

LITTERATURE ASIE / CARAIBES

I. The definition problems of “Commonwealth Literature”

The Commonwealth of Nations is a set of countries which are former colonies, dominions, or protectorates of the British Empire. Similarly, “Commonwealth Literature” usually refers to the literary productions of those countries united by a past or present membership to the British Commonwealth. It includes particularly the literatures of English-speaking Africa, Australia, Canada, the Caribbean Isles, English speaking Asia, Singapore, and Malaya. Consequently, “Commonwealth Literature” was regarded by most scholars as a descriptive term because it referred to a specific set of literatures related exclusively to the former colonies of the British Empire.

The term “Commonwealth Literature” was first used in the **1960s** by scholars in the field of literature. For them, the term was appropriate enough as it referred to a political body which was an outcome of the former British Empire. Even if the term did not have any political or geographical limitation, the main link between those literatures was that the people who produced them had a shared history because they were colonized by the British Empire.

However, “Commonwealth Literature” would soon appear as a not satisfactory label for all the literatures it aimed to cover. The term did not take into account all the aspects at the political and theoretical levels. Indeed, in the same way as “African Literature” could not be restricted to Africa,

“Commonwealth Literature” could not be used as the literary productions extended beyond the British Empire and its colonies. As a matter of fact, different names have been suggested, out of which we can mention:

- **“Third-World Literature”** which was used mostly by academics; but it was regarded as having a pejorative connotation because of the term “Third-World”. For the academics, the term was too degrading for the people it referred to; hence the rejection of that label.
- **“New Literatures in English”** was used after and appeared as a more popular label. But the language issue urged the scholars to leave it out as the Commonwealth of Nations as such covered many other areas where people write in languages other than English. Because it cannot include all those literary productions, the term “New Literatures in English” was considered as too restrictive and, therefore, could not be convenient.
- **“Colonial Literature”** was used, but it was also found inappropriate because of the connotation of the term “colonial”. The notions of “colonizer” and “colonised” were so present in that label that scholars did not feel at ease, particularly because of the scientific aspect it should bear and which implies that no discrimination of any type should be applied.
- **“Postcolonial Literature”** was proposed by many intellectuals. In a book entitled *The Empire Writes Back* (Edited by Bill Ashcroft, Herald Tiffin, G. Griffiths, London: Routledge, 1989), they state that the term “Postcolonial literatures” is the most suitable one to qualify the territorial literature of the former British Empire. For them, such a name covers the historical reality which it focuses on: colonialism. The defenders of post colonialist criticism

regarded the term “postcolonial” as less restrictive than “Commonwealth” because it covers, for example, the English literature of the Philippines, the United States, the New Zealand (the Pakeha [whites] and the Maori [coloured people]), South Africa... “Postcolonial criticism” aims at undermining the separation between the British Empire and its colonies, that is between the “centre” and the “periphery”. It challenges also the hegemony of the European literature as well as it advocates the appropriation of colonial languages (those of the coloniser).

II. Orientalism

Orientalism is a view that dramatizes or alters the diversity of Arab cultures in comparison to the “mono-cultural” societies of the West, particularly Europe and America. It tends to consider the Arab cultures as unusual, strange, and with no specific civilization. *Orientalism* came out during the period of colonization of the Arab world. It originates from the attempts of the Europeans to make legitimate their settlement policy through theories according to which the East was “created” or “rescued” by the West.

According to Edward Said, *Orientalism* is the acceptance by the West of the “basic distinction between East and West as the starting point of elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its peoples, customs, ‘mind’, destiny...”

For Edward Said, Europe has created the label “Orient” in order to take control of the area it refers to, that is the Extreme East, the East, and the Maghreb (North Africa, between Egypt, the Sahara, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean). Consequently, the Orient becomes mute (silent), while the

“orientalists” snatched the speech from them and became the vehicle for biased and stereotyped theories. Therefore, the world is divided according to a binary system: Occident/Orient, colonizer/colonized, civilized/primitive... Each of these binomials is strongly connoted and responds to the rules of another binomial chosen as the norm: **superior/inferior**.

III. Edward Said

In full *Edward Wadie Said*, sometimes *Edward William Said*, was born on November 1st, 1935 in Jerusalem. He died on September 25th, 2003 in New York, U.S.

Palestinian American academic, political activist, and literary critic who examined literature in light of social and cultural politics and was an outspoken proponent of the political rights of the Palestinian people and the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

Said's father, Wadie (William) Ibrahim, was a wealthy businessman who had lived some time in the United States and apparently, at some point, took U.S. citizenship. In 1947 Wadie moved the family from Jerusalem to Cairo in order to avoid the conflict that was beginning over the United Nations partition of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab areas (*see Arab-Israeli wars*). In Cairo, Said was educated in English-language schools before transferring to the exclusive Northfield Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts in the United States in 1951. He attended Princeton University (B.A., 1957) and Harvard University (M.A., 1960; Ph.D., 1964), where he specialized in English literature. He joined the faculty of Columbia University as a lecturer in English in 1963 and in 1967 was promoted to assistant professor of English and comparative literature. His first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966),

was an expansion of his doctoral thesis. The book examines Conrad's short stories and letters for the underlying tension of the author's narrative style; it is concerned with the cultural dynamics of beginning a work of literature or scholarship.

Said was promoted to full professor in 1969, received his first of several endowed chairs in 1977, and in 1978 published *Orientalism*, his best-known work and one of the most influential scholarly books of the 20th century. In it Said examined Western scholarship of the "Orient," specifically of the Arab Islamic world (though he was an Arab Christian), and argued that early scholarship by Westerners in that region was biased and projected a false and stereotyped vision of "otherness" on the Islamic world that facilitated and supported Western colonial policy.

Although he never taught any courses on the Middle East, Said wrote numerous books and articles in his support of Arab causes and Palestinian rights. He was especially critical of U.S. and Israeli policy in the region, and this led him into numerous, often bitter, polemics with supporters of those two countries. He was elected to the Palestine National Council (the Palestinian legislature in exile) in 1977, and, though he supported a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he became highly critical of the Oslo peace process between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel in the early 1990s.

His books about the Middle East include *The Question of Palestine* (1979), *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1981), *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question* (1988; coedited with Christopher Hitchens), *The Politics of Dispossession* (1994), and *Peace and Its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process* (1995). Among his other notable

books are *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature: Yeats and Decolonization* (1988), *Musical Elaborations* (1991), and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). His autobiography, *Out of Place* (1999), reflects the ambivalence he felt over living in both the Western and Eastern traditions.

In addition to his political and academic pursuits, Said was an accomplished musician and pianist.

Sources:

"Said, Edward." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2014.

Video 1 : Edward Said on Orientalism

https://youtu.be/fVC8EYd_Z_g

Video 2 : Edward Said discusses his book Orientalism

<https://youtu.be/PLmAqdEafcQ>

Evelyn Alsultany

Evelyn Alsultany is an Associate Professor in the Department of American Culture at the University of Michigan and Director of Arab and Muslim American Studies. She teaches courses on media representations, U.S. cultural and racial politics, and Arab and Muslim Americans. She also coordinates student internships at Arab and Muslim American organizations in southeast Michigan.

She is the author of *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York University Press, 2012). She is co-editor (with Rabab

Abdulhadi and Nadine Naber) of *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging* (Syracuse University Press, 2011), winner of the Arab American National Museum's Evelyn Shakir Book Award. She is also co-editor (with Ella Shohat) of *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* (University of Michigan Press, 2013). She is guest curator of the Arab American National Museum's online exhibit, Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes (www.arabstereotypes.org). In 2012, she was awarded a Jack G. and Bernice Shaheen Achievement Award.

She received an I.B. from the United Nations International School (1991); a B.A. in Women's Studies and Political Science from the University of Michigan (1995); an M.A. in Gender Studies and Feminist Theory from the New School for Social Research (1998); and a Ph.D. in Modern Thought and Literature from Stanford University (2005). Before joining the faculty in the Department of American Culture at the University of Michigan, she was a visiting lecturer at the Center for Arab American Studies at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

Sources:

Video 3 : Professor Evelyn Alsultany on Exoticism and the Exaggerated Perception of the Middle East

<https://youtu.be/cNI8zc6r7KU>

Video 4 : Professor Evelyn Alsultany Discusses the History of Representations of Arab Men

<https://youtu.be/EfW9hzQS8Wg>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ashcroft, Bill Herald Tiffin, G. Griffiths (Editors). *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Cobham, Rhonda & Merle Collins (Editors). *Watchers and Seekers: Creative Writing by Black Women*. London: The Women's Press, 1987.
- Fugueroa, John (Editor). *An Anthology of African and Caribbean Writing*. London: Heinemann, 1982.
- Laming, George. *In the Castle of My Skin*. London: McGraw-Hill, 1954.
- Naipaul, Vidiadhar Surajprasad. "The Baker's Story" in *Caribbean Rhythms*. Edited by James Livingston. New York: New York Wash, 1974.
- Ngcobo, Laretta (Editor). *Let it be Told*. London: Virago, 1988.