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## The 1990s: An Increasingly Postcolonial Decade

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## The 1990s – an increasingly postcolonial decade

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In postcolonial literary studies, the final decade of the twentieth century represented disciplinary consolidation and a coming of age, a move from fairly predictable close readings of writers still predominantly described as “Commonwealth”, to more prominently theorised accounts of migrant and national narratives. This shift is at once refracted and diffused in the pages of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, as we will discuss in this essay, to the extent that it is possible to claim that the journal, placed in its context, can be read as a documentary overview of the changing landscape of the 1990s, but one that was mediated, positioned at a critical remove from the theoretical developments that fomented postcolonial critical studies in this period. Even so, looking at the field’s distinct shifts in approach, subject matter, and critical terminology across the ten-year span, it is not an exaggeration to claim that the ‘nineties represented a watershed both for postcolonial studies and for the journal itself, albeit that the journal’s shift tended to be delayed by a few years. Both the field and the journal traced a movement from close readings occasionally informed by insights from literary theory, to more intensively comparative, theoretically informed though still text-based critical discussions.

In respect of the institutional history of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, the 1990s was the decade in which the journal’s editorial team changed, with Alastair Niven handing over the editorship to John Thieme, who became Professor at the University of Hull—where the journal was subsequently based. Soon afterwards, Thieme asked Shirley Chew, of the School of English at the University of Leeds, to join him as co-editor, and the team was completed by a third editor at Hull, Alan Bower, who was in charge of the annual Bibliography issue. Chew and Thieme co-edited alternate issues and, in an era when e-mail was still a rarity, the compilation of all the bibliographic regional listings in time for each publication was one of the major challenges faced by *JCL*’s editorial team.

Shirley Chew became the Professor of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Literature at Leeds in 1993, a title that showed the early recognition of the postcolonial as a serious critical term at Leeds. Elleke Boehmer was appointed as a Lecturer in English and Commonwealth Literature in the School of English in September 1990. Alex Tickell was a University of Leeds undergraduate (1988-1991) and then postgraduate student (1994-1998), supervised by Shirley Chew. Both of us co-authors, Boehmer and Tickell, had from our different positions been drawn to Leeds in part by the leading role that the School of English (with the pioneering Arthur Ravenscroft at the helm) had played in establishing Commonwealth literature as a legitimate, self-respecting field within English studies in the UK. This had begun as far back as the 1960s, the decade when both Wole Soyinka and Ngugi wa Thiong’o (then James Ngugi) had studied at the university, and Nissim Ezekiel had served as a visiting professor (in 1964). As considerable academic and cultural capital was

invested in the idea of the Commonwealth at Leeds, we the co-authors were in different ways party to the interesting and sometimes fraught discussions that were held within the School of English across the decade concerning the challenges that the onset of postcolonial critical studies represented for our understanding of Commonwealth literature. What kind of world map did the postcolonial field describe, when compared with the map of the Commonwealth? Did this overlap at all with the critical domain of American literature, or the area of the Black Atlantic? And what was the place of Black Britain in the wider landscape? These questions all related to highly contested pedagogic areas and even by the end of the decade were by no means resolved. Yet the MA in Commonwealth Literature at Leeds throughout this period offered options whose collective focus tended to replicate the geo-cultural shape of the Commonwealth, featuring courses in African, Australian and Indian English literature, though never in a programmatic or reductive way.

With 1990s Leeds as an important context for both of us, one that has continued to shape our careers in postcolonial teaching and research since, we feel for several reasons well placed and appropriately equipped to write an overview of this particular decade in the journal's history. Of these reasons, foremost must be that we witnessed that shift in critical and institutional preoccupation from "Commonwealth" to "postcolonial" at first hand, in a university setting where such debates mattered intensely, and not only among Commonwealth and postcolonial scholars. Yet the "on the spot" position can also of course introduce bias and partiality, which we openly declare from the start. Elleke Boehmer published one of her first academic articles in the journal in 1991, and Alex Tickell also published his first academic article in the journal, though just outside our period purview, in 2000. Like Elleke Boehmer, he was aware of ongoing conversations about the journal's direction and content that formed and evolved as part of teaching and discussions about teaching strategy, and of how these overlapped with and fed into other institutional decisions, such as choices of guest speakers. In short, as our environment was one within which the journal was being compiled and edited, we were inevitably closely involved with it.

For the purposes of writing the article, therefore, to help us give as full and sensitive a reflection of these dynamic changes as possible, and at the same time introduce some critical distance, we commissioned two students, postgraduate Erica Lombard from Oxford, and undergraduate Alicia Byrne Keane from Trinity College, Dublin, to compile a database of all the article titles published in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* in 1990s, accompanied by keynote words designating dominant issues and themes, as would be standard for any research article today. In the second half of this essay, following our broad contextual review of the "postcolonial" 1990s, we will look more closely at this database in order to trace out interesting points and shifts of emphasis in the journal's preoccupations. Our starting assumption, even before the commissioning took place, was that these shifts would probably sometimes have been in step with developments in postcolonial studies more broadly, and sometimes in a rearguard position to them.

To some extent the critical survey bore out this assumption, though not entirely so. We expected to find some incorporation or accommodation of postcolonial themes evident particularly in the later years shown in the database, yet this was not always

as marked as we had originally expected. This recalled us both to our political views of the journal at the time and our sense that its predominant literary focus sometimes seemed to imply a lack of direct engagement. Certainly from the perspective of postgraduate students at Leeds who engaged with contemporary global politics (racism in Britain, the Ayodhya Babri Masjid/Ramjanmabhumi affair in India, and the end of apartheid in South Africa were all current issues), the Journal's conceptual adherence in these years to what seemed like an outdated notion of the Commonwealth was sometimes frustrating. On occasion, it appeared to be less involved with the more radical aspects of the postcolonial project than its critical attention to these once colonized areas of the world otherwise appeared to warrant.

Yet, at the same time, the relative novelty of postcolonial theory meant that younger scholars in the field were still assimilating its concept-terms and critical techniques, and that the picture of what postcolonialism entailed, both in *JCL* and more broadly, was constantly shifting. Moreover, the founding literary emphasis of the journal meant that it maintained faith with postcolonial novelists, poets and playwrights from across Africa and South Asia, and provided them with a platform. This faith was tested in other journals keen to join the theoretical turn marking early formations of the postcolonial, at the expense of a serious formal focus. In this sense, *JCL* maintained an important space for literary critical discourses (and for writers themselves to comment on their work) that was less evident in other parts of the field.

### **The 1990s and postcolonial studies**

In this section we move on to giving an overview of the decade, focusing on developments in postcolonial theory. The aim is to set the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* within the broadly discursive and academic context that to some extent shaped it, yet that it to some extent also side-stepped. Looking back, it is to the second half of the 1980s that we are able to date the emergence of a new postcolonial and racially-attuned critical awareness in literary theoretical discourse. The development ran alongside the formation of the field of cultural studies, led by scholar-activists such as Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural studies, as well as new cultural initiatives around race relations and racial equality in British culture more widely. In the wake of Edward Said's massively influential *Orientalism* (1978), which sought to combine elements of Antonio Gramsci's and Michel Foucault's thought, post-structuralist interpretative approaches and critical techniques were being widely adopted and adapted in the academy. This was particularly the case in those literary and cultural studies circles that were concerned to explore the psychic or mental states of being colonized, such as were resonantly described by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986). In his equally important and prescient work *The Intimate Enemy* (1983), Ashis Nandy termed this condition the loss and recovery of self under colonialism. Earlier anti-colonial activist-thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi were incorporated into this critical apparatus, primarily as theorists of traumatised and/or hybrid subjectivity in works like *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (1952), rather than as commentators on collective insurgency and anti-colonial violence, which they also were, as we see in Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961).

For a period of time, these critical activities were concentrated mainly in the forum of the seminar paper and the critical essay, rather than developed in book form. Outside a few pioneering universities, such as Kent as well as Leeds, the field had not yet found the kind of institutional stability that would foster more extensive research. Particularly notable essays of the time can be located in the papers from the 1983 Essex conference on the Sociology of Literature concerning new developments in literary theory, published in two volumes as *Europe and its Others* (1985), and edited by Francis Barker *et al.* Henry Louis Gates' more or less equally important "*Race*", *Writing and Difference* (1986) gathered together essays from two special issues of *Critical Inquiry*, and also did service as an indispensable reader. In the late 1980s classroom, these collections formed a constellation with more miscellaneous work including essays by Homi Bhabha, Sander Gilman, Stuart Hall, and Anne McClintock. It was in this sparsely populated context, viewed in relative terms, that the ecumenical *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin was in 1989 welcomed as a landmark text, and rapidly became a core critical and pedagogic resource.

Moving into the 1990s, more intensive and increasingly widespread critical and pedagogic postcolonial debates encouraged a sharper definition of key issues and terms: among them, "mimicry" and "hybridity", "nation-narration", creolization and diaspora. In the Anglo-American academy there was a sharp rise in the number of theoretical works and also teaching texts on postcolonial themes, many of them published by Routledge, an imprint that had moved quickly and presciently into this area of the market. At the same time, postcolonial literary texts, in particular novels, gained greater prominence in the HE humanities curriculum, with names like Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie (post-*fatwa*), Tsitsi Dangarembga and Derek Walcott (the 1992 Nobel Prize-winner) starting to feature prominently. In the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, though there was some initial wariness about adopting and engaging with a rival term, as we will see again, the keywords just mentioned featured with growing frequency. Outside the university, too, postcolonial literature became increasingly visible and commercial, with eminently Commonwealth (and postcolonial) writers Ben Okri (British/Nigerian) and Michael Ondaatje (Canadian/Sri Lankan) winning the Booker Prize: Okri in 1991 for *The Famished Road* and Ondaatje in 1992 for *The English Patient* (a joint winner with Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger*, which also bore colonial themes). Outside those universities where clusters of postcolonial scholars worked (again, Leeds, Kent and also Stirling), postcolonial teachers had also multiplied, though in most places they still tended to occupy singleton positions.

By the mid-decade, postcolonial studies had come to be closely associated with the theoretical work of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, designated a "troika" by Benita Parry—one that had been elevated in part by the post-structuralist approach of *The Empire Writes Back* (written of course by another troika). As an established Marxist critic Parry, and also her close colleague at the University of Warwick Neil Lazarus, always took a more contested and, as it turned out, critically constructive position vis-à-vis the field. (See her *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (2004) for a representative selection of Parry's essays at this time.)

Controversially for materialist critics such as Lazarus, Homi Bhabha's work and its mantra-like invocation of hybridity became exceptionally influential, producing a critical vocabulary that was almost viral in its disciplinary saturation.

Collected as *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha's essays reconceptualised binary relations of difference through an attention to interstitial, tertiary and mixed locations. For the generations that graduated in the late 1990s (such as Alex Tickell), the collection was often taken as a primer for a new postcolonial critical methodology. This influence is in part due to the fact that Bhabha's essay "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern" formally defined the "postcolonial" as a critical approach for the first time, and did so in contradistinction to nation-based approaches: "The postcolonial ... as a mode of analysis ... attempts to revise those nationalist or nativist pedagogies that set up the relation of Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition" (Bhabha 1994 171). Bhabha also rejected class as a term of analysis—hence the particular hostility from materialist criticism. His readings prompted a re-assessment of "Manichean" models of colonial self and other (JanMohamed 1983), and led to more textual and subjective (or "performative") definitions of hybrid agency. While attempting in "The Commitment to Theory" to reconceptualise the position and political value of "theory", Bhabha arguably consolidated a new textualist position on history that moved postcolonial critique away from its older reference points and alliances in earlier anti-colonial nationalist movements, and into the play of *différance* within a page of writing.

In parallel with this rising interest in Bhabha's work, Bhabha's critic and friend Robert Young at the start of the decade authorised and so consolidated the strengthening alliance of continental philosophy and postcolonial thought in *White Mythologies* (1990). This extended and clarifying exegesis of (if not apologia for) Bhabha's seemingly obscurantist writing was followed up with *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995), in which Young situated many of Bhabha's ideas in relation to the cultural and intellectual history of empire and its constructions of race. In both studies, Young defended Bhabha's style as necessarily difficult, even political, a mode of resistance to hegemonic systems of knowledge. Young's intervention into colonialism and history was bookended ten years later by Dipesh Chakrabarty's altogether more situated though still prominently theorized (and again highly influential) intellectual history *Provincializing Europe* (2000).

Perhaps the other significant theoretical strand to be followed through postcolonial theory in the early 1990s was the continued attention to issues of subaltern representation and the position of the academic within the institution. Whereas Bhabha provided an important consolidation of the critical preoccupations and parameters of the postcolonial, Gayatri Spivak had already been styled as an exemplary post-colonial critic in a collection of essays, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, edited by Sarah Harasym, in 1990 (note the retention of the sometimes controversial hyphen). Although less programmatic in defining the postcolonial than Bhabha's essays, these interviews opened up a fertile space for debates over the identity, pedagogical role and institutional affiliation of the critic in postcolonial studies. For example, the title piece, a discussion with Angela Ingram titled "Postmarked Calcutta, India", discussed and then also followed Spivak's ongoing engagement

with Indian academics at Jawaharlal Nehru University (where she held a visiting professorship in 1987).

These questions about engagement had however already been broached by Spivak in her much-anthologised essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, a provocative, ground-breaking theorization of the “representing” role of the postcolonial critic, published in Nelson and Grossberg’s edited collection *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988). Spivak went on to develop these ideas in essays such as “Marginality in the Teaching Machine” in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993), and in the larger re-appraisal of her earlier work in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). At around the same time, the critique of the university, and its discursive part in forging consent within regimes of colonial power, was also being interrogated by Edward Said’s student Gauri Viswanathan in her *Masks of Conquest* (1989), which revealed how English studies developed in centres like Calcutta as a sophisticated form of cultural control.

An aspect of Spivak’s work that must also be noted in retrospect is her use of translation as an integral part of her critical practice. This is exemplified in texts and commentaries on Mahasweta Devi’s writing in the third section of *In Other Worlds* (1987), and also in the three Devi stories translated in *Imaginary Maps* (1995). These works could be said to represent the beginnings of a road not taken in postcolonial studies, yet one that was interestingly not absent from the close attention to language and form in *JCL*, even though the journal’s focus was always Anglophone writing. Indeed, the discipline – as it moved from Commonwealth to postcolonial preoccupations – might have developed a much more involved, reflexive approach to translation and linguistic difference in response to the field’s inter-cultural sensitivities, yet in the event did not. One of the ironies of the increasingly “textualist” positions taken by postcolonial commentators in the 1990s was a corresponding inattention to translation as a mode of reading across cultures. It is perhaps an indication of the dominance of (English) literary critics in the institutional development of postcolonial studies that this cross-linguistic engagement failed to occur. As we note from our collected data, however, *JCL* did maintain an occasional coverage of translation and translated fiction throughout the 1990s (including an essay by Ganesh Devy on Indian literature and translation in 1993, Shifen Gong’s account of Chinese translations of Katherine Mansfield in 1996, and an interview with Mahasweta Devi in 1998). Despite the overriding preoccupation with English, the journal remained to its credit attentive to issues of language choice, as is reflected in its interests in world “englishes”, and related questions about creolisation, adaptation and narrative particularity.

Yet, whatever their theoretical or political positions might have been, the theorists and critics who shaped and consolidated postcolonial studies in the 1990s all worked with the legacy of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). These texts authorised the subsequent grafting of forms of discourse analysis onto the pre-existing literary-critical stock of Commonwealth criticism combined with Comparative Literature and world literary studies in their then Eurocentric formations. Both Spivak and Bhabha (and, later, the writers of this essay, as well as many others) returned to the colonial archive as part of their

theoretical development. Throughout the 1990s, critics built on Said's example and the pattern of early studies such as Benita Parry's *Delusions and Discoveries* (1972), to mount a far-reaching critique of the colonial archive, which for them included popular literary texts and other cultural narratives (1992 was probably an *annus mirabilis* for these investigations). Key works included John Barrell's *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey* (1991), Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992), Sara Suleri's *The Rhetoric of English India* (1992), Nigel Leask's *British Romantic Writers and the East* (1992), Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire* (1993), and Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* (1995). In the process, colonial discourse analysis became increasingly defined by a wider cultural bias, in place of its former fairly strict literary focus. By the later part of the 1990s, the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* was featuring work which drew on and contributed to this tradition, such as Nigel Messenger's reading of Forster in 1998, and John Newton's "Colonialism above the Snowline" in the following year, though readings of Kipling, Paul Scott, and other Anglo-Indian work appeared across the decade.

Substantive critiques of the emerging discipline also appeared even as it unfolded, and by the mid-decade a number of critics had interrogated the political and institutional complicities of the postcolonial industry: notably Arif Dirlik in "The Postcolonial Aura" (1994), Ella Shohat in "Notes on the Postcolonial" (1992), Anne McClintock in "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism'" (1992), and Aijaz Ahmad in his influential *In Theory* (1994), in which he delivered an excoriating response to Fredric Jameson's homogenising yet influential 1986 essay "Third World literature in an Era of Multinational Capitalism". These essays developed and extended some of the objections that Benita Parry had made to theoretical aspects of the discipline in "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse" (1987), which she later continued in other essays. The positions and counter-positions that defined postcolonial studies were certainly closely followed by the contributors to *JCL* in the 1990s but they remained a critical undercurrent and informed the journal in approaches and frames of reference rather than as direct commentaries on its pages. In certain ways, as we will again suggest, the journal was somewhat insulated from these arguments because it could claim a longer-running investment in authors and writing, rather than the more arcane process of theoretical production.

The 1970s and '80s legacy of feminist thought also had a shaping influence on postcolonial criticism's preoccupation with subaltern and minority representation. In African as well as South Asian studies there was a rising concern with the exclusivist and gendered terms through which the post-independence nation was imagined, as explored in the work of Elleke Boehmer, Florence Stratton, and Anne McClintock, amongst others. The question was how feminists and womanists might appropriate and modify this emphasis in such a way as to promote liberation and overcome oppression. Boehmer's aforementioned 1991 article represented the first instance when these issues were discussed in the journal's pages, on this occasion in relation to Ngugi's work. Susheila Nasta's widely cited *Motherlands* (1991), published by the then active Women's Press, gathered together a wide spectrum of responses from women critics to the issue. Redirecting the counter-discursive impulse of the



postcolonial, Black and Asian feminists—including Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Sara Suleri, Trinh T. Minh Ha in *Woman, Native, Other* (1989), bell hooks in *Yearning* (1990), and Carole Boyce Davies in *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994)—developed a critique of western feminism and theorised forms of womanist and situated Third World feminist praxis. Spivak, too, remained highly involved in this area. Intersections of gender and culture were also part of thematic preoccupations of postcolonial fiction in the work of writers such as Tsitsi Dangarembga, Bessie Head and Jamaica Kincaid, all discussed in the 1990s pages of *JCL*.

As might be expected from a rapidly institutionalising discipline, a number of influential readers and surveys emerged in the 1990s which helped frame and ultimately canonise key critical works, and shaped courses of study. Something very similar is occurring now, in the 2010s, with the emergence of world literature companions, primers and readers in line with the new emphasis on globalization and world literature perspectives. In the 1990s, the readers and primers included Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman's *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (1993), Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1995), Patrick Williams and Peter Child's *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (1996), Bart Moore-Gilbert's *Postcolonial Theory* (1997), Ania Loomba's slightly later and more retrospective *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* (1998), and Leela Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory* (1999). A response to the emergence of the postcolonial from scholars based in Italy, but one that still featured notable contributions by Bhabha, Hall, Gilroy and Minh-Ha, was Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti's collection *The Post-Colonial Question* (1995). The converging concerns of cultural and postcolonial theorists are exemplified in the first of the 1990s readers, still in print today, Williams and Chrisman's *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, published more or less contiguously with another reader by the same publisher Harvester Wheatsheaf: John Storey's *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (1994). Not only do both texts promise a "supplemented" theoretical approach to their emerging disciplines and feature similar titles; they also share between them a number of theorists and commentators, including Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, and even reproduce the same essay, "Postmodern Blackness" by bell hooks.

These various different interactions usefully problematized the conceptual understanding of culture, with works like Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) challenging the idea of culture as a necessarily unitary or unified category, and James Clifford's *Routes* (1997) questioning the situated nature of anthropological research in favour of an attention to border-crossings and cultures of travel. Gloria Anzaldúa had laid the groundwork for this perspective-shift in the approach to culture with her seminal *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). The new focus on migrancy and third-space agency complemented the politics of hybridity and the migrant aesthetics invoked by writers such as Rushdie, Kureishi and Ondaatje, all once again *JCL* featured writers.

An important complement to these cultural emphases in the new postcolonial studies was Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* (1995), which endeavoured to reassert the literary vibrancy of the postcolonial and provided a detailed, contextualised survey of the continuities and formal paradigms of colonial and

postcolonial writing. Her inflection of the post/colonial might be compared and contrasted with that of Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin who asserted: “such [colonial] texts can never form the basis for an indigenous culture nor can they be integrated in any way with the culture which already exists in the countries invaded” (1989 5). Boehmer’s work reassessed the deeply political imbrications of texts in colonial, national and postcolonial discursive formations and thus provided a bridge between more evaluative comparative close-readings of fiction, effectively the critical legacy of Commonwealth literature approaches, and the interest in cultural discourse and representation that characterised postcolonial theory. Later in the decade, Boehmer consolidated the new perspective she provided on colonial texts by bringing a neglected imperial literary canon to wider critical attention in the anthology *Empire Writing* (1998). Other collections and surveys followed, some including regional coverage, such as Deborah Madsen’s *Post-Colonial Literatures* (1999), while Dennis Walder’s *Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (1998) was already starting to map and review the transition from Commonwealth criticism to post(-)colonial studies. As these lists of titles show, across the decade there was variant and sometimes inconsistent use of the hyphen in the “postcolonial” to signal whether a period in history, or a theoretical or discursive approach, was being designated. Bill Ashcroft in particular maintained an at once chronological yet politically justified allegiance to the hyphen, while a heterogeneous group of commentators, including Bhabha, Boehmer, Lazarus and Young, departed from it.

To draw this inevitably selective review of the transition-decade of the 1990s to a close, it is worth noting that the politics of postcolonial writing remained an important part of critical scholarship (especially as conducted in the aftermath of the momentous *Satanic Verses* affair in 1989). Rushdie wrote under the shadow of the *fatwa* throughout the 1990s; Talima Nasrin was exiled from Bangladesh in 1994; and in 1991 the Malawian poet Jack Mapanje was released from prison and went into exile. These issues were followed in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* through its broad-frame attention to history, resistance and political violence, even though the journal may at the same time have been attuned to these changes in the main as literary effects.

### **Commonwealth to Postcolonial**

In this final section we look in more detail at the data collected on the shifting thematic focus of the journal in the 1990s. Our sub-heading is taken from the prescient and in its modest way field-changing 1992 publication, *Commonwealth to Postcolonial*, a collection of critical papers given at the Silver Jubilee conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies held at the University of Kent in 1989, and edited by the leading Commonwealth-cum-postcolonial scholars Anna Rutherford and Kirsten Holst Petersen.

In the early 1990s, the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* continued to favour the critical approach that also characterized its outputs in the 1980s, namely, single author studies, which in some cases were confined to close readings of singular texts. To pinpoint this, 1990-1991 featured no less than two readings of Wole Soyinka’s comic play *The Lion and the Jewel* (C.M. Ramachandran 1990; Grahame

Smith 1991). Essay titles often reflected this focus by naming quite simply the author and/or title under discussion, and a theme: consider for example “Translating the Present: Language, Knowledge and Identity in Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People*” (Michael Neill 1990 xxv.1) or “The Question of Form in Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope*” (K.C. Beliappa 1991 xxv.1). Clearly, in a period where postcolonial studies was by no means yet established in tertiary institutions or on their English literature syllabuses, the journal was regarded and used as a forum for gathering and exchanging readings of and insights into key Commonwealth writers. Still judging from essay titles, “postcolonial”, or even “post-colonial”, remained in abeyance as critical terms. Graham Huggan was the first in the 1990s to use “post-colonial” in a title (in 1990 itself), and “post-colonialism” was first combined in a title with “postmodernism” in 1994 (by Christopher Gittings), with the hyphen retained in the former term. Otherwise, in the early years of the decade, terms from theory whether post-structuralist or postcolonial were rarely if ever used.

Faithful throughout to its vision of the Commonwealth as an Anglophone ecumene, article coverage was interestingly fairly even across the English-speaking world, with the main regions of the Commonwealth, the South Pacific, Australia, South Asia, the Caribbean and Africa (west, east and southern) all represented. The annual bibliographical issues in 1990 and 1991 did not feature New Zealand or South Pacific sections. African writers from across the continent were particularly well represented: three articles, for example, were focused on Bessie Head. There was also notable coverage of South-East Asia, with essays by Shirley Geok-lin Lim on Malaysian/Singaporean war memoirs in 1993, Elaine Ho on Hong Kong fiction in 1994, Jorshinelle Sonza on Eric Gamalinda in 1997, and Philip Holden on early Singaporean fiction in 1998. Though it is difficult to make an informed comparison across different decades, it is clear from our 1990s data overview that the postcolonial predominance of Indian English fiction was not yet apparent, or had not yet been fully established. Recalling conventional Commonwealth studies approaches, both Rudyard Kipling and Paul Scott appeared as writers on India, and in general there was a respectable coverage of “settler” writers, including an article on Afrikaans literature. As this suggests, the “Commonwealth” category in a number of cases served as a way of highlighting literary traditions which did not receive the same level of critical attention in more mainstream postcolonial commentaries. Intriguingly, but unsurprisingly, given the implied centre-periphery map of the Commonwealth, Black British writers were not viewed as an important constituency, or not one with equivalent status to areas like India or South Africa. Pakistani and Bangladeshi writers, too, were not featured.

Key critical themes across the decade related to aspects of post-colonial and/or national history, which indicates perhaps that the journal was better at contextualising and historicising texts than was postcolonial theoretical discussion, or than postcolonial theory gave literary close reading credit for doing. That said, there was a gradual shift in focus across the decade from nation-based topics to a greater concern with hybridity and migration. Concomitantly, if Benedict Anderson was an important theoretical reference-point for contributors early on in the 1990s, Mikhail Bakhtin on heteroglossia and polyphony seems to have remained influential

throughout the period. Across the board, however, there was relatively little on vernacular languages or linguistic issues, though even this limited coverage was greater than might be found in postcolonial journals established later in the decade (such as *Interventions* or the *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, both 1998).

Across the 1990s, a decade in which a number of postcolonial writers won prominent literary prizes (especially the Booker and the Nobel, as was seen), the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* participated in these and related processes of elevation and canonization in noteworthy ways. Nobel Prize-winners past and future feature prominently in the essay titles: Gordimer (1993), Soyinka (1986), Naipaul (2001), though there is less attention to Coetzee (2003) than one might have expected. Booker Prize winners tend to feature within a few years of their winning and there is coverage of writers now considered to be postcolonial classics, such as Kazuo Ishiguro and Caryl Phillips. In some cases there is a bias towards just one representative from a region: it seems that Robert Kroetsch is *the* Canadian writer of choice. Others, by contrast, have lapsed from the central position they then held, such as Timothy Mo or Rudy Wiebe.

As regards institutional history, it is interesting to observe, from the list of contributors, the then early career postcolonial critics who have since become established names in the field, though not necessarily in the same regional or discursive area in which they began: the names include Elleke Boehmer, Claire Colebrooke, Elaine Ho, Mike Marais, Anshuman Mondal, Stephanie Newell, Ato Quayson, Caroline Rooney. Though it may be to state the obvious, the absence of the canonical postcolonial figures covered in our second section (Bhabha, Parry, Spivak, Young) is worth mentioning. From this it is possible to suggest that in the 1990s the status of the journal as a venue for the professional training of postcolonial critics for the new millennium was established and consolidated.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, what might we have learned from this overview of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* in the 1990s, especially when approached from the vantage point of 2015, the journal's 50<sup>th</sup> year? As our analysis several times suggests, one insight surely must be that across the decade the vision of the Commonwealth as a horizontal community or ecumene of Anglophone cultures acted with an insulating or restraining force against the hybridizing impacts of postcolonial theory, in such a way that the nation-centred focus of the 1940-60s independence movements was usefully sustained. Yet, though such restraint was often productive of critical autonomy, the fact is that across the decade, as the shape and focus of our own careers show, Commonwealth interests steadily and almost inevitably gave way to postcolonial ones.

This consolidation of postcolonial literary analysis however may not be as long-lasting as the picture of relentless encroachment might suggest. Even as we write, questions as to definitions of the field, and rival understandings of readership and market, are ever more concertedly mounted by world literature and book history specialists against the seemingly settled remit of postcolonial criticism (critically self-reflexive though it has continued to be). Across the 1990s the map of the

Commonwealth represented a constantly changing picture, as the journal's pages reflected. Yet this map has continued to shift and change, even as concentric understandings of the world have given way to multi-centred globalizing pictures showing variously intersecting peripheries and semi-peripheries. From the vantage point of 2015 it is interesting to speculate as to whether the postcolonial will eventually be seen less as a fixed and cumulative field of study, as it appeared towards the end of the 1990s, than as a transitional stage from Commonwealth to world literary criticism, or from a focus on what Amitav Ghosh calls the Anglosphere, to Immanuel Wallerstein's far more broadly conceived "world-systems".

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