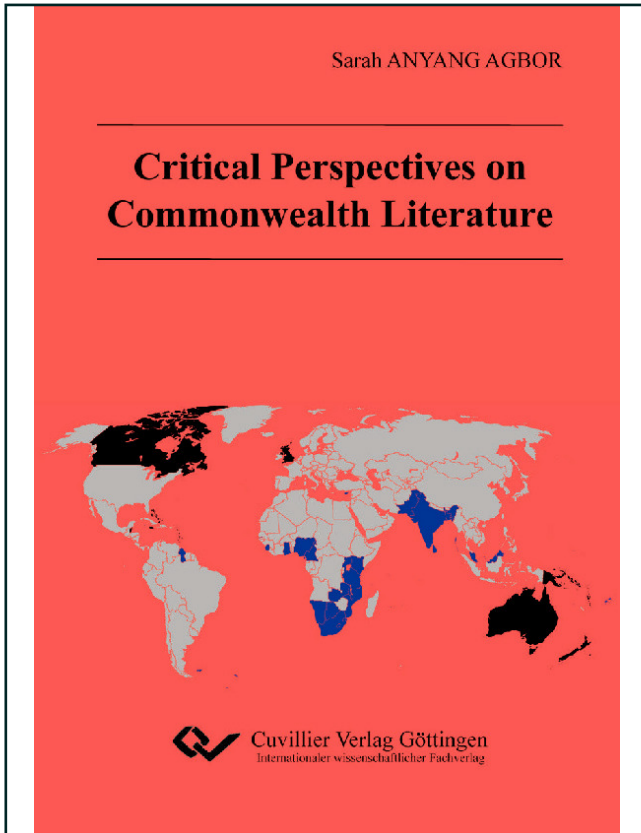




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## **Critical Perspectives on Commonwealth Literature**



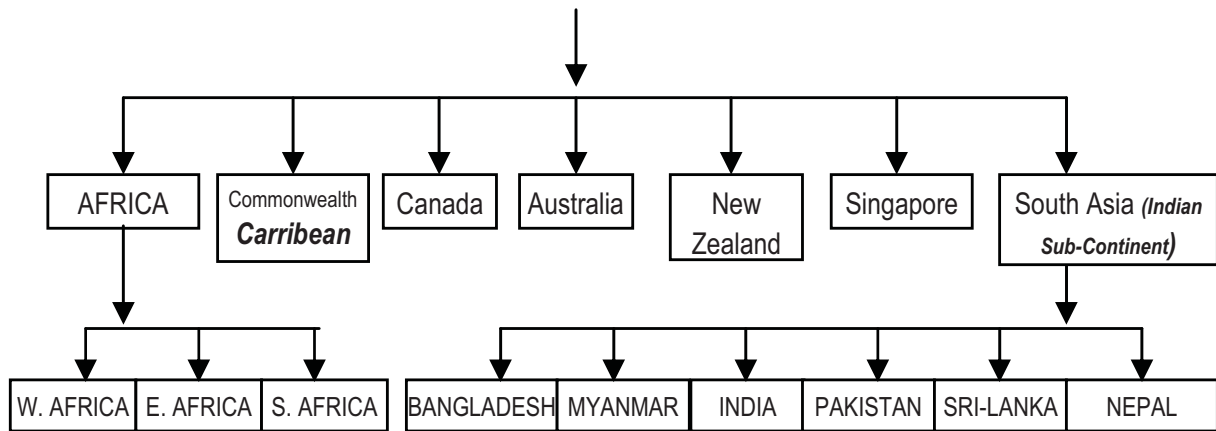
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## COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE



### The Functions of Commonwealth Literature

One of the functions of literature is that “it nourishes our emotional lives” (Michael Meyer 4). Michael Meyer emphasises:

An effective literary work may seem to speak directly to us, especially if we are ripe for it. The inner life that good writers reveal in their characters often gives us glimpses of some portion of ourselves... We can be moved to laugh, cry, tremble, dream, ponder, shriek, or rage with a character by simply turning a page instead of turning our lives upside down. Although the experience itself is imagined, the emotion is real. (4)

From the experiences of the characters, we sometimes identify with the flow of emotions. That is why sometimes while reading a play, poem, story or watching a bard recites a story we weep, we laugh, we shriek etc. For example, the rape of Martine in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. The

experience and dialogue of Makak in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* act as a satirical comic. Each work of art in Africa does not exist for art's sake but always carries some kind of message, protest or commitment. This makes it functional.

Moreover, one of the functions of literature is to assert the very rich diversified culture and history of a writer's text and context. Early African writers were committed to asserting the African past which colonialism had destroyed or misrepresented. They took upon themselves the responsibility to rewrite the image of Africa that had been presented as derogatory in every aspect e.g. *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. This is very evident in the works of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. They sought to demonstrate that the African had a culture and a personality he should be proud of. In *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Chinua Achebe writes: "Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of the word" (44). *Things Fall Apart* demonstrated a society that was orderly, stable, peaceful and civilized before the white man came. The goal of this was to assert the culture of the African.

Oral literature, especially in Africa, was widely used for entertainment as well as for education. Ibrahim Kashim Tala in *The Oral Tale in Africa*, makes this point when he states that "the oral tale was used by the community to teach, to entertain, and to explore the ambiguities of life" (72). Nol Alembong also declares that "our folktales, legends and myths... teach us the virtues of love, kindness, obedience, fidelity, gratitude, hard work, heroism, spiritual sanctity, etc." To him, our folklore is used for "social regulation and control" (*Epasa Moto* 122). In the same vein, Penny Van Toorn attests that "In remote

communities in central and northern Australia, traditional oral narratives and songs continue to be a primary means of preserving and transmitting knowledge of country, spiritual belief, language, kinship, history and practical skills”(20). Oral as well as written literature, therefore, has always been functional. This is even more evident in Africa as seen in postcolonial African Commonwealth Literature.

Commonwealth Literature like most literatures widens our horizon about the world. Through novels, plays and poems and short stories, we come into contact with the experiences of many other peoples across Commonwealth nations. In “The Writer as Visionary” Bole Butake emphasises the primordial role that every artist must play in order to be useful to himself and his society:

The writer has a moral duty to steer members of his society along a course that ensures the triumph of truth and justice for all... and also to steer society away from corruption, greed, injustice along a course that will vindicate truth and justice. The writer as visionary and combatant must know everything or as much as possible about his people. This is the only avenue by which he can clearly decipher their aspirations and so help in charting a course for the realisation and fulfilment of these in their lives. (23-25)

In exposing the ills of their society, Commonwealth writers satirise the unpopular manifestations in their society in order to educate the populace. In this light Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, concludes that:

Literature, by forcing us into a dramatic awareness of language refreshes the habitual responses and renders objects more perceptible. By having to grapple with language in a more strenuous, self-conscious way than usual, the world, which that language contains, is vividly renewed. (41)

Thus, from these texts our horizons about the world, different cultures socio-cultural, historical and political, religious and economic realities of various regimes are widened. It is in this light that Meyer states “Literature allows us to move beyond the inevitable boundaries of our own lives and culture because it introduces us to people different from ourselves, places remote from our neighbourhoods, and times other than our own” (4). For example a reading of Southern African Literature from writers like Doris Lessing (*The Grass is Singing*), Nadine Gordimer (*July’s People, None to Accompany me*), Athol Fugard (*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*), Yvonne Vera (*Nehanda and Butterfly Burning*), Tsitsi Dangarembga (*Nervous Conditions*), Bessie Head (*Maru and When Rain Clouds Gather*), J.M. Coetzee (*Disgrace and Waiting For the Barbarians*), and poets like Dennis Brutus (“Letters to Martha”, “Siren, knuckles and Boots”) and a host of others give us an understanding of the realities of Apartheid, oppression, victimisation and segregation in the Southern African region of the Commonwealth.

Tala Kashim in *New Horizon* stresses the importance of a literary work to the people as follows:

As long as there are individuals invested with vision, courage, drive, and intellectual power, there is always the hope that such individuals will one-day

change the direction of history and end the oppression of the majority by a minority and or vice versa. (23)

Thus, a piece of literature emotionally and intellectually educates us about the world around us emotionally and intellectually.

Moreover through a careful reading of a text, literature sharpens our analytical sensibilities. Many critics have stated the functional role of literature. Chidi Amuta in *The Theory of African Literature*, states that:

Literature is a major instrument for the sharpening and mobilising social consciousness and hence remained adoptive in the pursuit or negation of qualitative change. It can then be used as an instrument for subverting or preserving existing order. (45)

In a similar vein, Jean Paul Sartre in *What is Literature?* defines the role of literature as that which strives to positively change the world as opposed to its “syncretic” role which simply offers an explanatory view of the world. In his scholarly work, *Writers in Politics*, Ngugi asserts that:

Literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural, and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battlefield: the side of the

people, or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics. (xvi)

What this means is that a text view is partial in the sense that a writer's perception is influenced by the realities around him and he /she takes a position consciously or unconsciously. That is why new historicists examine the relationship between literature and political and economic power structures in a society. A student cultivates a good sense of reasoning; questions some of the issues and attempts a response to some of the issues raised in the text. Sylvan Barnet et al write "one of the things literature does is to make us see – hear, feel, love – what the author thinks is a valuable part of the experience of living"(5). It is important to note that a literary work has "an evaluative as well as descriptive function. So that its proper use has become a matter of contention" (Abrams and Harpham 153). The purpose of these forms of literature is to entertain and educate.

Like most literatures, Commonwealth Literature seeks to offer its readers fictions, which have been created and are not accurate representations of the real world, no matter how convincing they might seem. This literature is in the words of Elizabeth's Ermath "a point of transition where facts and fiction or history and literature merge" (38). New historicist critics assume that works of literature both influence and are influenced by historical reality. They say literature is a text of referentiality, that is, literature both refers and is referred to by things outside it. New Historicists argue that: "Literature is historical... Literature must be assimilated to history" (G.D.



Myers *The Literary Project* 6). To them the relationship between history and literature is seen as dialectic.

### **Differences between Commonwealth Literature and Postcolonial Literature**

It is observed that students sometimes use the two terms, Commonwealth Literature and Postcolonial Literature synonymously. Postcolonial Literature is a broader term. Many critics such as Chatterjee (1979), Darby (1997), Castellino (2000), have adopted the term post-colonial to characterise concerns in fields ranging from politics and sociology to anthropology and economic theory. Anne McClintock has suggested that:

Metaphorically, the term post-colonial marks history as a series of stages along an epochal road from the “pre-colonial”, to “the colonial”, to the “post-colonial” – an unbidden, if disavowed commitment to linear time and the idea of development”. (1995:10-11) (qtd in *The Empire Writes Back* 195-96).

Consequently, we find that even the term ‘postcolonial’ refers to a lot more than what is “post” colonial given that the various phases of Commonwealth Literature include pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial works. In the general introduction to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, the term post-colonial is used to address all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning to the end of colonial contact” (2). The definitions share a similar view of the term post-colonial as they all refer to the term from the perspective of the periods before, during and after colonisation.