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# End of empire and the English novel

On 2 November 2011 contributors to the volume *'End of Empire and the English Novel since 1945'* explored the history of post-war England through their readings of a range of writers and genres. **Professor Susheila Nasta**, a respondent in the discussion, raised the question of why there still remains an inability in much post-war English fiction to imaginatively engage directly with the realities of migration, decolonisation, immigration, and cultural co-existence.

ONE CAN PROBABLY still count on one hand the number of 'mainstream' (though I don't like that word) English novelists who have explicitly addressed, embraced, and imaginatively attempted to represent, the major social, political and cultural changes that the after-effects of black and Asian migration brought to Britain. A contemporary writer such as Maggie Gee, following in the footsteps of Colin MacInnes, Shelagh Delaney, or Alan Sillitoe in the 1950s, has recently attempted to engage with this in her fiction, by exploring the diversity of class and family in both black and white urban lives. Yet, as Caryl Phillips once put it, when describing English fiction from the 1950s, it is as if the primary concerns of the novel still remain entrapped in a 'kingdom of the blind', almost in defiance of the fact that we are clearly now living in a postcolonial and international era. I am not referring here to those works of post-war English fiction by home-grown 'postcolonial' or 'migrant' writers – as they are so often separated and designated – such as Hanif Kureishi, Bernardine Evaristo, Zadie Smith and others.

The question as to why the terrain of the English novel post-empire has largely remained parochial, inward rather than outward-looking, is a fascinating one. It is also one that has inevitably engaged me for many years as founding Editor of *Wasafiri*, a literary magazine which has featured the diversity of contemporary writing in Britain. *Wasafiri* has long attempted to counteract insularity, both in terms of content and also by seeking to open up what I would describe as a consensual and still prevalent 'parochiality' in terms of reading habits. It is a tendency that appears time and time again in the review pages of national newspapers, which attribute literary value and authority. This myopic, and essentially narrow, interpretative approach regularly manifests itself as either a refusal to seriously engage with the preoccupations of so-called 'other' writers in Britain, or simply reflects an embarrassed containment often combined with a startling absence of knowledge. Unfortunately such limitations in vision and perception reverberate and often go on, sadly, to inform editorial decisions made by literary agents and publishing houses.

## *Writing as a form of 'cultural travelling'*

*Wasafiri* has long promoted the idea of writing as a form of 'cultural travelling', stressing the fact that all cultures constantly cross-fertilise, traversing borders and boundaries to reinvent themselves.<sup>1</sup> It is through such encounters – through the meeting head-on of different versions of history and the voicing of parallel stories – that imaginative literature, the stories we tell ourselves, about our futures, about our place in the contemporary modern world, can grow. In that sense we have been, and are at, a most important moment in British literary history. And the history of empire and its aftermath remains very much a part of that. In its heyday, empire not only opened up important trade links with obvious financial benefit to Britain, but also resulted in many cultural affiliations and networks. This long history of transverse connections, which in many cases came to birth during the period of empire, continue to permeate and enrich the world of contemporary English fiction.

It is heartening to see that many of the post-war English writers explored in this exciting new volume of essays – whether George Orwell, Anthony Burgess or William Golding – have not only engaged, however obliquely, with empire but also, as one might expect, have long-standing, organic connections with it. As we all know, empires are not as solid as they might appear. Often shaped by shifting sands, they have to reinvent themselves constantly in order to accommodate the collision of competing histories, cultures, religions and ideologies. They almost all result in major migrations – whether of peoples, ideas, books or artifacts. Importantly too, when empires decline and fall, they need to make room for something else.<sup>2</sup> And, frequently, it is often those very things that seem to threaten or undermine their apparent solidity which cause them to exaggerate themselves, sometimes very dangerously, as they become the 'bastions' of distinctive national traditions.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, in order to withstand a fear of their own myths disintegrating, they shift their goal posts, recasting and reinventing their identities.

<sup>1</sup> The name *Wasafiri* derives from the Kiswahili word for 'travellers', itself a hybrid of the Arabic 'safari'.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful here to Robert Fraser's argument in his insightful essay, "'Is There a Gibbon in the House': Migration, Postcoloniality and the Rise

and Fall of Europe', *Moving Worlds*, 2.2 (2002), pp. 102-114.

<sup>3</sup> See Liz Maslen's engaging discussion of the 'English' literary canon and national identity in, 'The Miasma of Englishness' in David Rogers, John McLeod, eds., *The Revision of Englishness* (Manchester: MUP, 2004), pp. 41-52.

### 'How the Critic came to be King'

One might question why the admirable opening up of post-war English fiction in this volume, an approach that clearly sets out to counteract a 'parochiality of interpretation' has not been much in evidence before.<sup>4</sup> What is it about this moment now, as Britain faces even greater economic and social decline, that has led to the important questions and disclosures presented by such a collection of essays? This collection puts forward many convincing reasons as to why the remnants of empire in the so-called 'English' novel post-1945 seem most often to be liminal, symbolic, interred, an after-effect, symptom and displacement.

One nevertheless has to ask why, so many years after empire and the major process of decolonisation and migration that followed, some English writers, now deemed 'postcolonial', still remain bracketed into a location that conveniently separates them from the so-called 'mainstream' English novel in terms of ethnicity, colonial heritage and race? This is even though it is blatantly clear that their long and shared relationship with empire shrouds a much more complex reality. One wonders whether the 'imagining' into existence of the 'postcolonial' has only served to further insulate what some felt most needed 'protection', so the after-effects of empire can be acknowledged but still kept firmly at bay?<sup>5</sup>

The paradoxical effects of this kind of distancing and denial – and I would say erasure in some cases – is no better illustrated than in the surprising reproduction in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 2000 of a photograph taken in 1942 when George Orwell was working for the BBC Eastern Service during the war (see Figure 1). In the photograph, taken at Orwell's specific request, Orwell appears alongside several key artists and writers who contributed to a scripted poetry magazine programme entitled 'Voice'. In the original BBC version of the photograph, all the participants, whose appearance together at this moment in time is in itself interesting, are named.

The image suggests several other stories of exchange, friendship and cross-cultural fertilisation which exist beyond its immediate frame. We see, for example here, the Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand talking on the same platform as T.S. Eliot. Prior to 1945, Anand was a familiar public intellectual in British literary circles, a contributor to many mainstream period-

icals, and he was well known to several members of the Bloomsbury Group in London at the time. Interestingly too, Anand, wrote the scripts for this series of six programmes together with Orwell. Notably after the war ended, as V.S. Pritchett was to remark, Anand disappeared from English literary history – though he does later gain recognition as one of the founding-fathers of the 'Indian' novel in English.

The point about this image is that there seems to be a more open, reciprocal atmosphere surrounding this group of artists, writers and intellectuals, a sense of engagement which exists in excess of their – in some cases – colonial

Figure 1. The original photograph (1942) from 'Voice' – the BBC Eastern Service's monthly magazine programme. Huddled around the microphone are: (left to right, sitting) Venu Chitale (Assistant Producer), M.J. Tambimuttu (Ceylonese poet and editor for many years of 'Poetry London'), T.S. Eliot, Una Marson (Caribbean poet and producer of 'Caribbean Voices'), Mulk Raj Anand (Indian novelist and critic), C. Pemberton (BBC staff), Narayana Menon (Indian writer and critic); and (standing) George Orwell, Nancy Parratt (secretary to Orwell), William Empson.



The caption on this cropped version of the photograph reproduced in the *TLS* (2000) reads 'gathered together among others, from left to right, T.S. Eliot, George Orwell and William Empson'.

<sup>4</sup> See Fraser, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Abdulrazak Gurnah provides an illuminating discussion of this question and its relation to the creative writer in 'Imagining the Postcolonial Writer', in Susheila Nasta ed., *Reading the 'New' Literatures in a Postcolonial Era* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), pp.73-80.



Figure 2. Sam Selvon (1923-1994) in his study, by Ida Kar in 1956. This photograph was recently shown at the National Portrait Gallery as part of a retrospective of Kar's work. In the context of this exhibition Selvon was set alongside many key intellectuals formative to the period including Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Cocteau, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden and Colin MacInnes. The books on the shelves behind Selvon reflect his reading, ranging from William Faulkner to J.D. Salinger to George Orwell, Joyce Carey and Ernest Hemingway to popular classics and contemporary films. Photo: © National Portrait Gallery, London.

affiliations. Importantly, they are gathered together here at a moment just before the end of the Second World War and five years before Indian Independence when Albion itself was about to face its own decline and fall. In an article on Euro-American modernism entitled 'How the Critic came to be King', published in a millennium issue of the *TLS* in September 2000 (almost 60 years later), a very different kind of story seems to be represented. The same 1942 BBC image is reproduced, but instead of a clear list of all the participants, you have a literal cutting off of some heads. The caption beneath identifies only the names of the canonical moderns: T.S. Eliot, George Orwell and William Empson. I wrote to the *TLS* to query why they had used such an image to accompany an article on the forces influencing Euro-American modernism if they were only going to feature such a one-eyed view of the wider transnational and global forces impacting on the development of modernity in Britain.<sup>6</sup> Notably this image appeared in the *TLS* almost 20 years after the publication of Salman Rushdie's ground-breaking 1981 novel *Midnight's Children*, and the popularity of many international writers such as V.S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott and Vikram Seth.

### *The era of the postcolonial novel*

As an Editor, involved daily with issues of selection and representation, I remain painfully aware of a process at work in the wider literary industry that still continues to insist – despite all the theoretical battles of the 1980s and 1990s around identity, race and culture – on what I have been calling a myopia in processes of reading and interpretation. The first issue of *Wasafiri* was published in 1984, three years after the publication of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a novel frequently said to have heralded a major sea change in opening up the terrain of English fiction. If in a sense, as Virginia Woolf once put it, human character changed around 1910, it would seem that the era of the postcolonial novel was certainly well established by the 1980s.

There had of course been many books published before this which depicted a wider vision of the mulatto nature of British culture, some prior to the end of empire and many more later. A writer such as Sam Selvon for instance had already revised London as a black city of words in his groundbreaking 1956 novel *The Lonely Londoners*, anticipating things to come (Figure 2). Seen as an innovative Caribbean vision by a talented new voice, Selvon's manuscript was snapped up by a mainstream publisher and reviewed in all the national newspapers. Yet by the mid 1980s, as comforting memories of Britain's once great empire receded and the white English novel became even more paranoid about protecting its terrain from Black Britain, his significance had to be reinstated. His last London novel, *Moses Migrating*, takes up the story of his main character Moses, thirty years later. It was published in 1983 but only with a small paperback imprint, designed for the overseas market, called the Longman Drumbeat Series. Not surprisingly, it received few reviews and none were in the national press.

At around this time, we were supposedly in the heyday of the postcolonial. The empire was certainly seen to be writing back. The international novel had arrived and the works of home-grown black and Asian writers like Hanif Kureishi, Caryl Phillips, Andrea Levy, and later Monica Ali or Zadie Smith, were soon to populate high profile prize lists. Yet Kureishi's plea that it was the 'white British who had to change their way of thinking' – and I would add of 'reading' – continued to reverberate.

In 1994, in a televised late night Booker programme, Abdulrazak Gurnah's runner up novel *Paradise* was one of the topics for discussion. Tom Paulin and Germaine Greer, as well as the chair Sarah Dunant, insisted on mistakenly locating the book in the 1940s, arguing it was simply another exotic 'African *Heart of Darkness* tale' about a black boy in the bush and the onset of European colonialism. It was not therefore a novel worth taking up because Chinua Achebe had already covered similar ground in *Things Fall*

<sup>6</sup> The letter was published as 'Critics on the Air', *TLS*, 6 October, 2000, p.19. A full discussion can be found in Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

*Apart*. Whilst such arguments were in any case dubious in terms of attempting to flatten out the very different histories of colonialism in Nigeria and Zanzibar, they were also inaccurate. *Paradise* does not in fact focus primarily on European colonialism, but deals with the complex hybrid after-effects of a much earlier period in East African history. Set largely in the period prior to 1914, it details the impact of Arab imperialism on the East African coast. Resident in Britain since the late 1960s, Gurnah had also previously written several novels set in Britain.

What intrigues me most in terms of this brief (and somewhat simplified) potted history is the fact that prior to the end of empire, and despite the inequalities and hierarchies created by colonialism, it would seem paradoxically that it was almost easier at times to accept admixture, cross-cultural diversity and the productive coming together of alternative visions of the modern. It would appear that terms commonly used today to separate the 'English' novel from a shared history of empire – terms such as 'Commonwealth Literature' coined in the 1960s or, the 'postcolonial' (despite its more potent political purchase) – often sadly become convenient scapegoats to separate off a whole body of writing from its constitutive role in the formation of the post-war novel in Britain. Such labels not only suppress the wider influence of such works, but also reduce understanding of their individual and

particular histories, keeping them outside the dominant frames of interpretation where they belong.

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The British Academy's panel discussion on 2 November 2011 was organised in collaboration with Queen Mary, University of London. Audio recordings of the main presentations can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/events/2011/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2011/)

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