

'COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE' DOES NOT EXIST

When I was invited to speak at the 1983 English Studies Seminar in Cambridge, the lady from the British Council offered me a few words of reassurance. 'It's all right,' I was told, 'for the purposes of our seminar, English studies are taken to include Commonwealth literature.' At all other times, one was forced to conclude, these two would be kept strictly apart, like squabbling children, or sexually incompatible pandas, or, perhaps, like unstable, fissile materials whose union might cause explosions.

A few weeks later I was talking to a literature don—a specialist, I ought to say, in *English* literature—a friendly and perceptive man. 'As a Commonwealth writer,' he suggested, 'you probably find, don't you, that there's a kind of liberty, certain advantages, in occupying, as you do, a position on the periphery?'

And then a British magazine published, in the same issue, interviews with Shiva Naipaul, Buchi Emecheta and myself. In my interview, I admitted that I had begun to find this strange term, 'Commonwealth literature', unhelpful and even a little distasteful; and I was interested to read that in *their* interviews, both Shiva Naipaul and Buchi Emecheta, in their own ways, said much the same thing. The three interviews appeared, therefore, under the headline: 'Commonwealth writers . . . but don't call them that!'

By this point, the Commonwealth was becoming unpopular with me.

Isn't this the very oddest of beasts, I thought—a school of literature whose supposed members deny vehemently that they belong to it. Worse, these denials are simply disregarded! It seems the creature has taken on a life of its own. So when I was invited to a conference about the animal in—of all places—Sweden, I thought I'd better go along to take a closer look at it.

The conference was beautifully organized, packed with erudite and sophisticated persons capable of discoursing at length about the new spirit of experiment in English-language writing in the Philippines. Also, I was able to meet writers from all over the world—or, rather, the Commonwealth. It was such a seductive environment that it almost persuaded me that the subject under discussion actually existed, and was not simply a fiction, and a fiction of a unique type, at that, in that it has been created solely by critics and academics, who have then proceeded to believe in it wholeheartedly . . . but the doubts did, in spite of all temptations to succumb, persist.

Many of the delegates, I found, were willing freely to admit that the term 'Commonwealth literature' was a bad one. South Africa and Pakistan, for instance, are not members of the Commonwealth, but their authors apparently belong to its literature. On the other hand, England, which, as far as I'm aware, has not been expelled from the Commonwealth quite yet, has been excluded from its literary manifestation. For obvious reasons. It would never do to include English literature, the great sacred thing itself, with this bunch of upstarts, huddling together under this new and badly made umbrella.

At the Commonwealth literature conference I talked with and listened to the Australian poet Randolph Stow; the West Indian, Wilson Harris; Ngugi wa Thiongo from Kenya; Anita Desai from India and the Canadian novelist Aritha van Herk. I became quite sure that our differences were so much more significant than our similarities, that it was impossible to say what 'Commonwealth literature'—the idea which had, after all, made possible our assembly—might conceivably mean. Van Herk spoke eloquently about the problem of drawing imaginative maps of the great emptinesses of Canada; Wilson Harris soared into great flights of metaphysical lyricism and high abstraction; Anita Desai spoke in whispers, her novel the novel of sensibility, and I wondered what on earth she could be held to have in common with the committed Marxist Ngugi, an overtly political writer, who expressed his rejection of the English language by reading his own work in

Swahili, with a Swedish version read by his translator, leaving the rest of us completely bemused. Now obviously this great diversity would be entirely natural in a general literature conference—but this was a particular school of literature, and I was trying to work out what that school was supposed to be.

The nearest I could get to a definition sounded distinctly patronizing: 'Commonwealth literature', it appears, is that body of writing created, I think, in the English language, by persons who are not themselves white Britons, or Irish, or citizens of the United States of America. I don't know whether black Americans are citizens of this bizarre Commonwealth or not. Probably not. It is also uncertain whether citizens of Commonwealth countries writing in languages other than English—Hindi, for example—or who switch out of English, like Ngugi, are permitted into the club or asked to keep out.

By now 'Commonwealth literature' was sounding very unlikeable indeed. Not only was it a ghetto, but it was actually an exclusive ghetto. And the effect of creating such a ghetto was, is, to change the meaning of the far broader term 'English literature'—which I'd always taken to mean simply the literature of the English language—into something far narrower, something topographical, nationalistic, possibly even racially segregationist.

It occurred to me, as I surveyed this muddle, that the category is a chimera, and in very precise terms. The word has of course come to mean an unreal, monstrous creature of the imagination; but you will recall that the classical chimera was a monster of a rather special type. It had the head of a lion, the body of a goat and a serpent's tail. This is to say, it could exist only in dreams, being composed of elements which could not possibly be joined together in the real world.

The dangers of unleashing such a phantom into the groves of literature are, it seems to me, manifold. As I mentioned, there is the effect of creating a ghetto, and that, in turn, does lead to a ghetto mentality amongst some of its occupants. Also, the creation of a false category can and does lead to excessively narrow, and sometimes misleading

readings of some of the artists it is held to include; and again, the existence—or putative existence—of the beast distracts attention from what is actually worth looking at, what is actually going on. I thought it might be worth spending a few minutes reflecting further on these dangers.

I'll begin from an obvious starting place. English is by now the world language. It achieved this status partly as a result of the physical colonization of a quarter of the globe by the British, and it remains ambiguous but central to the affairs of just about all the countries to whom it was given, along with mission schools, trunk roads and the rules of cricket, as a gift of the British colonizers.

But its present-day pre-eminence is not solely—perhaps not even primarily—the result of the British legacy. It is also the effect of the primacy of the United States of America in the affairs of the world. This second impetus towards English could be termed a kind of linguistic neo-colonialism, or just plain pragmatism on the part of many of the world's governments and educationists, according to your point of view.

As for myself, I don't think it is always necessary to take up the anti-colonial—or is it post-colonial?—cudgels against English. What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it—assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers.

To take the case of India, only because it's the one with which I'm most familiar. The debate about the appropriateness of English in post-British India has been raging ever since 1947; but today, I find, it is a debate which has meaning only for the older generation. The children of independent India seem not to think of English as being irredeemably tainted by its colonial provenance. They use it as an Indian language, as one of the tools they have to hand.

(I am simplifying, of course, but the point is broadly true.)
There is also an interesting North-South divide in Indian

attitudes to English. In the North, in the so-called 'Hindi belt', where the capital, Delhi, is located, it is possible to think of Hindi as a future national language; but in South India, which is at present suffering from the attempts of central government to *impose* this national language on it, the resentment of Hindi is far greater than of English. After spending quite some time in South India, I've become convinced that English is an essential language in India, not only because of its technical vocabularies and the international communication which it makes possible, but also simply to permit two Indians to talk to each other in a tongue which neither party hates.

Incidentally, in West Bengal, where there is a State-led move against English, the following graffiti, a sharp dig at the State's Marxist chief minister, Jyoti Basu, appeared on a wall, in English: it said, 'My son won't learn English; your son won't learn English; but Jyoti Basu will send his son abroad to learn English.'

One of the points I want to make is that what I've said indicates, I hope, that Indian society and Indian literature have a complex and developing relationship with the English language. This kind of post-colonial dialectic is propounded as one of the unifying factors in 'Commonwealth literature'; but it clearly does not exist, or at least is far more peripheral to the problems of literatures in Canada, Australia, even South Africa. Every time you examine the general theories of 'Commonwealth literature' they come apart in your hands.

English literature has its Indian branch. By this I mean the literature of the English language. This literature is also Indian literature. There is no incompatibility here. If history creates complexities, let us not try to simplify them.

So: English is an Indian literary language, and by now, thanks to writers like Tagore, Desani, Chaudhuri, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Anita Desai and others, it has quite a pedigree. Now it is certainly true that the English-language literatures of England, Ireland and the USA are older than, for example, the Indian; so it's possible that 'Commonwealth literature' is no more than an ungainly name for the world's

younger English literatures. If that were true or, rather, if that were all, it would be a relatively unimportant misnomer. But it isn't all. Because the term is not used simply to describe, or even misdescribe, but also to *divide*. It permits academic institutions, publishers, critics and even readers to dump a large segment of English literature into a box and then more or less ignore it. At best, what is called 'Commonwealth literature' is positioned *below* English literature 'proper'—or, to come back to my friend the don, it places Eng. Lit. at the centre and the rest of the world at the periphery. How depressing that such a view should persist in the study of literature long after it has been discarded in the study of everything else English.

What is life like inside the ghetto of 'Commonwealth literature'? Well, every ghetto has its own rules, and this one is no exception.

One of the rules, one of the ideas on which the edifice rests, is that literature is an expression of nationality. What Commonwealth literature finds interesting in Patrick White is his Australianness; in Doris Lessing, her Africanness; in V. S. Naipaul, his West Indianness, although I doubt that anyone would have the nerve to say so to his face. Books are almost always praised for using motifs and symbols out of the author's own national tradition, or when their form echoes some traditional form, obviously pre-English, and when the influences at work upon the writer can be seen to be wholly internal to the culture from which he 'springs'. Books which mix traditions, or which seek consciously to break with tradition, are often treated as highly suspect. To give one example. A few years ago the Indian poet, Arun Kolatkar, who works with equal facility in English and Marathi, wrote, in English, an award-winning series of poems called *Jejuri*, the account of his visit to a Hindu temple town. (Ironically, I should say, it won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize.) The poems are marvellous, contemporary, witty, and in spite of their subject they are the work of a non-religious man. They aroused the wrath of one of the doyens of Commonwealth literary studies in India, Professor C. D. Narasimhaiah, who,

while admitting the brilliance of the poems, accused Kolatkar of making his work irrelevant by seeking to defy tradition.

What we are facing here is the bogey of Authenticity. This is something which the Indian art critic Geeta Kapur has explored in connection with modern Indian painting, but it applies equally well to literature. 'Authenticity' is the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism. It demands that sources, forms, style, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogeneous and unbroken tradition. Or else. What is revealing is that the term, so much in use inside the little world of 'Commonwealth literature', and always as a term of praise, would seem ridiculous outside this world. Imagine a novel being eulogized for being 'authentically English', or 'authentically German'. It would seem absurd. Yet such absurdities persist in the ghetto.

In my own case, I have constantly been asked whether I am British, or Indian. The formulation 'Indian-born British writer' has been invented to explain me. But, as I said last night, my new book deals with Pakistan. So what now? 'British-resident Indo-Pakistani writer'? You see the folly of trying to contain writers inside passports.

One of the most absurd aspects of this quest for national authenticity is that—as far as India is concerned, anyway—it is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw. The only people who seriously believe this are religious extremists. The rest of us understand that the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition, a *mélange* of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American. To say nothing of Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, Jewish, British, French, Portuguese, Marxist, Maoist, Trotskyist, Vietnamese, capitalist, and of course Hindu elements. Eclecticism, the ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest, has always been a hallmark of the Indian tradition, and today it is at the centre of the best work being done both in the visual arts and in literature. Yet eclecticism is not really a nice word in the lexicon of 'Commonwealth literature'. So the reality of the

mixed tradition is replaced by the fantasy of purity.

You will perhaps have noticed that the purpose of this literary ghetto—like that of all ghettos, perhaps—is to confine, to restrain. Its rules are basically conservative. Tradition is all; radical breaches with the past are frowned upon. No wonder so many of the writers claimed by 'Commonwealth literature' deny that they have anything to do with it.

I said that the concept of 'Commonwealth literature' did disservice to some writers, leading to false readings of their work; in India, I think this is true of the work of Ruth Jhabvala and, to a lesser extent, Anita Desai. You see, looked at from the point of view that literature must be nationally connected and even committed, it becomes simply impossible to understand the cast of mind and vision of a rootless intellect like Jhabvala's. In Europe, of course, there are enough instances of uprooted, wandering writers and even peoples to make Ruth Jhabvala's work readily comprehensible; but by the rules of the Commonwealth ghetto, she is beyond the pale. As a result, her reputation in India is much lower than it is in the West. Anita Desai, too, gets into trouble when she states with complete honesty that her work has no Indian models. The novel is a Western form, she says, so the influences on her are Western. Yet her delicate but tough fictions are magnificent studies of Indian life. This confuses the cohorts of the Commonwealth. But then, where 'Commonwealth literature' is concerned, confusion is the norm.

I also said that the creation of this phantom category served to obscure what was really going on, and worth talking about. To expand on this, let me say that if we were to forget about 'Commonwealth literature', we might see that there is a kind of commonality about much literature, in many languages, emerging from those parts of the world which one could loosely term the less powerful, or the powerless. The magical realism of the Latin Americans influences Indian-language writers in India today. The rich, folk-tale quality of a novel like *Sandro of Chegem*, by the Muslim Russian Fazil Iskander, finds its parallels in the work—for instance—of

the Nigerian, Amos Tutuola, or even Cervantes. It is possible, I think, to begin to theorize common factors between writers from these societies—poor countries, or deprived minorities in powerful countries—and to say that much of what is new in world literature comes from this group. This seems to me to be a 'real' theory, bounded by frontiers which are neither political nor linguistic but imaginative. And it is developments of this kind which the chimera of 'Commonwealth literature' obscures.

This transnational, cross-lingual process of pollination is not new. The works of Rabindranath Tagore, for example, have long been widely available in Spanish-speaking America, thanks to his close friendship with the Argentinian intellectual Victoria Ocampo. Thus an entire generation, or even two, of South American writers have read *Gitanjali*, *The Home and the World* and other works, and some, like Mario Vargas Llosa, say that they found them very exciting and stimulating.

If this 'Third World literature' is one development obscured by the ghost of 'Commonwealth literature', then 'Commonwealth literature's' emphasis on writing in English distracts attention from much else that is worth our attention. I tried to show how in India the whole issue of language was a subject of deep contention. It is also worth saying that major work is being done in India in many languages other than English; yet outside India there is just about no interest in any of this work. The Indo-Anglians seize all the limelight. Very little is translated; very few of the best writers—Premchand, Anantha Moorthy—or the best novels are known, even by name.

To go on in this vein: it strikes me that, at the moment, the greatest area of friction in Indian literature has nothing to do with English literature, but with the effects of the hegemony of Hindi on the literatures of other Indian languages, particularly other North Indian languages. I recently met the distinguished Gujarati novelist, Suresh Joshi. He told me that he could write in Hindi but felt obliged to write in Gujarati because it was a language under threat. Not from English, or the West: from Hindi. In two or three generations, he said,

Gujarati could easily die. And he compared it, interestingly, to the state of the Czech language under the yoke of Russian, as described by Milan Kundera.

This is clearly a matter of central importance for Indian literature. 'Commonwealth literature' is not interested in such matters.

It strikes me that my title may not really be accurate. There is clearly such a thing as 'Commonwealth literature', because even ghosts can be made to exist if you set up enough faculties, if you write enough books and appoint enough research students. It does not exist in the sense that writers do not write it, but that is of minor importance. So perhaps I should rephrase myself: 'Commonwealth literature' should not exist. If it did not, we could appreciate writers for what they are, whether in English or not; we could discuss literature in terms of its real groupings, which may well be national, which may well be linguistic, but which may also be international, and based on imaginative affinities; and as far as Eng. Lit. itself is concerned, I think that if *all* English literatures could be studied together, a shape would emerge which would truly reflect the new shape of the language in the world, and we could see that Eng. Lit. has never been in better shape, because the world language now also possesses a world literature, which is proliferating in every conceivable direction.

The English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago. Perhaps 'Commonwealth literature' was invented to delay the day when we rough beasts actually slouch into Bethlehem. In which case, it's time to admit that the centre cannot hold.

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