



Though Britain is now a small country on the edge of Europe, it once controlled vast areas of the world. Largely led by commerce and trade, the Empire was ruled by Government officials from Britain. Colonial rule brought the English language and major infrastructure to these countries, but the colonised peoples began to assert their resistance more and more, leading to military suppression. All the former colonies are now independent, and many remain part of the British Commonwealth, with a legacy of the English language and English administrative systems.

# Post-Colonial Literature

## POST COLONIAL WRITING

Post Colonial Literature is writing produced by people indigenous to formerly colonised countries. Some of the writers experienced colonial rule, but more contemporary writers are affected by the aftermath or a cultural awareness of their country's colonial history. This differentiates it from Imperialist or post Imperialist Writing, which is written from the British perspective. You will see how this categorisation would class Brian Friel's *Translations* as Post Colonial, while Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* would be termed Imperialist, or Colonial, literature. For the purposes of our study, we are particularly interested in those Post Colonial texts which are written in English, itself a crucial cultural and social legacy of colonial rule.

There is also an important difference between those countries which were ruled after invasion, such as India and African countries, and countries where control was gained through immigration, such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada. These different historical perspectives make an important difference. The ancestry of a Nigerian writer is Nigerian, but the ancestry of an Australian writer is likely to be British. This means that Post Colonial writing should not be seen purely in terms of responding to political control by foreigners — it is much wider and more complex than that. The historical context of Post Colonial writing is therefore very important.

While there have been evaluations and re-evaluation of Britain's colonial history, the impact on formerly colonised countries was enormous. While some literature examines the politics of colonialism, and sometimes the military brutality of colonial control in a novel such as *A Grain of Wheat*, not all Post Colonial literature takes the same line. Writers frequently explore a tension between the indigenous culture and a desire to emulate the white colonialists. This is apparent in the conversions to Christianity in *Things Fall Apart* and the anglophilia of many of the characters on *The God of Small Things*. At other times, writers have noted that the new independent political systems offer little different from colonial rule; this is seen in Derek Walcott's poem 'Parades, Parades', for example. Using stories to commentate on their times, authors tend to be clear sighted about independence, so that while *A Grain of Wheat* recounts the punitive excesses of the English military regime, Ngugi also shows corruption immediately spreading in the newly independent Kenya.

# POST COLONIAL LITERATURE : A READING LIST

## A RANGE OF TEXTS AND SOME BACKGROUND READING



### AFRICA

Chinua Achebe (Nigeria)

#### *Things Fall Apart*

The novel details the effects of the arrival of white missionaries and white administration on the Ibo community, centred around the character who epitomises Ibo values, Okonkwo. In the first half of the novel Achebe plunges the reader into Ibo society, so that when the white men arrive, it is they who seem foreign. Achebe's careful, almost artless prose keeps authorial perspective in the background.

Chinua Achebe

#### *Anthills of the Savannah*

Quite a different novel, set in a post-independence African country remarkably similar to Nigeria. Through shifting narrators it shows a country struggling with democracy and corruption, where the influence of England is still evident. It explores the politics and the social concerns, but also the tensions in the relationship between four friends faced with the political upheavals when one of them becomes President.

Ngugi (Kenya)

#### *A Grain of Wheat*

This novel is centred around the moment of Kenya's independence from Britain and the attendant ceremonies. Its structure flicks between the past and the present, weaving together separate narratives of trust, betrayal, violence and love. Ngugi lived through these times and writes with clarity about the violent act carried out both by the British and Mau Mau, the independent guerrilla movement. The novel is also very clear-sighted about the chances for Kenya's smooth transition to independent rule.

J.M. Coetzee (South Africa)

#### *Disgrace*

A university professor, expelled from his position for a sexual relationship with a student, moves in with his daughter on her rural smallholding. His witnessing of her rape causes huge re-evaluation on his part, which also challenge the reader, about domination, debt, remorse and guilt. A powerful, sometimes disturbing novel.

Nadine Gordimer (South Africa)

#### *Burger's Daughter*

The story of the daughter of a leading anti-apartheid activist who is fully aware of the political tensions of South Africa. After the death of her parents she returns from Europe to South Africa to find that she cannot shake off her political heritage. Shifting between narrative and Rosa's internal thoughts, Gordimer explores the possibilities of racial harmony and the political state of South Africa, which for most of us is only the subject of news footage.

Barbara Kingsolver (USA)

#### *The Poisonwood Bible*

A bit of a cheat here, as this is not an African text, but a novel by an American about Africa. It tells the story of an American family transplanted to the Congo by the zeal of their missionary father at the time of Congo's Independence. It deals not only with the family's terrifying ordeal, but with the aftermath for both the family and the Congo itself, a country of violent disorder ever since, largely because of American intervention.



## AUSTRALIA

Peter Carey

*Oscar and Lucinda*

A story about forging a new life in the new colony, about love and mad acts, particularly the transportation of a glass church through the outback. An independent woman and an unconfident man are drawn together. They are both gamblers — literally, but also gamblers of their wealth, ability, religion and themselves.

David Malouf

*Remembering Babylon*

Children discover a human creature, who enters their developing colony. The inhabitants of the colony are fearful for their own survival in this new place and fear the Aborigines particularly. The newcomer, who turns out to be a British sailor who has lived with the Aborigines for years, almost forgetting his past, becomes the focus for the immigrants' fears.



## CANADA

Michael Ondaatje

*The English Patient*

Although living in Canada, Ondaatje is of Dutch descent, but born in colonial Ceylon, now independent Sri Lanka. This difficulty in defining the national origins in the author is reflected in this novel, which concerns itself with nations, nationality and boundaries in the aftermath of the Second World War, as two Canadians, an Indian Sikh and the eponymous English Patient live together in a deserted Italian villa. The narrative shifts about in time and place, and the patient's history is gradually revealed.



## CARIBBEAN

C.L.R. James

*Minty Alley*

In a tradition of social realism, the narrator is a young educated West Indian who observes the poverty and degradation around him in the slums. There is a strong tension between his awareness of the indignity of this poverty but also the distance between himself as an educated man and the people who live in such conditions.

Jean Rhys

*Wide Sargasso Sea*

If you ever wondered about the history of Rochester's mad wife in the attic in *Jane Eyre*, this novel tells the story. It views her Creole history from her own perspective, a haunting story of love, loss and betrayal. Colonial and masculine power are linked, and giving voice to the woman subverts both.

Derek Walcott

*Selected Poems and Omeros*

Walcott is the key figure of contemporary Caribbean literature. His body of work is large and here too he is often aware of the tension between knowledge of historical oppression and the use of English as his medium of communication. There are also frequent allusions to western literature, particularly in his long work *Omeros*, which is based on Homer's *Odyssey*, reflecting the fate of those wandering and in search of their homeland.



## INDIA

R.K. Narayan

### *The Guide*

There are also many Narayan short stories, but this novel concerns a man who poses as a guru. He is trapped in the role when he is respected and revered as such by ardent worshippers. The narrative mixes his difficulties with maintaining this role and his clear memories of his past as a tourist guide and petty embezzler.

Arundhati Roy

### *The God of Small Things*

This is a skilfully woven story seen partially through the eyes of children who have their innocence violently taken away. The cause of tension is the Indian caste system which permeates all aspects of society. The novel is about love — platonic and passionate — and chilling violence. It's also about time — how the mind deals with time and how memories shift and alter. Roy uses language inventively to create a persuasive childlike perspective.



## NEW ZEALAND

Katherine Mansfield

### *The Garden Party and other Stories*

The stories are perfect little vignettes of moments in people's lives. There is the innocent naivety of a young girl at her first dance with the hint of corruption circling her in *Her First Ball*. Another young girl en route to a governess's job in Belgium almost has her innocence taken advantage of in an altogether more unpleasant way in *The Little Governess*. *At the Bay* shows a family establishing itself in a new location in the new colony. Other stories, like *A Married Man's Story*, are careful and often amusing examinations of human behaviour.



## ENGLAND

Salman Rushdie

### *Midnight's Children*

The children of the title are those born at midnight on August 15, 1947, the day India of Indian independence, each of whom is reputed to be gifted with supernatural powers. The narrative follows two of these children -- the illegitimate son of a poor Hindu woman and the male heir of a wealthy Muslim family -- who become inextricably linked when a midwife switches the two boys at birth. Slipping between reality and fantasy, the novel explores the difficulties faced by India post-independence, mixing history with personal fortune.

## COLONIAL/IMPERIAL LITERATURE

For comparisons of attitudes and assumptions, it is worth reading English literature about the European relationship with other parts of the world. Both Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* are critical of Belgian and British colonial attitudes, but do not necessarily question the role of colonialism itself. One could also look at the work of Rudyard Kipling.

## TEXTBOOKS

A good straightforward introduction to the field, with extracts from various texts, is *Post-Colonial Literature* by Christopher O'Reilly in the CUP Contexts in Literature Series. It is endorsed by OCR as the companion guide to this synoptic unit.

Also available in the library, but quite challenging, are *The Empire Writes Back* by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin and *The Post Colonial Studies Reader* edited by the same academics. The first is a book about the various branches of post colonial theory, which can get quite technical, but you ought to read at least the introduction. The *Reader* is a collection of writings by various authors about post colonial literature and studies.