The Voyage of the Good Ship 'Commomwealth'

Chris Tiffin

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
The Voyage of the Good Ship 'Commonwealth'

Abstract
The good ship 'Commonwealth' was launched from an expansionist dockyard in the 1960s and set sail with an enthusiastic crew and excited passengers. Thirty years on, both passengers and crew are wondering if their vessel is not something between Noah's Ark and a tramp steamer unsuccessfully trying to work off a cargo of toxic waste into the mangroves.

This journal article is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol14/iss2/6
The good ship ‘Commonwealth’ was launched from an expansionist dockyard in the 1960s and set sail with an enthusiastic crew and excited passengers. Thirty years on, both passengers and crew are wondering if their vessel is not something between Noah’s Ark and a tramp steamer unsuccessfully trying to work off a cargo of toxic waste into the mangroves.

In the wheelhouse, opinion is divided between sailing anywhere to stay afloat and to keep the rigging in good repair, and not sailing any further until it becomes clear where the ship is, where it should be going, and why. Many on board have decided they never did like the Company much, the stern is disfigured with the graffiti of successive attempts to rename the vessel, the nationalists are homesick and sneaking off to their bunks, while octopus-like creatures, (euroamericanus opportunus), keep slithering over the gunwales, so that it is no longer clear who is on board and who is not. Worst of all, the ship is constantly tacking to avoid being rammed and sunk by a huge, sinister, spectral vessel named *La Postmod.*

If we look back almost thirty years to the launch of Commonwealth literature we find a discipline marked by an energetic and expansionist enthusiasm. Ontologically the discipline was represented by a collection of texts written in English from countries which bore the linguistic, cultural and economic impress of a declined Britain. Methodologically the discipline preserved the current domestic approaches to British literature with a new emphasis on thematic and tropic comparison and a greater (although by no means always adequate) sense of cultural relativity. Just at the time when sardonic comments were being made about the futile repetition of work on canonical writers demanded by the suddenly expanded PhD programmes of Western universities,1 Commonwealth Literature offered an extensive adjunct to the available material for study. Moreover, it was a material which could be loosely said to promote cross-cultural understanding, so the discipline came with demonstrable social
utility. Travel was broadening, and Commonwealth Literature showed English Departments *en voyage*.

For those crewing the vessel there were some adventitious benefits, for part of the founding energy of the discipline of Commonwealth Literature came from the nostalgia of British academics who had done their tours of duty in the colonies and were now faced with ten years' hard grey at Leeds or Stirling. Moreover, the policy of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies of rotating its triennial meetings around the Commonwealth offered the younger membership a chance of regular and congenial exposure to the countries whose literatures they were reading. On the negative side, though, there were Senior Common Room sneers about the insubstantiality or non-existence of the literature, avuncular warnings about how this might be a worthy sideline, but one's real career lay in Milton, and a recurrent isolation marked by a lack of texts and of bibliographical and collegiate support.

The isolation was partly overcome by alliances with nationalist critics, in fact Commonwealth literature often looked like the Foreign Affairs Department of literary nationalism. The links and overlaps between the two disciplines have persisted.\(^2\) Ganesh Devi has even argued that Commonwealth literature is really a phase of national literary traditions.\(^3\) But this overlap which initially facilitated the institutional development of Commonwealth Literature, has come to look more like a fundamental weakness in its theorization, and the lack of definition of both its scope and its methodology have loomed as increasing problems for a discipline which is attempting to maintain its purchase in crowded and noisily competitive institutional structures. Moreover, nationalist criticism has withdrawn to some extent from the alliance, fearing that a blurring of categories might prejudice its chances for national Arts Council funding.

There is no diminution of activity under the umbrella of Commonwealth literature and with the expansion of publishing in English in most areas, Commonwealth literature is in no danger of running out of material to discuss fruitfully. But with the demand for a more self-conscious literary practice, the plenitude of Commonwealth texts no longer carries a sufficient defence against charges that the discipline is too diffuse and ill-considered to constitute a rigorous study. Nonetheless, richness and diversity remain the watchwords of those who feel the traditional formulation is most adequate. The new editors of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* say that they are 'committed to the diversity of Commonwealth Literature' and are sceptical about the formulation 'post-colonial literature' because it 'runs the risk of ... conflating the diversity of the literatures studied into a single category'.\(^4\)

As Alastair Niven has recently commented, discussion of the adequacy of the name, 'Commonwealth literature', has been going on for twenty-five years and is both tired and unresolved; but as he also rightly says names do matter because 'each carries its own ideological banner'.\(^5\) (He could
have added, 'and methodology'). The real question is not what we call the discipline, but what sort of activities are conducted under its aegis.

The name, 'Commonwealth literature', didn't give clear directions about what was to be done, but it did say (a little misleadingly) what texts were to be read. These were texts in English from any of Britain's present or past colonies except the United States, and Ireland. Britain herself was also excluded. These exclusions were quite blatantly protectionist, to give the newer literatures room to breathe; they were never argued on a theoretical basis. The same loose inclusiveness as characterised national literature formulations was used. V.S. Naipaul could live in Britain for sixty years and would remain a 'Commonwealth writer'. D.H. Lawrence could visit Australia for two months, write a novel set there, and that would be a 'Commonwealth text'. Moreover, in practice no one ever stood at the door checking countries for formal membership of the British Commonwealth. Virtually any sort of literary or cultural study – formal, generic, historical, bibliographical, textual, linguistic, cultural – found a place under such a commodious umbrella. The initial sense of 'Commonwealth', then, was simply an aggregation of individual national literatures broadly and inclusively conceived. Consequently it is not surprising that much 'Commonwealth' work could equally well be regarded as work on a national or regional literature, say, New Zealand literature or West Indian literature.

Some attempt at stiffening the critical backbone came with the attempt to encourage or enforce a comparative stance in the work. Commonwealth literary studies then became not any critical activity which used a Commonwealth text, but rather a critical activity conducted across two or more national traditions. This is a paradigm which says, 'the English language has been used in these two (or more) different environments. Let us see what we can learn about the social mediation of the language by comparing these examples'. This type of activity found an early model in John Matthews' Tradition in Exile. It was made the methodological requirement for papers given at the 1977 ACLALS conference in Delhi, and has continued to be regularly practiced.

A variant on this comparative paradigm is the replacement of one pole of the comparison by the critic’s own distanced position. That is to say, a Nigerian critic studying Nigerian literature is taken to be working in a national framework, but a Canadian critic working on Nigerian literature is taken to be working on Commonwealth literature. One meaning of 'Commonwealth literature' has thus been literature from one or more Commonwealth countries excluding one's own: a non-British, non-US, English-language literary Other.

Commonwealth Literature proceeded fairly satisfactorily in this latitudinarian way for two decades. But when university practices swung towards more politicised uses of literature, and when university cafeteria started serving theory with everything, the formulation began to seem not
The Voyage of the Good Ship 'Commonwealth'

liberating (attacking traditional curricula which privileged British literature) but rather reactionary (reinscribing the power structures of Britain by endorsing the political Commonwealth) and naive (inconsistent in its choice of texts and insufficiently cogent in its attitudes to language and politics.) It did no good to point out that British literature was (slightly illogically) excluded from the field of study, so could hardly be said to be monopolising the attention of Commonwealth literature scholars; the name 'Commonwealth' was 'anglophile and sub-imperialist', 9 and with breathtaking syntax, Homi Bhabha daubed Commonwealth literature a normalising, revisionary, expansionist, academicist, egoistic, and 'expansionist epigone' of history and nationalism. 10

The one thing which had provided even a tenuous cohesion to the discipline was the use of English (or Englishes), and this now came to be seen as one of the markers of colonial oppression. Prominent writers like Ngugi repudiated English to write in local languages; English-dominated contextualisation was attacked as impeding the adequate cultural siting of the texts being considered; 11 and the deliberateness with which English language and literature had been implicated in colonial control was exposed. 12 Caliban using the master's own language to curse him has become talismanic, and The Tempest, (the only Shakespeare today's Commonwealth scholars will admit to reading), has become a sort of cult text, with its readers cheering for the Indians. 13

In the face of this upheaval, a fairly widespread move has been made to develop a more coherent and more political critical practice under the name 'post-colonial literature'. It is important to see this as a change in practice rather than simply a change in name, for it marks a concentration on a particular activity which is only a part of the amorphous and joyful busyness of Commonwealth literature. It may also be misleading to see an evolution of Commonwealth literature into post-colonial literature (as is implied by the title of the Proceedings of the 25th anniversary conference of ACLALS itself, From Commonwealth to Post-colonial). 14 Although many scholars and critics who would have regarded themselves as having a commitment to 'Commonwealth literature' ten years ago would prefer the term, 'Post-colonial literature' today, there are strong arguments that a post-colonial critique neither is nor should be the only method of approaching this literature. As Thieme and Chew say,

'post-colonial literature' promises a radical reassessment of the subject and in many ways offers this, but clearly runs the risk of being perceived as a new hegemonic discourse, conflating the diversity of the literatures studied into a single category and (even more regrettably?) defining them in terms of their increasingly distant relationship to colonialism. 15

Post-colonial critique would not, of course see the relationship to colonialism as becoming an 'increasingly distant' one, for colonialism does not end with political independence, but Thieme and Chew are probably
correct in implying that a post-colonial approach makes its own map from the range of Commonwealth literature by selecting and returning to only those texts which respond to appropriate tropic, allegorical or counter-discursive readings. This does raise the spectre of 'a criticism ... that celebrates predictable heroines and rounds up the usual suspects, that finds confirmation of its values wherever it turns'.

Both the formulations, 'Commonwealth literature' and 'post-colonial literature' involve texts, writers, readers, and a matrix of socio-political events outside of these. But whereas Commonwealth literature anchored itself in facts of past and present political alliance, post-colonial literature postulates as its starting point a psychology that results from the experience of colonialism. 'The post-colonial desire is the desire of decolonized communities for an identity.' Commonwealth literature identifies certain societies as having a political (but really cultural) and linguistic distinctiveness (present or former membership of the Commonwealth and English-speaking) and on that basis sets out to explore their literatures. Post-colonial literature identifies societies which have a certain historical experience and a linguistic distinctiveness (ex-colonies of Britain and English-speaking) and proceeds to investigate the implications of that experience in the literatures. It may, then, be helpful to think of 'Commonwealth' as inherently referring to a collection of literatures and 'post-colonial' as inherently referring to a way of approaching some texts within those literatures; or, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin phrase it, 'a reading practice'. 'Post-colonial literature(s)' is then an imprecise but convenient term which conflates a method and a group of texts. This conflation, however, has proved controversial. Tying down post-colonialism is a little like the story of the blind men and the elephant, but as Paul Sharrad says, 'One constant in all theorizing of post-colonial literature is the centrality to both literary creation and its criticism of involvement in historical process.' The idea that the 'post-colonial' is situated anywhere near the 'pastoral' and the apolitical belongs in the mirror-maze of euro-babble.

The domain and activity of a post-colonial approach to Commonwealth literature have been extensively discussed by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back*. Where objections have been made to their thesis, they have usually been about the homogenising of the approach with the literature as though post-colonial readings were innately and exclusively appropriate to deal with it. This also recalls the caution of Thieme and Chew mentioned above. The question is whether colonialism is such a major constituent of late twentieth-century consciousness that it conditions all literature from formerly colonised countries. Or are there some texts which do indeed reflect such a consciousness and reward a reading from that position while others do not? Is post-colonialism offering itself not only as a synecdoche for *all* oppression, but also as a refraction of *all* experience?
There are two issues at the intersection of the post-colonial and Commonwealth literature which I wish to take up at this point; one is the place of comparison in a post-colonial practice, and the other is the question of binaries. As mentioned above, the exploring of parallel literary traditions and their social geneeses was the first step away from treating Commonwealth literature as a collection of individual national literatures. Comparing texts from different traditions seemed a fertile critical practice. For the critic, as well as offering a flexible operative stance, the method implied the social utility of cultural relativity and cross-cultural awareness. For writers it offered the extension of a readership outside their own geographical area.

The implicit concept of literature behind this activity is that literature mirrors social reality. The point of comparing the literary texts in this way is to gain insight into the similar-yet-different generating societies, and into the way language and culture mutate in different social environments. But post-colonial theory proposes that the reality perceived by the colonised subject has been constructed for him or her by the linguistic structures of colonialism, and are distortions of what would otherwise be a felt reality. So all that can be available through a comparison of Commonwealth texts is one distortion set against another. We cannot arrive at a comparative sociology through a comparative post-colonial analysis, merely a comparative pathology of neuroses. If we are to maintain a comparative framework in post-colonial critique, we need then, to reformulate the reasons for doing so. This theoretical difficulty has not, however, stopped at least one critic from marrying a post-colonial impetus with a comparative methodology in order to energise an institutional politics.

The challenge for the critic is to find an alternative power base to that which has traditionally fuelled imperialist academic endeavour. That base lies in recognising the potential power of comparative post-colonial studies to pose an alternative to traditional English studies.22

Much of the work now being conducted under the label of post-colonial literature does in fact draw examples from different traditions, but it has relinquished the idea of comparing one real social ethos to another real social ethos via the mediation of two literary expressions. Instead a post-colonial approach identifies a shared consciousness characterised by a fractured epistemology and an oppositional stance towards past and continuing experience of colonialism. This offers a tidy and coherent formulation which identifies a leading (presumably the leading) impulse in the writing, and a pedagogical and social programme that proceeds from it.

I said that a post-colonial approach identifies ‘a shared consciousness’. This consciousness is no doubt deducible from historical records and a theory of atavistic recall, but post-colonial theory would be on stronger ground if it could identify and codify markers of colonial fracture and/or
post-colonial resistance in the texts. Otherwise it is open to the charge that it is reading practice which creates what it wants to find. A good deal of work is being done across Commonwealth literature offering post-colonial readings of pairs or groups of texts, and arguing for the innateness in post-colonial literature of motifs, tropes, and rhetorical strategies such as the house, the journey, allegory, irony, magic realism and so forth. There is, however, no taxonomy of traces or markers found exclusively in post-colonial literatures. And yet, drawing up such a taxonomy should not be an impossible task. Texts which yield to a post-colonial analysis must do so through internal markers which exist before and independent of the actual reading. It ought to be demonstrable that such markers are present in texts from, say, New Zealand, India, and the Caribbean, but are not present in texts from Britain. This is a crucial question because it focuses one of the most complex and sensitive problems in Commonwealth literary discussion of recent years: whether the colonial mindset of the settler colonies can be meaningfully associated with that of the black or brown Commonwealth. The post-colonial literature position is that it can and must. As Diana Brydon puts it, ‘We colonised form a community, with a common heritage of oppression and a common cause of working toward positive social change.’

The question of where the US fits in relation to post-colonial theorization remains a fascinating one. As a colony of Britain, presumably at one time the US was exactly comparable, as far as its colonial consciousness went, to a stage in the development of consciousness in settler colonies like Canada or Australia. Once again it ought to be possible to demonstrate this by inspecting its early literature for traces comparable to those that demarcate the colonial consciousness in texts from other places. But the US raises other questions: if the US’s is not still a colonial consciousness, at what stage did it lose that consciousness, and how did it do so?

Given that post-colonial criticism starts from a postulation of a shared fractured consciousness, it is not surprising that much of its energy has been displayed in a boisterous denunciation of European colonial and neo-colonial practices, and a demonstration of how contemporary texts from Commonwealth countries escape, expose, interrogate, allegorise, refute, subvert, mimic, counter the discourse of, ironise, refuse, or resist European hegemony. Set up in this way, post-colonial criticism is devoted to the construction of a writerly practice which counters political and cultural control inscribed in European texts, especially those which have been privileged through educational or publishing empowerment. While this has done much to explore the interpellative structure of colonial education and has produced some splendidly imaginative readings of familiar texts, the process seems to me to contain two dangers. In the first place there is a reductive lumping of all European thought (and often all European and American thought) into a monolith of negativity while the particular post-colonial text being called on to counter the Euro-American
episteme is examined in sympathetic and subtle detail. This is reverse orientalism – one European theory looks just like all the others; only the non-European has features.  

One of the sins of Europe according to post-colonial theory is that its thought is fashioned on a binary system, of which self-Other is the focal instance. Paradoxically, this is answered by post-colonial theory itself setting up a further binary between Europe’s inveterate pattern of binary thought on the one hand, and a claim for a post-colonial moment of escape from, or transcendence of, such binaries on the other. Qualities of hybridity, fluidity, carnivalesque reversal, magic realism, postmodern relativity and so forth are all identified as being markers of the post-colonial. The argument is usually clinched by reference to the work of Wilson Harris, but it remains to be demonstrated that Harris’s work is either typical of the post-colonial text or representative of its quintessential burden. It is also still to be demonstrated that such markers cannot equally be read from works which emanate from contemporary Britain.

The second reservation I have about the virtual definition of a post-colonial approach as a denunciation of Europe is that this leads in practice (although not inevitably) to a rather whingey self-inscription as victim. In several current literary discourses there is an enthusiasm for grounding claims to attention not in what is achieved in the writing, but in what is suffered or allegedly suffered by those claiming, (sometimes rather desperately), connection with the real-life brutalisation. Post-colonial critique has unfortunately not always avoided the ‘my marginalisation scar is bigger than your marginalisation scar’ slang-off, and some of the posturings of powerful, wealthy academics shrilly declaring their deprivation or their identification with deprivation are simply risible.

If a post-colonial approach to literature is worth pursuing it is worth pursuing for what it reveals in the literature’s articulations, whether they are read as mimetic, expressive, subversive, mimicking, parodic, healing, synthesising or whatever; not for the catalogue of wrongs, dispossessions, psyche-fracturings, oppressions, interpellations, deprivations, marginalisations, otherings, subaltern-izations, abjections, and worldling-izations, to which its proponents sometimes triumphantly lay claim. As Diana Brydon says, ‘Caliban quickly tires of cursing Prospero. His speech is most compelling when he celebrates his own skills and love of place, and when he transforms himself from European creation into an autonomous indigene.’

I suggest, then, that the unsatisfactorily-named discipline of Commonwealth alias post-colonial literature is lurching in different directions at the moment. Part of it is eager to preserve the inclusiveness and expansiveness of the early Commonwealth literature brief and, despite the theoretical problems of representation thus incurred, maintain radio contact with the sociologists. Another part seeks a more coherent and theoretically-rigorous discipline by developing the historico-political valency of a
smaller range of texts under the banner of post-colonial critique. Ultimately it may be impossible to fuse these projects, and we shall each have to go one way or the other, sawing the boat in two. My own preference at the moment is for a wider, less-focused field, largely because it seems to me to allow access to texts which do not answer well to a post-colonial reading. But post-colonial critique may continue to develop its already formidable strategies to circumvent this and to demonstrate that the fact that 'imperialism has penetrated the fabric of our culture, and infected our imagination more deeply than we normally realize' does result in textual resonances which are systematically demonstrable, and politically potent.

NOTES

Thanks to Helen Tiffin and Stephen S Goldman for constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. For example, A.D. Hope, 'Literature Versus the Universities', The Cave and the Spring (Adelaide: Rigby, 1965), pp. 164-73.
2. Many panels at ACLALS conferences consist of papers which show no comparative bent, and which could equally well have been presented at conferences on the national literatures.
7. The theme of the conference was 'Comparative Approaches to Commonwealth Literature'. The succeeding conference in Fiji in 1980 emphasized a different way of crossing divisions with its theme of 'Commonwealth Literature in Multi-Cultural Contexts'.
13. Among several studies which explore the resiting or rewriting of The Tempest are: Diana Brydon, 'Rewriting The Tempest', WLWE, 23.1 (1984), pp. 75-88, and Chantal
15. Thieme and Chew, op. cit. p. 2.
25. Significantly, one of the foundational texts of post-colonial studies was titled Europe and its Others.