

Introduction

What is post-colonial literature?

It is sometimes easier to use the label 'post-colonial literature' than to state exactly what is meant by it. This is not just because 'post-colonial' means different things to different people, but because of the range of writing to which the label can be applied. It can be applied to sonnets written by a 19th-century Indian female poet, to a novel depicting life in Nigeria before the arrival of the British, to the productions of theatre workshops in South Africa and to the reggae and 'dub' beats of black British poetry. What do these very different kinds of writing have in common? Why might they be categorised as post-colonial literature?

One simple answer is that all the above writing has arisen out of experiences which result from contact with the British empire. In this sense, post-colonial literature is writing which reflects, in a great variety of ways, the effects of colonialism. This might include the enforced mass migrations of the slave trade, or the impact of colonialism upon indigenous societies, to name only two areas of focus. Post-colonial literature is a large topic.

Though post-colonial writing is clearly a response to empire, it should not, however, be defined purely against it. As 'post-' implies, it is also the literature written after the end of formal colonial rule. The British retreat from empire after the Second World War and the gaining of independence by the vast majority of its colonies (those, such as the Falkland Islands, which are still colonies, are so by choice) has meant that, particularly in what has been termed the 'developing' or 'Third World', new conflicts and power struggles have arisen; the television screens of Europe often show pictures of ethnic conflict or famine, and in some countries corruption has come to characterise much post-independence politics. Internal conflict has been one legacy of colonialism, particularly in countries such as India or Nigeria where traditionally isolated or conflicting groups were brought within national boundaries created by colonialists. This is another context which informs the writing of post-colonial authors: the problems faced by independent countries and the lack of security and certainty in such a world. On one level, post-colonial literature is an expression of these crises as well as a testimony to those who resist them. In an important way, it also presents alternative perspectives of Third World countries to those presented on the television screens of the West.

Many might argue that it is a mistake to describe such a world as 'post-colonial'. Political independence has not necessarily brought economic freedom. Many countries are still economically dependent on the 'developed' world, produce cash-crops such as coffee or tobacco for multi-national companies that reap the

profits, and are ruled by dictators supported by foreign aid. It can be argued that such a world is not post-colonial, but 'neo-colonial': though the obvious signs of empire may be gone, the populations of such countries have not gained the freedom that they hoped would come after independence. By 1966 increasingly oppressive regimes or military rule could be seen in Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Nigeria, to name only four countries.

Post-colonial literature should be clearly distinguished from colonial literature. For the purposes of this book, 'colonial writing' is writing produced by authors who belong to the colonising power (white writing about India, Africa or the Caribbean) and written before independence in the relevant region. Colonial writing also comes in many shapes and forms; it covers a large time frame, from the 16th to 20th centuries, and colonial writers are certainly not uniform in their depiction or opinion of empire. Though it is only possible to include a small amount of colonial writing in this book, what can be included is there to provide key examples of its kind and to be seen in relation to the writing of post-colonial authors. Colonial writing can act as a backdrop highlighting the particular concerns of post-colonial authors, who have, in various ways, responded to it.

The label 'post-colonial' demands a shift in focus, away from British literature (literature produced by British writers) to world literatures in English. Whereas it would have once seemed impossible to separate Britain and British attitudes from great writing in English, post-colonial literature questions the importance of both 'Britishness' and 'Englishness'. Perhaps the prominence of post-colonial literature reflects the changing nature of British society itself, which is now multi-cultural. Furthermore, whereas English literature was once exported throughout the empire, through schools and colleges, now the writing from former colonies is being exported to Britain. In the words of the Indian novelist, Salman Rushdie: 'The Empire writes back to the centre.' This book attempts to deal with the implications of that shift.

The purpose and scope of the book

The book discusses the key issues relating to post-colonial writing, providing a sense of the historical and cultural background which has shaped the subject.

Since post-colonial writers often respond to particular historical events, post-colonial literature is intimately entwined with the contexts in which it is written; indeed, part of the purpose of this book is to provide a sense of the various contexts of post-colonial literature. This is certainly not to argue that writing is a mere by-product of history (the written or performed word is always the primary focus), but to show how different writers are influenced by, respond to and perhaps shape the societies in which they live.

The global nature of post-colonial literature means that the reader needs to be aware of a variety of contexts. Because of the influence of migration and the availability of global travel, writers may not belong to or identify with one geographical region, but cross both regional and cultural boundaries through their writing. Though there are issues, such as the use of the English language, which are common across the globe, much post-colonial writing reflects the concerns of the particular region in which it is written. In addition to this, the British empire was a far from uniform operation, differing greatly in the various regions. For these reasons, Part 1: Approaching post-colonial writing, which offers an overview, is devoted to both 'Transcultural writing' and to particular geographical regions: India, Africa and the Caribbean.

Owing to the limitations of space, this book does not cover writing from New Zealand, Australia or Canada. These (along with South Africa) were 'white dominions' with greater control over their own internal affairs and foreign policy, and though their writers faced some similar problems to those from Britain's 'colonies', they require a distinctive introduction of their own. The colonies, however, are linked together because of the extent to which they were prevented from managing their own affairs, and by the fact that, until they gained independence, power was in the hands of a white élite responsible to the government in London.

Much of the focus of this book is about how authors from subjugated peoples and races have come to take the English language, taught to them initially by their colonial masters, and have used it for their own literary purposes, transforming it in the process. This book seeks to provide an introduction to why, how and when this occurred.

How the book is organised

Part 1: Approaching post-colonial writing

Part 1 provides an introduction to the main features of post-colonial writing, key post-colonial authors and the development of post-colonial literature within specific geographical contexts.

Part 2: Approaching the texts

Part 2 raises essential issues which need to be kept in mind when reading post-colonial literature, and is designed to provoke close, critical reading.

Part 3: Texts and extracts

This part offers an anthology of writing, which will be referred to in the other sections and which can be used as the basis of tasks and assignments. It is organised regionally, according to the place represented in the passage.

Part 4: Critical approaches

An introduction to post-colonial criticism, this section emphasises the importance of recognising different ways of writing about colonial and post-colonial literature and provides an introduction to the central critical concepts and vocabulary used. There is also guidance on how to write about colonial and post-colonial literature, as well as writing about established English texts from a post-colonial perspective.

Part 5: Resources

This includes a reading list and other resources, providing a list of the primary texts used in this book, as well as useful guides to the subject as a whole and the regions under discussion. It also includes a selection of useful internet sites.

There is a glossary which lists and defines the critical terms which, when used, appear in bold type.

There are tasks and assignments, for individual or group work, in Parts 1, 2, and 4.

1 Approaching post-colonial writing

- What are the main characteristics of post-colonial literature?
- How has post-colonial writing developed in different geographical, cultural and political contexts?
- How have individual authors responded to key historical and cultural developments?

Transcultural writing

First and foremost, post-colonial writing is an international genre. It would be a mistake to imply that all authors can be neatly tied, either culturally or personally, to their countries of origin. Indeed, a sense of origin or belonging is often conspicuously absent. Furthermore, the setting and scope of much post-colonial writing is international rather than local in focus. Deciding whether a work should be placed in a local or international context is a key issue when approaching post-colonial writing.

V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie: the problem of context

Look at the following extract from the novel *A Bend in the River* (1979) by the writer V.S. Naipaul; the narrator, Salim, a man of East African Muslim descent, is making observations about the life of immigrants and refugees in London.

They traded in the middle of London as they traded in the middle of Africa. The goods travelled a shorter distance, but the relationship of the trader to his goods remained the same. In the streets of London I saw these people, who were like myself, as from a distance. I saw the young girls selling packets of cigarettes at midnight, seemingly imprisoned in their kiosks, like puppets in a puppet theatre. They were cut off from the life of the great city where they had come to live, and I wondered about the pointlessness of their own hard life, the pointlessness of their difficult journey.

As soon as the reader begins to consider where to place the passage geographically, questions arise. Should the passage be seen as being written from the perspective of Salim's personal background? Should it be seen within the context of London, where the passage is set, even though the narrator and people described are outsiders to that city?

To complicate matters further, the author was born in Trinidad of Hindu Indian descent, but has lived most of his adult life away from the place of his birth, much of it travelling in Africa and India. Is it not possible to argue that the writing could be seen as Caribbean, Indian or African, even English, depending where the reader chooses to place emphasis?

Displacement and rootlessness

These questions highlight how difficult it can be to place writers and texts within a specific context. Indeed, for some, displacement is the key feature of the post-colonial world. Its effects, both cultural and psychological, are central themes in post-colonial literature.

- ▶ Look again at the passage and consider how displacement is depicted. What particular words, phrases or sentences highlight this?

Writers who do not fit neatly into any particular area can be described as **'transcultural'** in the sense that they live and write 'across' national and cultural boundaries. One characteristic feature of such writing is a sense of rootlessness, though this may not always be immediately obvious. Such dislocation raises all sorts of interesting questions about the subject of post-colonial writing, and the way in which it relates to its context.

Transcultural writing reminds the reader that writers do not always have a rich sense of culture to draw from like a well, and that their relationship with the culture or nation of their birth or heritage can often be problematic. On one level, such writing challenges the idea that national and cultural identities can be easily defined, and that individuals fit neatly into such categories.

Near the beginning of *A Bend in the River*, Salim describes his origins:

Africa was my home, had been the home of my family for centuries. But we came from the East coast, and that made the difference. The coast was not truly African. It was an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese place, and we who lived there were really people of the Indian Ocean. True Africa was at our back. Many miles of scrub and desert separated us from the up-country people; we looked east to the lands with which we traded – Arabia, India, Persia. These were also the lands of our ancestors. But we could no longer say that we were

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Excerpt

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Arabians or Indians or Persians; when we compared ourselves with these people, we felt like people of Africa.

Naipaul has created a narrator who, despite the distinctiveness of his position, is caught between cultures. Even though his family have actually lived in Africa 'for centuries', they are 'really people of the Indian Ocean'. However, even that is not secure; when they compare themselves with Arabians, Indians or Persians, they 'felt like people of Africa'.

Living between cultures

Though the details may be different, the sense of living between cultures can be seen to reflect Naipaul's own predicament. Naipaul is the grandson of indentured (contracted) labourers who were brought to the Caribbean, in his case Trinidad, from India to supply cheap labour on plantations after the abolition of slavery in the 19th century. As such he was born into a family which still practised Indian, Hindu rituals, but was thousands of miles from the source of those rituals. The Port of Spain in which Naipaul grew up had Indian, black, American and English communities.

It is far from coincidental that Naipaul is equally a travel writer and a writer of fiction. His travel writing is as much an exploration into history and the relationship between the past and the present as it is about scenes, occurrences and experiences. In *Finding the Centre* (1984), Naipaul has written about the process of writing and his motivations for travel, specifically in the Ivory Coast, West Africa. One of the aspects he focuses on is meeting people:

But the people I found, the people I was attracted to were not unlike myself. They were trying to find order in their world, looking for the centre ...

- ▶ Given that Naipaul is predominantly an exile, why might 'order' and a 'centre' be so important for him? What might they offer on a psychological level?

The above statements by Naipaul reflect a key problem for many writers living in the post-colonial world. That is, how to make sense of and represent a world which may not seem ordered or meaningful. This does not necessarily mean denying uncertainty and doubt, but incorporating it into the picture.

The process of writing across cultures may affect the actual writing process itself. Reflecting on the experience of writing his novel, *Miguel Street* (1959), Naipaul relates how he came to recreate his native Port of Spain while writing in London. Consider this extract from *Finding the Centre*:

The first sentence was true. The second was invention. But together – to me, the writer – they had done something extraordinary. Though they had left out everything – the setting, the historical time, the racial and social complexities of the people concerned – they had suggested it all; they had created the world of the street ...

So, that afternoon in the Langham Hotel, Port of Spain memories, disregarded until then, were simplified and transformed ... When I began to write about Bogart's street I began to sink into a tract of experience I hadn't before contemplated as a writer. Half of the writer's work though is the discovery of his subject. And a problem for me was that my life had been varied ... Trying to make a beginning as a writer I didn't know where to focus.

The experience of exile gave him the clarity and distance to manage the material.

However, exile presents different problems for different post-colonial authors, and may affect their writing in different ways. In his essay 'Imaginary Homelands' (1992), Salman Rushdie reflects upon the process of writing about India while living in London (because of Rushdie's own sense of himself as an Indian writer, a more detailed introduction to his work is included in the section on India, pages 24–26):

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind ...

This passage emphasises a fundamental issue when approaching all writing, not just transcultural works: the position of the author, whether geographical or cultural, and how that affects the way in which the subject is perceived and represented.

Authenticity

In addition to this, the extract raises another essential issue: 'authenticity'. To what extent can a piece of writing be seen to reflect or convey truly a particular event or moment? On the one hand, post-colonial literature offers us fictions (such as Rushdie's 'Indias of the mind') which have been constructed and selected, and are

not accurate, complete **representations** of the world, no matter how convincing they might seem. However, there is a sense in which writing reflects the world, as in the extracts from *A Bend in the River* above.

Post-colonial literature often works in an area between what is fact and fiction, or what is history and literature.

Michael Ondaatje: the search for identity

The writing of Michael Ondaatje highlights the subjective, personal element of the post-colonial world. Originally from Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), his roots are of mixed Dutch, Tamil and Sinhalese elements. Educated in England, he eventually settled in Canada. A sense of the transcultural informs much of his work, whether in the form of migration, international displacement or the personal search for his family's past. Above all, his work heightens a sense of a world which is not ordered and fixed, but relative, composed of various perspectives and histories.

In Ondaatje's novel, *The English Patient* (1992), the reader is given an insight into the highly individual, but entwined histories of the main characters. Though much of the novel is set in Italy at the end of the Second World War, action also takes place in Canada, North Africa, England and India. All of the four main characters are removed from their culture of origin, and the nature of their experiences means that they become entwined in lives of those from cultures other than their own. Though the sense of place and history is global in dimension, Ondaatje focuses on the intimate, inner world of each character.

It is significant that for much of the novel the central character of *The English Patient* is nameless and featureless, distinctive features having been burnt in a plane crash, his identity a mystery. Even when Carravagio (another character) reveals his identity as an Hungarian spy, Count Almásy, the nurse, Hana, rejects this as the past and unimportant. The English patient has assimilated Englishness to the degree that he can no longer be distinguished as Hungarian or English. Moreover, the novel is set at a time of chaos in Europe and at the beginning of the decline of European empires. A sense of the disintegration of formal order, and the need to create clarity in the world, is conveyed in the following passage:

The Bedouin were keeping me alive for a reason. I was useful, you see. Someone there had assumed I had a skill when my plane crashed in the desert. I am a man who can recognise an unnamed town by its skeletal shape on a map. I have always had information like a sea in me. I am a person who if left alone in someone's home walks to the bookcase, pulls down a volume and inhales it. So history enters us. I knew maps of the sea floor, maps that depict weaknesses in the

shield of the earth, charts painted on skin that contain the various routes of the Crusades.

So I knew their place before I crashed among them, knew when Alexander had traversed it in an earlier age, for this cause or that greed. I knew the customs of nomads besotted with silk or wells ... There were continual drownings, tribes suddenly made historical with sand across their gasp.

In the desert it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation. When I came out of the air and into the desert, into those troughs of yellow, all I kept thinking was, I must build a raft ... I must build a raft.

- ▶ In what ways might the passage seem 'transcultural'? How does Ondaatje link a sense of history with a sense of place and personal experience?

Perhaps the loss of easy 'demarcation' characterises the post-colonial world. The colonial spy, a man of knowledge and maps, finds himself in the ever-shifting desert. Human civilisation and history are seen in terms of quest and migration, of change, of survival or 'drownings'.

Do post-colonial writers provide us with maps, however imperfect, which represent a world that is continually changing? Maps which are incomplete, cultural and psychological, as much as physical, but which still give some insight?

The theme of mapping countries and experiences across cultural boundaries is a key aspect of *Running in the Family* (1983), which is based on Ondaatje's return visits to Sri Lanka. Throughout this work, the reader is aware of a world being reconstructed. In the section 'Aunts', he writes:

How I have used them ... They knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong. They lead me through their dark rooms crowded with various kinds of furniture – teak, rattan, calamander, bamboo – their voices whispering over tea, cigarettes, distracting me from the tale with their long bony arms, which move over the table like the stretched feet of storks. I would love to photograph this.

A sense of the book's make-up can be gleaned from knowing that it includes historical detail, photographs and extracts from conversations. Alongside these are placed translations of 5th-century poetry, diary extracts and Ondaatje's own poetry. As with *The English Patient*, the map we are given is a composition of possible perspectives, so that the fictional, imaginary aspect is emphasised. Towards the end, addressing his dead parents, he states, 'But the book again is incomplete. In the end all your children move along the scattered acts and memories with no more clues.' When acknowledging the help of others, Ondaatje writes: