Chapter 1

Introduction: situating the postcolonial

Over the past half-century, postcolonial literatures and postcolonial studies[1] have gained the attention of more and more readers and scholars throughout the world. Writers as diverse as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka from Nigeria, Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy from India, Derek Walcott from the Caribbean, Seamus Heaney from Ireland, Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje from Canada, Peter Carey and Patrick White from Australia, and J. M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer from South Africa have been prominent when major literary awards such as the Booker Prize or the Nobel Prize have been announced, and their works now appear on numerous school and university syllabuses. Concurrently, their writing has provided the nourishment for a variety of postcolonial theories concerning the nature of such works, approaches to reading them, and their significance for reading and understanding other literary, philosophical and historical works. Indeed, the production of introductions to postcolonial theory has become a major industry.[2] However, this book seeks to focus on the literary texts rather than the theories, and to give a general sense of the issues and choices which inform the writing and reading of those texts. It will discuss the ways in which these issues have changed over the decades, involving questions of genre, form and language, as well as social and political concerns; it will also discuss how these texts may be read and responded to in different contexts.

Although the focus of this book will be on texts rather than theories, and although I will use the adjective postcolonial (without a hyphen) throughout to refer to both the texts and their contexts, it is useful to be aware of the terms and theories that have become current in critical discussion, not least the terms 'postcolonial' and 'post-colonial' themselves, for their usage varies, is far from consistent, and is the subject of considerable debate. For historians, the hyphenated word refers specifically to the period after a country, state or people cease to be governed by a colonial power such as Britain or France, and take administrative power into their own hands. Thus India and Pakistan gained their political independence in 1947 and so became historically 'post-colonial' after 15 August 1947. But within the area of 'Postcolonial Studies', which tends

to embrace literary and cultural – and sometimes anthropological – studies, the term is more often used to refer to the consequences of colonialism from the time the area was first colonized. Such studies are generally concerned with the subsequent interaction between the culture of the colonial power, including its language, and the culture and traditions of the colonized peoples. And almost always, the analysis of those interactions acknowledges the importance of power relations in that cultural exchange – the degree to which the colonizer imposes a language, a culture and a set of attitudes, and the degree to which the colonized peoples are able to resist, adapt to or subvert that imposition. I should add that the label 'postcolonial' is rejected by some writers to whom it has been applied. The Indian writer Nayantara Sahgal, for example, dislikes the term because she considers that it implies that colonization by the British is the only important thing that has happened to India, and that it denies the history that precedes British colonization and the continuing traditions stemming from those earlier periods.[3]

Some scholars are also uneasy about the application of the term to such a variety of colonial and postcolonial contexts, and fear that its generalized use obscures the significant differences between different colonies and their histories and cultures. It has been argued that predominantly European colonies such as Australia and Canada, which were settled by British and other European groups over a period of two hundred years, and which now have a relatively small indigenous population, should not be grouped together with settler colonies such as Jamaica and Kenya, where historically a small group of Europeans dominated a majority African population, and where, after the achievement of political independence, indigenous Kenyans and Jamaicans of African descent took over the reins. Indeed, given that indigenous Australian Aborigines and Native Americans have yet to recover their territory and achieve self-government, it has been claimed that countries such as Australia and Canada should be classified as not 'post-colonial' but 'colonial'. As an island settled and governed by the British since the twelfth century, Ireland is seen by some to have a dual status as a postcolonial state in the south while remaining a British colony in the north.

Nations which were historically settler colonies also differ significantly from those which were not settled by Europeans but governed by the British directly from London through the agency of civil servants, police, and soldiers sent not as permanent settlers occupying the land but as administrators and 'peacekeepers' to ensure that the laws and regulations promulgated by the British were enforced. The Indian subcontinent changed over a period of two hundred years from being seen as a series of states whose rulers collaborated, often as a result of military intervention, with the British East India Company, to becoming in the

nineteenth century an area governed by the British and subject to its statutes. In both Ireland and India, the British sought to establish an intermediate class of English-speaking people who could act as interpreters, teachers and lower-grade civil servants, and so provide support for British cultural, military and economic domination. Similar policies were followed in African colonies such as Ghana and Nigeria after the allocation of these territories to Britain at the Berlin Conference in 1884.[4]

Although this book will concentrate on literature written in English by members of the colonized groups just before or during the historically postcolonial period in the colonies formerly dominated by Britain – that is, works written in the phase leading up to independence or following the achievement of independence – it is important to bear in mind the differing histories of each former colony and the impact of those differing histories. It is also important to be aware of the development of postcolonial studies and the peculiarities of the discipline, in order not to be confined by its present boundaries and terms, but rather to question and modify them. As Stuart Hall remarks, 'Those deploying the concept must attend . . . carefully to its discriminations and specificities and/or establish more clearly at what level of abstraction the term is operating and how this avoids a spurious "universalisation" . . . Not all societies are "post-colonial" *in the same way* . . . But this does not mean they are not "post-colonial" *in any way*.'[5] In the same essay Hall also insists on the need to view postcoloniality as a process, involving changing relationships and positions with regard to the colonizing culture and the postcolonial subject's identity.

From Commonwealth to postcolonial literary studies

Postcolonial literary studies owe their origin chiefly, of course, to the enormous and exciting efflorescence of creative writing which first came to the attention of readers and critics in the 1950s and 1960s, and coincided with a series of states in Africa, South East Asia and the Caribbean moving from colonial to postcolonial status.[6] Concurrent with the dismantling of the British Empire came the establishment of the British Commonwealth (more recently called the 'Commonwealth of Nations'), a structure grouping together most of the former British colonies. In 1964 A. Norman Jeffares convened the first Commonwealth Literature Conference at the University of Leeds, and courses in Commonwealth literature became a significant part of the curriculum in English departments at various universities in Britain.[7] Later, such courses would also be introduced in Australia, Canada, India, Sri Lanka and the various African countries, though here the emphasis was more often on the country's

own writers, rather than a comparative study or survey, and there was often considerable opposition to the introduction of such courses. The Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes about the absence of any reference to writing by Africans in English departments in Kenya and Uganda, and describes his own struggle to introduce African literature courses at the University of Nairobi.[8]

The study of Commonwealth literature in Britain was reinforced by the presence of many writers and academics from the former colonies. Some, like Kamau Brathwaite, V. S. Naipaul and Wole Soyinka had come in the 1950s and 1960s to study in British universities; others, such as the novelists George Lamming and Samuel Selvon, and the poets Dom Moraes and Peter Porter, sought work and wider opportunities for publication. After World War II, Britain had recruited thousands of people from the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent to sustain the national health and transport systems and to work in the steel and textile factories. As the children of these recruited immigrant workers began to enter the secondary school and university systems in the 1970s, teachers and students alike sought to encourage the study of African, Caribbean and Indian writing.

While Commonwealth literary studies had on the whole striven to remain apolitical, focusing on aspects such as form and style in the novels of Australian authors such as Patrick White, or the use of language in the poetry of Brathwaite and Derek Walcott, sometimes drawing comparisons with works by mainstream British authors, there was also considerable pressure to read and understand these works within a political context. In Britain and the United States, texts by African, Caribbean and Indian authors were often read within the framework of area studies programmes, such as African Studies or Asian Studies, or, especially in the United States, Black Studies or Third World Studies. In North America the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and in Britain the racist attitudes which kept black and Asian people out of all but the most poorly paid jobs and resented their presence in British cities and suburbs, led to an increasing emphasis on political, psychological and cultural resistance to discrimination on grounds of race and colour. For authors such as Achebe in Nigeria and Brathwaite in the West Indies, as for students and teachers of African descent in Britain, the Caribbean, and the United States, the writing and reading of texts by African and Caribbean authors were seen as a means of restoring dignity and self-respect to people who had suffered from hundreds of years of contemptuous dismissal, exploitation and enslavement by Europeans. Postcolonial literature is concerned above all with the issue of *self-representation* in two senses of the word, the artistic and the political. Writers from the former colonies wish to speak for themselves, to tell their own stories, including the story of the colonial encounter and its consequences, and so to

create the psychological base and historical understanding which will encourage wise choices in self-government. But, as Paul Gilroy and other critics have pointed out, one of the consequences of the colonial encounter has been what the African American writer W. E. B. Dubois described as a double consciousness, the ability to live within and between two cultures and two perspectives (and sometimes more), and with that the creation of a particularly postcolonial form of modernism.[9]

It is the amalgamation of Commonwealth literary studies, Black Studies and Third World Studies that has produced contemporary postcolonial literary studies, and which accounts for some of its peculiar features and the debates within the discipline. From Commonwealth literary studies it derives its embrace of a wide range of European settler colonies as well as predominantly indigenous and former slave colonies. The British Commonwealth category also involved an emphasis on English-speaking countries, writing in the English language (and the exclusion of writing in indigenous languages) and an emphasis on literary texts. Because the Commonwealth was set up in 1948, replacing the political structures and connotations covered by the term 'British Empire' for those ex-colonies which were now self-governing, it excluded former British colonies which had achieved independence and become republics prior to the 1940s, such as Ireland and the United States.

However, the influence of the Black Power and Black Arts movements in the United States, and the combination of Asian and Caribbean radicals in Britain, joining forces under the label 'black British' to contest racial prejudice and discrimination in education, law enforcement, housing and employment, as well as in society as a whole, encouraged an increasing emphasis on issues of identity, racial and cultural difference, and social and economic empowerment particularly with regard to people of African and Asian descent. In Britain and North America, academics and writers whose origins were in Africa, the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent and Palestine became prominent intellectual leaders elaborating the connections between written discourses and Europe's political domination over the rest of the world. These academics also drew on the thinking of influential European intellectuals such as the philosophers Theodor Adorno, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Paul Sartre, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and the sociologist Michel Foucault. The emphasis these intellectuals have placed on the power of language and modes of discourse has been particularly significant in the development of postcolonial theory.

Four names appear again and again as thinkers who have shaped postcolonial theory: Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Of African descent and born in the French former slave colony of Martinique in 1925, Fanon was taught by the great Martiniquan poet and

Marxist politician Aimé Césaire. He studied medicine and psychiatry in France, where Lacan was one of his teachers, and published his psychological analysis of racism and its effects, *Black Skin, White Masks*, in 1952. This is a remarkable personal account and analysis of the effect of the 'colonial gaze' – of being seen, defined and stereotyped by the Europeans whose culture is deemed to be superior and to have greater authority than the cultures of Africa and the Caribbean. European appearance and culture is assumed to be the norm by which others are judged, making all others 'abnormal' and either exotic or inferior or both. Fanon writes:

> There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect.
>
> How do we extricate ourselves?[10]

Fanon states his belief that 'the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex,' and his hope that an analysis of that complex will help to destroy it.[11] He also declares that 'what is often called the black man's soul is the white man's artefact'.[12]

Thus *Black Skin, White Masks* is a psychoanalytical study, an attempt to understand the causes of racism, and more importantly, the effects of racism and colonialism on black people and how to overcome or deal with those effects. In short, Fanon believes that to a greater or lesser extent black people had internalized the racism of those who ran the society, and either accepted an inferior status or felt the necessity to prove themselves fully human and equal – but in the white man's terms. He discusses various ways in which black intellectuals have sought to challenge racist attitudes. One chapter discusses and reluctantly rejects *négritude*, an ideology dramatized in his poetry by Césaire and developed more extensively in essays and poetry by the Senegalese poet and politician Léopold Senghor. Senghor argued that African culture was completely distinct from but equal and complementary to European culture. Drawing on examples from the writing of Harlem Renaissance writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Jean Toomer, as well as the cultures of his native Senegal, he claimed that rhythm, emotion and humour were the distinctive qualities of African writing, that 'emotion is completely Negro, as reason is Greek', and that Africans understood the world through intuition rather than objective analysis.[13] Senghor and other African intellectuals such as Cheikh Anta Diop also turned to precolonial African cultures and histories to illustrate the achievements of Africans ignored by modern Europeans. They wrote about the significance of Timbuktu as a centre of learning in the Middle Ages (as defined by European historians), and of the prestige

accorded kingdoms such as Mali by medieval Europe. They also reclaimed Egypt and its past artefacts and monuments as part of a continental African civilization.

Fanon acknowledged the psychological importance of this historical reclamation, but he saw *négritude* as an ideology trapped within the terms of a European dialectic, and unable to break away from the essentialism inherent in colonialist and racialist thinking. He accepted Jean-Paul Sartre's description of the movement as a necessary but passing phase in that dialectic. Sartre had written, in his Preface, entitled 'Black Orpheus', to an anthology of francophone African poetry edited by Senghor:

> In fact, Négritude appears to be the weak stage of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical application of white supremacy is the thesis: the position of Négritude as antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself and the blacks who employ it well know it; they know that it serves to pave the way for the synthesis or the realization of a raceless society. Thus Négritude is dedicated to its own destruction, it is passage and not objective, means and not the ultimate goal. At the moment the black Orpheus most directly embraces this Eurydice, he feels her slip away from between his arms.[14]

While *négritude* was an important movement, influencing the works of many writers and scholars in the Caribbean and the United States as well as Africa, Fanon's work has perhaps had a longer-lasting effect, and has been given new impetus in the work of postcolonial theorists and writers. However, it is important to remember that Fanon is writing from a particular position at a particular time – that is, a multiracial Caribbean colony ruled by the French, where the language is entirely French or French patois, and as one of the few black intellectuals studying in France. His situation was very different from that of Ghanaians, Nigerians or Senegalese living in societies which retained their own languages and continuing traditions. Nevertheless, many anglophone African writers shared Fanon's scepticism regarding Senghor's promotion of *négritude*. The Nigerian playwright Soyinka expressed his view that it was superfluous for Africans to broadcast their African identity, pointing out that a tiger does not need to proclaim his tigritude.[15] And Achebe was adamant that precolonial Africa must be presented honestly, not as 'some glorious technicolour idyll'.[16]

Fanon's experience working with Algerians fighting to liberate their country from French colonialism led to the publication of other essays and books, of which *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les Damnés de la terre*, published in French in 1961 and in English in 1965) has become the most widely read. In this work

he continues his psychological study of the colonized, but also describes the psychology of the colonizers.[17] He asserts that in order to justify their rule and occupation of the natives' territory, settlers and administrators create and define a 'Manichean Society'; that is, they classify the world of the 'native' as the opposite of everything the European supposedly represents: civilization, morality, cleanliness, law and order, wholesome masculinity.[18] So the native is by definition uncivilized or barbaric, childlike, feminine, unable to rule himself, superstitious. He is deemed to have no historical monuments, no literature, and hence no history.

Indeed, a recurring European view of Africa was that it is a place which has no history, and that history does not become significant there until the European comes on to the scene. Thus the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1837) expresses an attitude shared by many European historians even in the mid-twentieth century:[19]

> Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained shut up . . . The negro [*sic*] as already observed exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality – all that we call feeling – if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character.
>
> At this point we leave Africa never to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no development or movement to exhibit. Historical movement in it – that is its northern part – belongs to the Asiatic or European world. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the *condition of mere nature* and which has to be presented here as on the threshold of the World's History.[20]

Attitudes such as Hegel's were used to justify colonization, since it was argued that Europeans brought civilization and progress, and thus history, to Africa, or India, or Ireland, for the first time. At the same time, Africans and other colonized peoples were seen as mentally and physically adapted only for menial labour or routine clerical positions. Such justifications had been used throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to justify the enslavement of millions of Africans to work in the sugar and cotton plantations of the Americas; colonial settlers and governments continued to maintain that the people they colonized were incapable of self-government or of putting their land and its resources to good use. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon maintained that European interests in retaining their hold on the lands and resources they had occupied made it almost impossible for them

to change their attitudes, as Senghor hoped the *négritude* movement could. Fanon believed that settlers and colonial governments could be uprooted only by violence. Moreover, Fanon argued, such violence was a means of destroying the mental colonization and sense of racial inferiority he had analysed in his earlier work.

While Fanon had focused mainly on the relationship between colonizer and colonized in Africa and the Caribbean, the literary and cultural critic Edward Said, who was born in Palestine, concentrated more on portrayals of Asia, including India, and the Middle East. In his influential and much-debated book *Orientalism* (1978), Said is concerned with the ways in which knowledge is governed and owned by Europeans to reinforce power, and to exclude or dismiss the knowledge which natives might claim to have.[21] Drawing on Foucault's work, and his notion of systems of discourses controlled by those in power which define the 'truths' by which we live and judge others, Said refers to anthropology, history, linguistics and literary criticism as well as European literary works as a network of 'discourses' which establish a particular view of 'orientals' as a people to be governed rather than as equals who are capable of self-government. In this case, he argues, the writers about the East (or the Orient) acknowledge monuments, but only those which belong to the distant past – they are ruined monuments, and the cultures are seen as degenerate. Scholars also acknowledge writings from India and Egypt, for example, but writings in the ancient languages – Sanskrit or Egyptian cuneiform script – not contemporary writers in Arabic or Bengali or Urdu, for example. In any case, contemporary oriental societies were perceived to be in need of civilizing, and that meant European civilization. Said stresses that Orientalism refers not to a place but to an idea, and can be seen as a 'Western style for dominating, restructuring, having authority over the Orient'. He contends that:

> without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – *and even produce* – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. . . . European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.[22]

Said has been criticized on the grounds that his discussion of orientalist discourse moves too readily across time and geography and does not place particular texts precisely enough within particular economic and political contexts. The fact that Said himself is criticizing orientalist discourse on these same grounds, for its lumping together and homogenising of a variety of historical

and geographical examples of Eastern culture, does not entirely invalidate his critics. Nevertheless, the existence of such prestigious institutions as London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, where 'Oriental' includes such diverse areas as China, India, Japan, Iran, Iraq, Palestine and Turkey, might substantiate Said's argument.

Culture and Imperialism, which Said published fifteen years after *Orientalism*, responded in part to another criticism of his earlier work for its noninclusion of ways in which native writers had responded to orientalist attitudes, and so implicitly represented the Orient and 'orientals' as silent or silenced subjects. In this work he not only analysed the presence of empire in texts such as Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), he also referred to writers such as Achebe, Fanon, Salman Rushdie and W. B. Yeats from colonized and postcolonial countries.[23]

Whereas Said in his earlier work had focused on academic research and European ownership of the study of the Orient and its problems, Fanon was more interested in the effects on those who have been conquered and how they should resist. In chapter 3 of *The Wretched of the Earth*, he discusses the various ways in which African and Caribbean intellectuals have responded to European stereotypes, first by internalizing European views of them and their cultures and showing that they can mimic the white man, and behave just like him. A second stage comes when these intellectuals, finding that they are discriminated against despite their demonstrably equal intelligence and educational attainment, begin to protest against this discriminatory treatment, often in terms of the very values which the Europeans have proclaimed – especially equality and justice. Another move by educated Africans seeks to validate their own culture and civilization by rediscovering a buried history and celebrating early achievements, including the Egyptian pyramids, the medieval cities and scholarship found in Timbuktu, Mali and Ghana, the kingdoms of Ashanti and the Zulu King Chaka, the kingdoms and buildings of Benin and ancient Zimbabwe, and so on. These acknowledgements of early African achievements were important, but to some extent they might be seen as accepting and responding to European views and values regarding what is historically significant, what is worth celebrating. And they also left open the question of why these kingdoms and centres of learning or artistic achievement did not survive.

Fanon believed that such restoration of the past was an important factor in giving colonized people the confidence to envision a future without European rule and a nation capable of future achievements. It responded to and negated the European insistence that Africans were incapable of creating a civilization – or anything worth while. Moreover, the writing of an African or Indian history might involve a different view of events already narrated by British historians.