms of actual subject matter for English degrees. Structural changes to the existing order were called for, and these began to be made by the universities in various places—on a selective basis, to begin with. Some implications of changes to pre-assigned priority within English Departments were such that these appeared not to have been fully foreseen. One of them surely was the decision by Ngugi Wa Thiongo's (then James Ngugi) and his colleagues', who successfully proposed, at the University of Nairobi (then a University College and a part of the University of East Africa), to abolish the Department of English and instead try to institute a Department with a range of subject larger than just 'English'.⁶ Again a logical development; so logical that A. N. Jeffares, a decade or so after the Leeds conference, found himself writing, in concern if not anguish, on the merits of not throwing the nurse out with the bath water.⁷ We all had to confront the tradition, ourselves, making decisions, reassigning priority, redistributing curricular choices in order to satisfy genuine competitive claims of literary worth and

contemporary critical view. Occasionally, Doris Lessing, or Margaret Atwood, or Bessie Head was chosen for certain courses over Jane Austen, in full knowledge that Emma Woodhouse would not approve of such matchmaking.

Nonetheless, new matches picked up, apace since 1970s, when the ACLALS conference in Delhi definitively proposed conversion of 'English Literature' and 'Commonwealth Literature' into 'Literature in English'.⁸ The last three decades can be described as a period of complete overhauling of English literature studies and Commonwealth literature studies, in content, as well as method, involving the support of many related disciplines that help understand and thereby evolve towards a satisfactory study of the literatures of the Commonwealth, which includes the United Kingdom.

Literary studies as well as linguistics and language studies in the 1970s were undergoing serious rethinking. Institutional remodelling of canons and approaches, impelled by reconceptualisation within, as also under the influence of larger European post-structuralist movements, had become normal. The diversity part of the original Commonwealth formulation had gained room: Commonwealth Literature (in the singular) did not include the literatures of Great Britain or the United States, except in case of inflationary comparisons or the search for normative measures or

functions in the older forms. The English writing in Canada, Australia, New Zealand—and to a degree, South Africa—was considered as separate from the writing in the Anglophone Caribbean and Africa. India figured in this picture, but little account was taken of the rest of South Asia or Southeast Asia. William Walsh, the first Professor of Commonwealth Literature at the University of Leeds (or, indeed, the first professor with that title anywhere in the world), thus found himself writing in one of his key books, Commonwealth Literature:

This book offers a personal chart of writing in the English language outside the traditions of Britain and the United States—essentially writing within those areas of the world loosely gathered together into the British Commonwealth. Not that I have any structural theory of the nature of this institution. I take it to mean what most people do, and while I recognise that the writers I speak of see themselves as Africans or Canadians, and not as contributors to some nebulous international organisation, the term is at least a useful category of denotation grounded in history and making a point of substance about those it is applied to.⁹

Most reasonable, but perhaps having some structural theory, as another generation of scholars realised, might have helped. And “the useful

category of denotation grounded in history” might as well had made “a point of substance” about Great Britain, which was part of that history as well as a contemporary member of the Commonwealth. Also, the United States, though never a member of the Commonwealth, had also been part of a similar history a little earlier on and was then extensively engaged at various cultural and literary levels with the world, particularly the English-speaking, Commonwealth world. Be that as it may, Walsh further writes, in the same book:

The book is short. I hope reasonably comprehensive (although there is work deserving of attention in South Africa, Pakistan, Malaysia, for example, which space does not allow to be treated), and in intention at least, critically discriminating.¹⁰

Critically discriminating all right, but nowhere in Walsh’s writings, even in books not so short, does one come across anything to make up for such relatively serious omissions.

The multilingual nature of the Commonwealth was another issue. Let alone India and Pakistan, or Africa, a linguistic atlas of Australia names more than one hundred languages, though English is more widely used. Good translations were few and far between, besides the fact that more detailed studies of language interactions were needed than were available to

the literary scholar to figure out the contextualised, deep embedded nature of language in such literary works.

Add to this the shifting sands of the socio-political world of the 1970s—or the “nebulous” world of international organisations as Walsh saw it—and Britain’s increasing involvement in Europe (as part of Europe) and in Transatlantic matters, the next turn of the proverbial wheel delivered to us in the 1980s ‘Post-Colonial Literature’ (with or without the hyphen).¹¹ Postcolonial Literature (in English), or New Literature in English, was an improvement, supported by a suitable theory, deriving from a master narrative or a slave narrative, Subaltern or what have you. It would remove the flaws of earlier critical junctures, and would fill the gaps. Soon enough, ‘Postcolonial Literature’ and ‘New Literature’ were renamed in the plural, as ‘Postcolonial Literatures’ and ‘New Literatures’. Further precision was sought with the term ‘Postcolonial Literatures in English’, which is the mainstay of the entire field now. My hunch is that for any (or any number) of these reasons and circumstances, the ‘Commonwealth Literature’ volume announced in 1980s as part of the multi-volume Macmillan History of Literature (under the General Editorship of A. Norman Jeffares) was never published. Perhaps Alastair Niven, who is present here, would like to say something about that.

Actually, the postcolonial approaches—historical, theoretical, psychological, linguistic, feminist, economic, or sociological—have increasingly been applied now for over two decades to a number of other fields of study. Doubtless, Postcolonial Literature itself has become the pivot for critical thought in so many disciplines now that one begins to wonder if certain individual entities might have been subsumed by efficacy—more or less in the manner of ‘Commonwealth Literature’. Having killed off the author a while ago (*à la* Roland Barthes),¹² in all literature, another quasi-Eurocentric theory (largely contingent on migrant metaphor and inflections of indigeneity) thus foregrounds the critic,¹³ creating further complexities in the process of understanding of the texts, which procedurally come last. Representation, with which most literary and critical debates of the twentieth century began, is yet again centre-stage, in nation or narration.¹⁴ If the recollection in my late if restless tranquillity is correct, I had proposed ‘re-charting’, ‘context’, and ‘contexture’ not as the way out but rather as the way back in, in 1980s, so as to be able to see the specific location or relocation of the text in relation to the writer and the reader.¹⁵ And I think some recent re-mapping that has followed will be helpful.

We may note that Salman Rushdie was among the first to declare himself as being in denial; his categorical fatwa was titled “ ‘Commonwealth

Literature' does not exist".¹⁶ He thought the writings to be described as such would be written mainly at addresses in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, etc. (I think he left out areas north of Newcastle, and did not mention Wales, Cornwall, or Ireland.) The real topic there was a minority literature, if not a minor literature. Other countries could look after their own. 'Postcolonial Literatures in English', as practised now, includes U.K. writers and U.S. writers when seen as non-British and non-American, but normally excludes British Literature and American Literature as subject matter. Arguably, both Britain and the United States are postcolonial countries, although like many other nations and nation-states they have experienced other forms and styles of existence in their respective histories. Patronising any sort of 'Black Literature' in the U.S. and Britain, or anywhere else, is just what it sounds like: patronising. Either it is literature or it is not. The Modern Language Association of America published a volume about three American literatures some years ago.¹⁷ The book had others but did not contain any items on either 'Black Literature' or its obverse, whatever that be, indicating certainly that the subject requires critical classification and treatment appropriate to its intrinsic properties rather than catering to popular political or social slogans of the day.

Having said this, if I say I am offering to help solve certain problems of literature and literature studies (and thereby help build a viable cultural matrix), probably few practitioners would suspend their disbelief this minute. All right, one solution found (by others) has been to have a broad language classification. Among the examples are Ian Ousby's The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English,¹⁸ and Harry Blamires' A Guide to Twentieth Century Literature in English.¹⁹ Commonwealth Literature scholars like Arthur Ravenscroft and Peter Quartermaine contributed to the latter. In this respect, William Walsh's oft-repeated emphasis on the capacity and centrality of language always would seem to be right. The other solution is to continue along the three main existing divisions of the Literatures in English, i.e., British, American, and Commonwealth / Postcolonial (the first two geographical/national and the third distinctively historical/theoretical), and wait until the divisions become time-barred in virtual space when the national cookie crumbles.

The processes that modify the national aspects of literature and culture have been rather pronounced in these parts since the Second World War. The twelfth volume of the Oxford English Literary History (by Randall Stevenson), covering the 1960–2000 period, ends the subtitle of the book 'The Last of England' with a question-mark. The thirteenth volume of the

same history (by Bruce King) is affirmative in a sense. About the 1948–2000 period, it is subtitled ‘The Internationalisation of English Literature’, and deals mainly with ‘English Literature’ by writers in England (of non-English descent, or living, or female) who would have routinely been excluded from the histories of English Literature by an earlier generation of literary historians.

There is no question that the new Oxford English Literary History, by avoiding being another History of English Literature, thus, recognises the altered nature, position, and role of the subject in our times. I think it is not statistical significance. It is a recognition which many Commonwealth scholars came to long ago.

What, then, is the significance (in the ordinary sense of importance or noteworthiness) of such recognition? Granted the criteria for significance have varied over time or been expressed in different ways, we still must answer the question for ourselves nearly all the time; even if the question is not phrased as “who has significantly contributed to the canon of literature in English?”²⁰ I propose that the question of significance be addressed both at the individual and the institutional levels as we look anew at the nature, position, and role of our subject (The Literatures of the Commonwealth) and the scholarly activity in it. Most studies published in the journals and in

books now are informative, or useful, or instructive in various ways, but they rarely address the key question: of significance. Perhaps, it is self-evident except to those who insist on it. Let us put it differently. Why is Kafka's The Trial better known and more significant than Mazrui's The Trial of Christopher Okigbo or Nazareth's In a Brown Mantle? Is it because the latter two works are about Africa? By African writers? If anyone thinks that Kafka's The Trial is more "universal", and hence significant, what is the basis for such interpretation and placement? Certain interpretations of works can lead to misplacement, and I fear, having followed de Saussure's²¹ work in Geneva, that many readings of works from those other cultures have dealt more with signification than with significance. Needless to say, the signified object may possibly lie somewhere between literality and latency; we would need to know the culture that supports such a scale of language. If, say, the "J.C." of many of George Herbert's poems remains recondite, or we remain indifferent to why Judith Wright turns to the Ghazal for a while in her later work, there are serious questions to be asked about critical practice. Likewise, it cannot be that African and Caribbean writers can write only about Africa and the Caribbean for African and Caribbean audiences. It is precisely this kind of myopia that the practice of Commonwealth Literature and Postcolonial Literatures was to help cure. Knowledge of the levels of

significance of the object of study is crucial to any proper criticism. Bruce King realises from practice that “it will be necessary in future to do detailed studies of individual writers and publishing circles...to learn about family, languages used, education, religion, ethnic group, careers, and where they live...”.²² Then also, perhaps, we shall know about the significance of what they write. The Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English is a major step in that direction. In terms of sheer numbers—of the works, writers, and areas covered—there is no comparable resource. Further, it has also laid a comparative foundation for a pan-Commonwealth and World study of the literatures in English.²³ Insofar as the institutional measures are concerned, still other but related tasks await further attention.

Some considerations for institutional measures, either partly in place now or desirable in the future, are as follows.

1. The literatures of the Commonwealth, currently theorised as postcolonial, are many as national literatures; their multiplicity increases manifold just as we begin to look beyond English to the other languages of the Commonwealth.
2. The act of writing in oral cultures and the noticeable language switch in established literate cultures are developments of an order that require demanding critical tools.

3. Now that the number of English speakers worldwide competes successfully with the number of Chinese speakers is a moment for thought—of the more dispersed language. Journals like World Language English, English World-Wide, and World Englishes have been contributing to better understanding of the phenomenon for many years now. With the current pace of developments on the ground, we are ever in need of more studies.
4. The publishing and arts establishments around the world, but particularly in the Commonwealth, may take note of the new surge of creativity in English and the translation activity.
5. Within the academy, the teaching of the literatures of the Commonwealth under the Postcolonial rubric goes a long way to meeting the perceived needs or preferences of the academy, but it goes only thus far. In a way, it also keeps the lid in place. What's more—actually less—keeping postcolonial courses and seminars as optional (or outside the 'core curriculum') will not better literary education in English any more than it can. Area or national literatures are still largely limited to own country literature. British institutions conduct courses about other 'canons' because Britain continues to disavow membership of Commonwealth Literature. It is time to move on to a greater exchange of courses across the board. The literatures of the Commonwealth, indeed, are uniquely

poised at a moment of concurrent globalisation and recursive tribalisation. Language and literature studies have by and large moved in tandem with studies of other aspects and expressions of society, but this relationship needs more focus now. The Association for Commonwealth Studies, it appears to me now, finds it to be an area fit for its exertions. And I would like to compliment it for holding this Conference.

6. Typologies of literature are not permanent conditions of life and creativity. Still, it may be acknowledged that the literatures of the Commonwealth have had a substantial presence in the society and in the academia, and it is owed in no small measure to the interest taken in the subject by the Commonwealth of Nations and its affiliate bodies, particularly the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, which forged ahead undaunted with its tasks during the last four decades, made the necessary adjustments, and remains vibrant as a scholarly body. The sustained and systematic study of the literatures of the Commonwealth has been one of its rewards, and it has helped further development in the larger evolutionary process of twentieth century English literary studies, in terms of both subject matter and method. If the literatures we speak of today are configured in different ways in the future, it will also be partly owed to the

Commonwealth of Nations—due to what it may or may not do for them.

7. The contributions of many scholars and writers from outside the Commonwealth have been important. For example, American, Taiwanese, Hong Kong, and Philippine scholarship in the field has added to the richness of perspectives. “We” have been code-named as Division 33 of the Modern Language Association of America whose real area of interest is “English Literature Other Than British and American”. Whether it is Any Other or the Significant Other is anybody’s guess. But we shall find out.

Endnotes

- ¹ Delivered by the author on 15th May, 2005. Windsor, UK.
- ² Margaret Drabble, Arnold Bennett: A Biography (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1974).
- ³ Mark Twain, Pudd'nhead Wilson (New York: Bantam Classics, 1984), p. 118.
- ⁴ Joseph Jones, Terranglia: The Case for English as World-Literature (New York: Twayne, 1965).
- ⁵ John Press (ed.) Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture (London: Heinemann, 1965).
- ⁶ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Homecoming (London: Heinemann, 1972). See the Appendix (pp. 145–150), “On the Abolition of the English Department”, dated 24th October, 1968.
- ⁷ A. Norman Jeffares, “On Not Throwing The Nurse Out With The Bath Water: English And Commonwealth Literature”, The Round Table (London) [Vol. 261 or 264] (1976), pp. 45–51.
- ⁸ See the editor's introduction in C.D. Narasimhaiah (ed.) Awakened Conscience: Studies in Commonwealth Literature. (New Delhi: Sterling, 1978).
- ⁹ William Walsh, Commonwealth Literature (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. v.
- ¹⁰ William Walsh, Commonwealth Literature (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. v.
- ¹¹ B. Ashcroft, “On the Hyphen in Post-Colonial”, New Literatures Review, No. 32 (1996), pp. 23–32.

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- ¹² Roland Barthes, Image-Music-Text translated into English by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
- ¹³ Ato Quayson mentions several examples of this phenomenon in his Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process? (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). In a recent issue of Postcolonial Text devoted to “Enacting Postcolonial Theory”, C. Kanaganayakam writes (in an article on teaching a “culturally different text”): “The complexity of teaching culturally different texts is at least in part a result of uncertainties about constructing literary histories. Comparative models, political agendas, transnational movements, and a host of other factors have been sources of empowerment for readers and instructors. The richness of postcolonial theory is directly attributable to the multiplicity of historical and political contexts”. (1:2, p. 8).
- ¹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, Nation and Narration (London: Routledge, 1990).
- ¹⁵ See the first lecture in Alamgir Hashmi, The Commonwealth, Comparative Literature and the World (Islamabad: Gulmohar Press, 1988); also the earlier book on the subject, Alamgir Hashmi, Commonwealth Literature: An Essay Towards the Re-definition of a Popular / Counter Culture (London and Lahore: Vision Press, 1983).
- ¹⁶ Salman Rushdie, “‘Commonwealth Literature’ Does Not Exist”, Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991 (London: Penguin, 1983, 1991, 1992). See also “The New Empire Within Britain”, *ibid.*, pp. 129–138.
- ¹⁷ Houston A. Baker, Jr. (ed.), Three American Literatures (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1982).

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- ¹⁸ Ian Ousby, The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 1993).
- ¹⁹ Harry Blamires (ed.) A Guide to Twentieth Century Literature in English (London: Methuen, 1983).
- ²⁰ William Walsh, Commonwealth Literature (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. v.
- ²¹ F. de Saussure, Course of General Linguistics translated into English by W. Baskin (London: Peter Owen, 1960).
- ²² Bruce King, “The New Literatures: Some Implications”, Review of National Literatures (New York), Vol. 15, pp. 56–77.
- ²³ Eugene Benson and L. W. Conolly (eds.) Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English (London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 2005).