

Island or Mainland: A Cartologist's Dilemma¹⁾

Ronald D. KLEIN

Abstract

Since the dissolution of the British Empire after World War II, an indigenous English literature has emerged in all the former colonies. This “other” English literature poses some special problems for the literary critic and historian, especially so in Japan, where English literature has stayed fairly close to the traditional canon of British and American writers.

This paper will attempt to briefly outline several of the research problems one must address when studying this “other” English literature:

1. Definition and nomenclature—does the terminology being used to define the field accurately describe the territory?;
2. Identity of the participants—inconsistencies in using criteria of birth, nationality, ethnic origin, residence, place of publication;
3. Rules of inclusion and acceptance—the issue of marginalization and its effects;
4. Library classification—differences among British, American and Japanese libraries and the inconsistency of NDC in cataloguing these writers.

Basic to the inquiry is whether this literature is an island, separate from but dependent on the mainland or part of the mainstream literature itself. A third possibility is that it represents an isthmus, a link between the Commonwealth cultures and mainstream English literature. This brief overview, points out some of the problems and inconsistencies in proceeding with research in the field.

Introduction

Beginning in the 16th century, England began its global expansion, establishing trading and colonial outposts in every corner of the known world. By the mid-19th century the British Empire was firmly in place, providing the refinements of British culture, including the English language, to its subjects in North America, Africa, India, Southeast Asia and Australia/New Zealand. The establishment of a trading empire required an indigenous population skilled at speaking English and the merchant class saw the benefit of sending

1) Based on a paper presented at the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies Tenth Triennial Conference: Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 13–18, 1995.

their sons to England for their education. In most of the former British colonies of Africa and Asia, English has remained the primary language of instruction at the university level, ensuring a civil service population able to function in the global lingua franca.

With several generations growing up with English as at least a second language, it was not surprising that an English literature would be born in these former British colonies. Canada, Australia and New Zealand has had a longer history of its own English literature due to the obvious factor of English being the primary language spoken there.

But in the mid-20th century, after the dissolution of the British Empire, the independence of the former colonies and the formation of the new British Commonwealth, English literature has appeared in all the former colonies. This “other” English literature poses some special problems for the literary critic and historian, especially so in Japan, whose concept of English literature has stayed statically close to the traditional canon of English Literature since it was first introduced in this country.

This paper will attempt to briefly outline several of the problems with studying this “other” English literature, including basic issues as definition and identity as well as the practical sides of the relationship between publishers, prizes and the public. This paper will not touch on the more contentious, recondite or arcane issues of content, discourse or criticism.

Basic to the inquiry is whether this “other” English Literature is an island, separate from but dependent on the mainland, or whether it is part of the mainland or mainstream of English Literature. Seeing it in its broadest context is the cartologist’s dilemma.

Definition and Nomenclature

The first problem of identity is nomenclature: there are more than half a dozen groups of scholars calling the same corpus of writing by different names. Not surprisingly, the British Commonwealth Foundation calls this literature “Commonwealth fiction” and even offers an annual literary prize to the best works from the Commonwealth countries, regionally shortlisted. This term has the arbitrary limitation of excluding English literature from countries that are neither former British colonies nor members of the British Commonwealth, such as the Philippines, Egypt, Iran or Israel are presently and South Africa was until recently.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (and others) prefer the term "post-colonial fiction" and their book *The Empire Writes Back* puts this literature in a distinctly political context as a residue of the British Empire.

An escape around the political issue is to call this emerging literature "new literatures," as the Centre for Research in New Literatures in English (CRNLE) at Flinders University in Adelaide (and others) prefer. This definition assumes that with emerging nationhood, a new national literary voice, writing in English, would emerge. However, this assumption denies the reality of many countries where an existing literature was already being written in English.

Wasafiri, a literary magazine published in London, reports about "Afro-Asian Writings in English," although with a pronounced Anglo-African and Anglo-Asian bent.

On the broader and non-referential side, Edwin Thumboo, the dean of English literature in Singapore uses the term "world literatures in English," and across town from Thumboo, the journal *World Literatures Written in English (WLWE)* is presently being edited by the National Institute of Education's Dr. Kirpal Singh. Finally, the University of Calgary Press publishes *A Review of International English Literature (ARIEL)*, which is perhaps the most inclusive and least political or ideological rubric. Regardless of the name used, however, the user at some point must come to terms with the territory he is describing, to place it into a geographical, political or critical context.

The term "Commonwealth Literature" suits some academics for purposes of geographical and political aggregation. The ideology behind this term is that without the Imperial legacy of language, writers from these countries would not be writing in English. This is the literature of the Commonwealth, served up in a forum of like-speaking brethren.

There are several problems with this term. The first is that it perpetuates the historical colonialization. Now that the former colonies of the empire are independent, they are still not free of their former colonial association. A second problem is that, as Salman Rushdie points out, "I have never yet encountered a writer who agreed that he or she was a member of this remarkable school."²) It is a strange ideology indeed, akin to the former colonization, which embraces a people who do not wish to be embraced. A

2) Salman Rushdie. "Minority Literatures in a Multi-Cultural Society" in *Displaced Persons*. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, eds. (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1988) p. 38.

third problem is the condescension it implies, the island mentality that separates it from the mainland/mainstream.

A more revisionist nomenclature is "Post-colonial," which acknowledges that the writers from these former colonies are in fact independent to write any way they choose. Yet the tie is still there:

What each of these literatures has in common is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonialization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial center. It is this which makes them distinctly post-colonial.³⁾

Natantara Sahgal, the Indian writer, tosses off the burdensome yoke of this ideology:

I have also wondered when 'post-colonial' is supposed to end. First we were colonials, and now we seem to be post-colonials.... the British came, and stayed, and left. And now they're gone, and their residue is simply one more layer added to the layer upon layer of Indian consciousness. Just one more.⁴⁾

In another corner of the critical scrimmage is the camp that studies this literature with a view toward identifying its national/regional/ethnic characteristics. This includes the patois of Trinidad, the storytelling technique of Nigeria, the beat or rhythm of tribal poetry, the images of expansiveness of Australia, the multi-generational themes of Singapore, etc. This makes some sense. The writing of a locality must reflect the environment which produced it. The speech patterns of its characters must reflect the local rhythm and dialect as much as the settings and descriptive props. In some cases, themes will reflect the political or social realities as well as the sociolinguistics. Writers in English of the newly-independent countries may want to tap that mine of experiences. But they must go beyond mere location settings:

3) Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. (London: Routledge New Accents, 1989), introduction.

4) Nayantara Sahgal. "The Schizophrenic Imagination" in *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial*. Anna Rutherford, ed. (Sydney: Dangaroo, 1992) p. 30.

Too much of a stress on nationalism will be a limitation, but any serious writer is engaged in much more than simply affirming nationality—identity goes much deeper; humanity goes well beyond national boundaries, and identity is individual well as universal. Local and universal, national and international must go hand in hand.⁵⁾

The way around this morass of confusion is to see this literature as coming from diverse places, serving diverse needs and being perceived in diverse critical contexts. The fact that it is written in English is probably the only factor that links the writing of this group of people. The reasons for this are also diverse. In some cases, English was the colonial language alongside their native tongue. In other cases, it was the only language they ever knew. In other cases, authors left their home country for a freer environment in which to write. Others came to America or England in order to be published. Still others are second generation British, Canadian or Australian citizens.

A new perception of these writers is emerging, one based on these writers' internationalism. As Edwin Thumboo describes Raja Rao:

...within the ambit of his novels...we find characters that come from different civilisations, different societies, and so on.... What they have in common is the search for self and for understanding... There is this essential internationalism of his characters and at the same time there is this very new, very very powerful bedding of the whole international movement and the immemorial Indian tradition.... [H]e is a novelist for the twentieth century, the twenty-first century, really.⁶⁾

Identity of Participants

A second problem of identity is recognizing the players in this field. It may be surprising to realize that notable writers of English have always come from outside England. Moreover, as seen in Chart I, of the ten English-writing Nobel literature laureates since 1960, only one, William Golding, could be said to be truly British—Beckett and Heaney are Irish (and Beckett wrote in French), three are American (one African American, one

5) John McRae. "Introduction" in *S. E. Asia Writes Back!* (London: Scoob Books, 1994) p. 12.

6) "Interview with Edwin Thumboo" in *The Crnle Reviews Journal*. 1988, No. 1 & 2, p. 188.

Chart I: Nobel Prize Winners in Literature (English) since 1960

<i>British and American</i>	<i>"Other"</i>
John Steinbeck—1962	Samuel Beckett—1969
Saul Bellow—1976	Patrick White—1973
William Golding—1983	Wole Soyinka—1986
Toni Morrison—1993	Nadine Gordimer—1991
	Derek Walcott—1992
	Seamus Heaney—1995

Chart II: Booker Prize Winners (1969–1995)

*connotes additional shortlisting

<i>Winners</i>	<i>Shortlist (*)</i>
J. M. Coetzee (*)	Chinua Achebe
Peter Carey (*)	Margaret Atwood**
Keri Hulme	Robertson Davies**
Nadine Gordimer	Anita Desai**
Kazuo Ishiguro(*)	Doris Lessing***
Ruth Praver Jhabvala	Timothy Mo***
Thomas Keneally (***)	Rohinton Mistry
V. S. Naipaul (*)	Mordecai Richler
Ben Okri	Abdulrazak Gurnah
Michael Ondaatji	Tim Winton
Salman Rushdie (***)	

Canadian-born), and the rest come from the English-speaking diaspora, Australia, Africa and the Caribbean.

A more extensive indication of prizeworthy writers is the prestigious Booker Prize, awarded yearly to the best work published by a British publisher. Chart II shows the list of "other" English writers born or living in countries other than England who have either won or were shortlisted for this prize. (Americans do not qualify for the Booker Prize.)

A problem arises as to how to accurately indicate the national identity of these writers. Since the term "new literatures" refers to the literatures of the new national identities of post-colonial countries, it would be natural to look to these emerging new nations to find these authors.

But what we find, in fact, is that many of the authors embraced as "Commonwealth" or "new" writers have in fact left their home countries and gone to England, America or Australia, for political, artistic or publishing freedom. Although upon meeting someone

Chart III: National Identity

<i>Author</i>	<i>Born</i>	<i>Raised</i>	<i>Educated</i>	<i>Residence</i>
V. S. Naipaul	Trinidad 1932	Trinidad	England (Oxford)	England
Ruth Praver Jhabvala	Germany (Polish parents) 1927	England	England (Univ of London)	India
Michael Ondaatje	Ceylon 1943	Sri Lanka	Canada (Univ of Toronto)	Canada
Salman Rushdie	India 1947	Pakistan	Pakistan/England	England
Timothy Mo	Hong Kong 1953	Hong Kong	England	England
Kazuo Ishiguro	Japan 1954	England	England (Univ. Kent/E. Anglia)	England

from Africa or Asia might predispose one to judge them as an African or Asian writer, a moment's conversation will reveal an accent far removed from the home country of birth or ancestry. Chart III shows some of the problems of defining these authors' national identities.

V. S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad of Indian parents, but being bright and able, was sent to England for his education. Almost 50 years later, it is safe to say that he has never returned. Yet, he is still classified as a Caribbean writer or even an Indian writer. This is a problem. If you haven't written about your country of birth for 25 years, should you still be considered as being from that country? If you write books about a country you have never lived in, informed and engaging commentaries though they may be, should you be characterized as coming from the country of your books' subject? This routinely happens to Naipaul, whose books are set in the Caribbean, Africa, India and England.

Salman Rushdie and Timothy Mo, like Naipaul, left their home countries for a British education and never went back to live. Yet they derive some inspiration for their novels from the land of their ancestors. Both Rushdie and Mo have lived the greater part of their lives outside of their countries of birth. How long should they be tagged with their discarded national identities?

Michael Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka and went to Canada for his education, yet, outside of autobiography, he has never written of his country of birth. Should we consider

him a Sri Lankan writer the way we call Naipaul a Trinidadian, Rushie an Indian or Mo a Chinese writer? Or should we consider him a Canadian writer, based on his residence? If so, is he a truly Canadian writer the way Alice Munro, Robertson Davies or Margaret Atwood are a part of the Canadian Literature canon?

Ruth Praver Jhabvala seems to be the quintessential Indian woman writer until one realizes that she is she is not Indian at all! She is actually an East European Caucasian, born in Germany of Polish parents and educated in England. She is Indian by virtue of her marriage to an Indian architect and of the subject of her work, writing about her adopted country as if an insider.

A final example is Japanese-born Kazuo Ishiguro, whose family moved to England when he was six. He grew up in British schools from first grade of primary school through graduate school. His first trip back to Japan occurred after the publication of his first novel. Could there be a more "English" novel than *The Remains of the Day*? Yet because his first two novels were set in Japan is he to be considered one of these "other" novelists?

How should we appropriately categorize the emigrant writer from a non-British colony, who comes to the English-speaking home country, finds his or her literary voice and writes in English, like Joseph Conrad or Vladimir Nabokov? Why don't we call Conrad "that Polish writer" or Nabokov "that Russian writer?"

What about the Anglos who by circumstances of their parents' work assignment, were born in the Empire but like Rushdie and Co. moved to the motherland for a proper education, writers like Rudyard Kipling, Katherine Mansfield and Doris Lessing?⁷⁾ Are they any different from W. S. Maugham, Leonard Woolf, E. M. Forster, George Orwell or Paul Scott, who derived inspiration from their sojourns in the colonies.

Recently there has been an explosion of second-generation emigrant writers, born in America, England or Australia who write about the problems of generational cultural integration—Americans like Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan or Fae Myenne Ng, or Britains like Shashi Tharoor or Amit Chaudhuri. These are 100% American and British citizens but somehow they are not perceived as such. Is there any question of their national identity or must they wear the cloak of their ancestors? If so, then for how many

7) Lewis Hill. "A New Checklist of English-Language Fiction Relating to Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei" (Hull: University of Hull, 1991).

generations until their writings, too, acquire British or American citizenship?

As we have seen, there are many possible criteria for identifying members of this "other" English literature. First is country of parentage; second, country of birth, regardless of duration of stay; third, country of residence; fourth, country of publication; fifth, country of stylistic roots, setting or thematic content. If we use only one of these criteria as the means of identification we severely limit the net of inclusion. If we allow all, we have broadened the criteria to be practically meaningless.

Rules of inclusion

With all this confusion, one might be moved to ask the question, why is it necessary to make these kind of identifications? Can't we just read the works and judge them on their merits? Sadly, the answer is no, because being perceived as a member of the literary community outside of England and America automatically marginalizes these writers. They are not seen as mainstream British or American writers, despite their British education or decades of residence. Naipaul will always be seen as "that Trinidadian writer" or even, "that Indian writer," Mo will be "that writer from Hong Kong," Ishiguro, "that Japanese writer," etc.

Authors who are born, bred, raised, educated and continue to live in their native countries do not have the same access to British readers. Critically, they are seen as "other" and their books are not easily available outside their countries. Even the works of Raja Rao, considered to be one of the greatest living writers (Neustadt Prize of 1988) are rarely available in British or American bookstores. Books by Singapore, Malaysian, Philippine, Nigerian or Indian writers are rarely carried by bookstores in England or America. Although recently, Penguin, Longmann and Heinemann have begun to publish a Caribbean, Indian or Asian Writers Series, they remain primarily within the domain of mail-order catalogues and specialty bookshops.

On the other hand, the separation of this "other" literature is a perceptual one, perpetrated by the academics and perpetuated by critics and the public. As Salman Rushdie explains about "Commonwealth literature":

Not only was it a ghetto, but it was actually an exclusive ghetto. And the effect of

creating such a ghetto was, is, to change the meaning of the far broader term, 'English literature'—which I'd always taken to mean simply the literature of the English language—into something far narrower, something topographic, nationalistic, possibly even racially segregationist....It permits academic institutions, publishers, critics and even readers to dump a large segment of English literature into a box and then more or less ignore it....it places Engl. Lit. at the centre and the rest of the world at the periphery.⁸⁾

Prizes such as the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Booker Prize help publicize these writers, yet in recent years, the Booker Prize has come under some criticism for overtly promoting "Commonwealth" writers. That kind of attitude is discriminatory. Categorizing a book based on the surname, country of origin or national proclivity of its writer has some racist tendencies, however benign they are. This ghetto has all the appearances of a non-white enclosure. Nigerian writer Biya Bandele-Thomas states it starkly:

We have a very popular man in the government, a man called Michael Portillo [present Defense Minister]. His parents are Spanish and he is the most English of English politicians. If Michael Portillo's grandparents had been from Trinidad, he would have always been Trinidadian, black. That is the difference. It is obvious that you stand out.⁹⁾

This peripheralization also holds true at Waterstone's Bookstore on Charing Cross Road in London, where Indian writers have been segregated at one table. While this shows that there is, indeed, interest in those authors and the bookstore is being helpful by collecting them in one corner, the fact remains that they are not mainstreamed on the shelves along with other English writers of English.

A more pernicious form of marginalization occurs in academia, with the exclusion of these writers within the canon of modern English literature. Whereas Canadian and Australian universities may include courses in Canadian or Australian literature, American universities decidedly do not. Although there has been a movement in past years to

8) Salman Rushdie. "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist" in *Imaginary Homelands*. (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 63.

9) "Biya Bandele-Thomas talks to Rosa Diez-Tagarro" in *Wasafiri*. No. 22, Autumn, 1995, p. 59.

broaden the canon of Western Literature to include world literature translated from all languages, American universities, by and large, still do not include works by Nobel winners White, Soyinka, Gordimer or Walcott on their syllabi of "Post-War English Literature." Thus these great writers find themselves marginalized on the academic front, too.

Library Classification

A final problem with this "other" English literature is how it is classified in libraries in Japan. The purpose of library classification is to provide a taxonomical system where any book can be found. The purpose of a national library classification is to provide a system where any book can be found in the same place among libraries that use the national system.

American libraries use the Library of Congress system; British libraries use the older Dewey Decimal system. In 1929 the Japan Library Association adopted the Nippon Decimal Classification system, devised some years before. At that time, Japanese scholars accepted the dominant canon of British and American literature and put them together. In the N. D. C., 930 is for "English and American literature" and 933 is the designation for "Fiction." Hence Britain E. M. Forster and American F. Scott Fitzgerald reside side by side on the shelves of Japanese libraries. But if you want to find New Zealand writer Janet Frame, you must look on the other side of the library under 993, 994 or 997, where you will find her along with Nobel Prizewinners Nadine Gordimer of South Africa and Patrick White of Australia. 990 is the designation for "Other languages," like ancient Latin or Greek.

In a small study I did, published in *Toshokan-kai*,¹⁰⁾ I wrote to 40 public, private and national university libraries, with a list of 20 international writers of English and asked them how they classify them. In a national system, all authors should be classified under the same call numbers. What the study showed was that, while some libraries have their own internal consistency, there is none among the libraries.

The problems of classification are similar to those of identity discussed earlier. Do you

10) Ronald D. Klein. "The Problem of Cataloguing "World Literature" Using the Nippon Decimal Classification System" in *Toshokan-kai*, May, 1994, p. 24-31.

classify by language, by nationality, by residence or by place of publication? Inconsistencies abound. For example, in most cases, Margaret Atwood and L. M. Montgomery, the two Canadians on the list, were put in 933 along with their British and American cousins. But Michael Ondaatje, a neighbor in Toronto of Margaret Atwood, was placed by his national origin, along with permanent residents of India, Anita Desai and R. K. Narayan. V. S. Naipaul is also put in India, despite having never lived there in his life.

The case of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Isaac Bashevis Singer, both Nobel laureates is curious. In both cases there was widespread consistency. Despite his American citizenship, Solzhenitsyn was consistently placed in Russian literature, by virtue of his writing in Russian all his life. On the other hand, despite the fact that singer, too, never wrote in English (he wrote in Yiddish all his life) he was placed in British/American literature.

There are two basic problems here. The first is that for the scholar or researcher in Japan, it is necessary to be able to find references at the same place regardless of library. As long as there is a national system, it should be consistent among national libraries.

The second problem is the one of marginalization, again. By making the decision that some books written in English are not part of "English literature," it is exiling them to distant shelves of the library, quite literally putting them on the periphery. The National Diet Library has chosen the easiest and most realistic policy of putting all books written in English—regardless of nationality, residence or national origin of author—altogether in 933— "English and American literature." Other libraries following the N. D. C. should follow the National Diet Library's example.

Conclusion

As John McRae says, "the only advantage that Western literature has is in the length of its traditions, and the ever-expanding range of its terms of reference. Both...are in need of constant renewal and enrichment—otherwise they would stultify and die."¹¹⁾

At this time, for the past 25-30 years, the source of renewal of English literature has come from outside England and America, from writers all over the globe. What they have in common is nothing more than a common language and a yearning to communicate

11) John McRae, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

their stories to an audience beyond the range of their own voices. This has always been the motivation to write. The choice of language may be a political one or it may be commercial one. The writer's place of residence may reflect his reality—or not. He may feel alien in his country of exile or in his own country. He may choose to draw from his familial, local, ethnic, religious, or national roots or he may choose to ignore them. What all these writers have in common is their need to tell their stories and their choice to do this in English. If academics or critics are going to exclude writers who were not born in England or America or do not write about life in England or America, they are turning their backs on some of the most exciting and interesting work being written today and drawing the lines of inclusion far more narrowly than good sense would dictate.

In this regard, to come back to the cartologist's dilemma referred to in the title of this paper, I would like to suggest that this corpus of literature is neither an island unto itself, like those separate round tables at Waterstone's, nor is it yet part of the mainland, for all the practical and perceptual problems noted here. But I would like to suggest an alternative topology—an isthmus, connecting island and mainland, stable enough for settlement and broad enough for free passage in both directions.

What these writers share is a sense of multi-culturalism, combining the traditions of their root culture, however near or removed it may be, with the influence of their educations or acculturation. Pico Iyer, the India-born, England-educated, America-residing writer, expresses it well:

Rushdie...has explored the new state of 'translated men,' who offer, in his words, 'stereoscopic vision...in place of 'whole sight.'...The new transcultural writers are...the products not so much of colonial division as of the international culture that has grown up since the war, and they are addressing an audience as mixed up and eclectic and uprooted as themselves. They are the creators and creations, of a new post-imperial order in which English is the lingua franca...¹²⁾

The process of marginalization, does no service to the field of literature nor these talented writers. There has been an explosion of writing by these "other" writers. It is time to include them into the long, glorious and changing history of English literature.

12) Pico Iyer. "The Empire Writes Back" *Time*. February 8, 1993, p. 50.