“Postcolonial” Literature

Historical landmarks

1600 Creation of the East India Company

**1607 Settlement at Jamestown, Virginia, by England (Virginia Company)**

**1620 The Mayflower reaches “New England” with Puritans onboard**

1713 Treaty of Utrecht: Britain gains territories in the Americas and Mediterranean (incl. Newfoundland, St Kitts, Gibraltar)

**1775-1783 American war of Independence**

**1776 American Declaration of Independence**

**1801 Act of Union** unites Britain and Ireland; creates **the United Kingdom**

1805 Victory of Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar gives Britain control of the seas

**1807 Abolition of the slave trade**

**1833 Abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire**

1839 Opium wars between China and Britain

1857-1858 Indian Rebellion against British rule; India placed under the Crown’s control

1867 Canada becomes the first UK Dominion

1870 British troops withdraw from Australia, New Zealand, and Canada

1876 Queen Victoria becomes Empress of India

1880-81 First Boer War

1899-1902 Second Boer War: the white colonial population in South Africa fought British rule

1926 Balfour Declaration states the Dominions (Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, the Irish Free State, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa) are autonomous and equal to Britain

**1931 Statute of Westminster**: gives Dominions constitutional autonomy + creates the **Commonwealth of Nations**

**1947 Indian Independence** + “**Partition”**: **creation of Pakistan**

1952 Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya

**1956-1966 Nearly all British African colonies become independent** (1956, Sudan; 1960, Nigeria; 1963 Kenya)

1982 Falklands war: armed conflict between Britain and Argentina

**1997 Hong Kong handed back to the Chinese**

Context

* England started its colonizing enterprise in the 16th century, under Tudor monarchs, to compete with colonial powers Spain and Portugal. Navigators and privateers were granted permission to seek new paths to the East, and to seize foreign ships and ports.
* The first colonies were established in the 17th century in the Americas (Virginia, Canada), as well as trading posts in Asia (esp. India), Africa (esp. the West Coast), and the West Indies.
* After defeating Napoleon in 1805 and 1815, Britain was alone on the seas (the Portuguese and Spaniards had lost their influence). The **British Empire** grew in the 19th c. under Victoria. Became the **empire “on which the sun never sets**” as covered the five continents, and the largest peopled empire. The Empire reached its peak in the 1920s.
* The Empire brought Britain prestige, power, and revenue. White colonists used colonized population to get free labor, and imposed the “**British model**” of civilization (religion, ‘values’, language) with the help of the local elites.
* **Decolonization** occurred by steps. In 1783 the American colonies became independent from the Crown. Several countries became dominions: Canada (1867), then Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. After World War I, the need for self-determination and self-government became pressing. Ireland split into two parts in 1921, with the North remaining in the United Kingdom (=Northern Ireland) while the South became the Irish Free State, then a Republic. Empire broke down in the 2nd half of the 20th century: India became independent (1947) (and Pakistan split from India after the Partition (1947)); most African countries followed from 1956 to 1966.
* Last step of decolonization: the UK handed back Hong Kong to China in 1997.
* The **Commonwealth of Nations**, created **1931**, is the free association of 53 independent states formally part of the British Empire. Composed of realms that still recognize the Queen as sovereign (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Jamaica…), monarchies with their own kings/queens (Malaysia, Lesotho…), and republics (South Africa, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Kenya, Bangladesh, Mozambique…). Is a cultural, economic, sporting association based on common values and the English language. Commonwealth members can live, vote, and be elected in the UK; partly explains the multicultural nature of the UK.
* The Empire, colonization, the relation to **otherness** and **difference** inspired and captured the imagination of countless writers and artists since the 17th century, cf. William Shakespeare (*The Tempest*) or Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre*). In the 20th century some authors devoted whole works to the issue: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, which contained more nuanced portrayals of the colonies and of the colonized became more nuanced, and sometimes a stinging criticism of imperialism.
* In the 1970s, development of **postcolonial** studies: with **Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978**), growing suggestion the British constructed an “Oriental” identity in their literary and artistic works, with the colonized as the “other”. This and the distinction colonizer/colonized and civilized/savage justified the imperial enterprise and the silencing and oppressing of indigenous people.

Notable literary movements, genres, authors

* **Postcolonial writing**: a broad term used to refer to all the writings produced in former colonies or dominions, esp. in the second half of the 20th century, that share themes and formal characteristics (power, race relations, identity, language…). Postcolonial works are generic hybrids, mixing native genres (for ex. oral folklore, myth) with “Western” conceptions of literature and the novel; recurring use of magic realism in postcol lit (cf. Salman Rushdie). Plots question power structures between colonizers and colonized, or between apparently equal characters in a post-colonial world. Offer a complex vision of identity: contest colonizer’s definition of the colonized as the “other”, the “savage”, the “barbarian”; present identity as plural and diverse, with characters torn between their local, inherited identity and that of the colonizing country (which the colonized sometimes secretly embrace and value) 🡪 results in personal, political, and ideological conflicts, with confused and disoriented characters who do not know who they are. Language is crucial too: postcolonial writers and their characters question the legitimacy of using English, the language of the colonizers. Writers who choose English often reinvent it (break down the syntax, use neologisms, insert words from their own languages). 🡪 Postcolonial literature “writes back”: questions and challenges established, colonizing views of the colonized’s identity. Numerous rewritings help challenge Western literary codes and representations of the colonized, cf. **J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe***(after *Robinson Crusoe*), or **Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea (*1966*)*** (after *Jane Eyre*). Postcolonial literature also reflects on women, as colonized women were doubly penalized.

Note:

* the term “postcolonial” is still criticized today: covers 5 continents and too diverse a range of authors and aesthetics + some writers refuse to be considered postcolonial, and others writing in former colonies do not treat “postcolonial” topics (cf. Katherine Mansfield in New Zealand).

*But* the adjective “post-colonial” has been created to refer more specifically to literature produced after the independence of former colonies 🡪 it is an artificial yet useful theoretical and literary concept, must be taken as such.

* the term can consequently loosely be applied to any writer reflecting on imperialism and its modern-day consequences: includes British writers like **Zadie Smith** (Jamaican and English origins; ***White Teeth,* 2000**).
* although it is hard to speak of post-colonial literature in the United States, some authors use traditionally postcolonial themes and ways of writing to question the impact of slavery and segregation in the US, like **Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, 1987**).

Canada

Became a dominion in 1867; led the country to modernity, and to new writing.

1900-1950: realism and regionalism

* First novels: realistic descriptions of the country, regional local color writing.
* In the 1930s, writers turned to social and psychological of the Depression.
* Canadian fiction started to address tensions between different ethnic groups, esp between white Canadians and native Canadians.

1950-1980: towards a Canadian identity

* After WWII, Canada more assertive of its cultural specificity, and trying to resist to influence of the US. Recurring themes include: space, with huge, beautiful landscapes, and the sometimes harsh, hostile environment; ethnic differences, between English and French communities, native Indians and the Inuit, and the more recent multicultural immigration population; identity, and the necessity of a proper Canadian identity; survival (acc. to Margaret Atwood).
* **Margaret Atwood**: one of the most influential contemporary writers; writes about feminist issues, with strong female characters who are threatened by society and need to assert themselves. In the postmodern vein (unreliable narrators, multiple plots, disrupted syntax). *The Edible Woman* (1969) compares marriage to sexist cannibalism; *Alias Grace* (1996) traces the life of a woman who killed two members of the family where she worked. ***The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985**) is a feminist dystopia set in a theocracy, where women belong to one of three categories (servants, handmaids or genitors, and wives). The book has gained immense resonance in the 21st century, esp. with its TV adaptation.
* **Alice Munro**: famous Canadian short story writer. Nobel Prize in Literature 2013. Her short stories are linked, show her characters’ evolution. Provoking stories about characters’ loneliness and secrets, struggling to relate to a community; often about women (*Dance of the Happy Shades*, 1968).

1980s-2000: a multiplicity of voices

Canada more multicultural since the 1980s.

* Carol Shields, an American-born writer living in Canada, writes realistic fiction about family life, love, sexuality, esp. for women (*The Stone Diaries*, 1993).
* Michael Ondaatje, born in Sri Lanka, lives in Canada; writes of migration, displacement, alienation (*The English Patient*, 1992)
* Native Canadian or First Nations literature started developing in the 1960s.

Australia

* From 1788 to the 1860s, Australia, which had been annexed by Britain, welcomed convicts. Traumatic event for the nation, visible in arts; feeling of united, single nation (“**mateship”**); empathy towards the underdogs, cf. Ned Kelly, an outlaw who committed armed robberies and accused the British Empire; has remained a cult figure in Australia. Australian identity linked to the bush, uncultivated wilderness where difficult to settle; associated with romance and adventure in ppl’s minds. Related to idea of strong, self-reliant, romantic bushrangers. Other themes: traveling, leaving & returning (=metaphor for ambiguous relationship to Britain?). Recent multiculturalism of the country: more works reflecting on identity and alienation, esp reflecting on the experience of Aborigenes: were on the land before the British arrived; rich culture, treated as inferiors, pushed back as settlement developed, victims of diseases, alcoholism, massacres. 1929-1945 lived in poor conditions, often in reserves; mixed-blood children placed in institutions or foster homes; related by several novelists. Aborigines’ situation started to improve in the 1960s in the wake of American Civil Rights movements; Native Australians then started to write their own stories.

1880-1945: nationalism and social-realism

* 1901: Australian colonies federated into one nation; sense of nationhood increased, and strengthened by Australian participation to WWI. Writers freeing themselves from British tradition. Fiction & poetry on bush, farmers, shearers, shepherds + egalitarian myth of “mateship”, demand for social justice.

1945-2000: multiplicity of voices

* After WWII, British influence over Australian letters decreased. More influence of the US and of Asia; Australia growingly multicultural.
* Fiction: most prolific field; many different voices; reflect on the Australian past; postmodernist influence.
* **Patrick White**: first Australian Nobel Prize (1973). Novels (often set in 19th c) explore Australian themes (pioneers struggling to survive, convicts…). ***Voss* (1957**): story of a German who tries to dominate the Australian continent and faces aborigines; about religious symbolism, spiritualism, and mysticism.
* **David Malouf**: novels (*An Imaginary Life*, 1978, *Remembering Babylon*, 1993) about misfits and marginals, torn between nature and culture, trying to find their identity.
* **Peter Carey**’s novels (*Oscar and Lucinda*, 1988, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, 2000): postmodern, reflect on artificiality of fiction; close to magic realism. Deal with Australian past and how national identity is shaped.

New Zealand

* Always a serene relationship Britain / New Zealand (treaty with the Maoris 1840). 19th c. New Zealand literature imitated British lit; became independent in the 20th c.
* **Katherine Mansfield**: most significant New Zealand writer; expatriate (London), master of **short stories**; a modernist, used stream of consciousness and symbolism. Stories built around intense moments of perceptions; impressionistic, poetic texts about life, death, (mistaken) beliefs and perceptions (“**The Garden Party” (1922**), “Bliss”).
* 1930s-1940s: new generation of writers, influenced by European modernism and the Depression (Frank Sargeson, realist novels and short stories about hypocrisy, conformity and puritanism of the establishment).
* **Janet Frame**: second most famous New Zealand writer; also wrote short stories and novels. Suffered from depression and spent years in psychiatric wards; ***The Lagoon and Other Stories* (1951)** revealed her worldwide; stories about human psyche, alienation, and madness; intense, fragmented language.
* + Maori writers composing in English (novelist Alan Duff).

Africa

“**Scramble for Africa**”: 19th c. course between European countries to seize as much African land as possible. Despite fierce resistance from local populations, ended in conflicts and eventually the division of the continent at **the 1885 Berlin Conference**. Economic and “civilizing” enterprise; missionary schools provided education but dismissed traditional African customs and cultures and modified them as much as possible. Post-colonial writers have felt the need to challenge and reject colonial stereotypes.

South Africa

* South African literature mostly realist; strongly political literature; shows social and racial tensions of the 20th c, and consequences of history on individual lives.

Until 1945

* After the 1930s, emergence of literature in English by South Africans.

1945-1990 / Apartheid years

* Apartheid policies set up in the 1940s: created two different systems based on race, with the whites considered superior. Blacks were exploited, interracial relationships forbidden, no rebellions allowed. 🡪 strongly influenced Sth African literature.
* Once Apartheid was established, multiple individuals sued for treason, but more black writers wrote about segregation (often published in *Drum* magazine).
* **Nadine Gordimer**: one of Sth Africa’s most famous writers (novels and short stories); Nobel Prize 1991. Some of her books were banned in South Africa. Studies the impact of politics on people; portrait of divided country (interracial relationships, violence, corruption, interdependence between blacks & whites); became politically committed, supported African rights organizations, increasingly denounced white privilege and apathy. Famous works include ***The Conservationist* (1974**) (about a white apartheid supporter who has to face black squatters on his land)and ***July’s People* (1981**, imagines the aftermath of a revolution and a reversed racial order). Realistic, detailed, concise, detached prose.
* Afrikaans writers had their works banned in the 1970s, like Andre Brink: wrote in Afrikaans and in English; *A Dry White Season,* 1982, about the death of a black activist in detention, *An Act of Terror*, 1991, is about an Afrikaner who adopts the values of black freedom-fighters and becomes a terrorist.
* 1980s: “Black Consciousness” movement: celebrated black cultural values, militated against apartheid and state policies + to bypass growing repression and censorship, wrote stories indirectly addressing apartheid:
* **J.M. Coetzee**: most famous South African writer; wrote in English for more international visibility; Nobel Prize in Literature 2003. Novels analyze the way collective & individual are merged. In ***Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980**) an official is waiting for dangerous barbarians who never seem to be coming, in an unspecified time and place; allegory of situation in racist South Africa and fear engendered by oppressive regimes. *Foe* (1986) is a post-colonial rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. ***Disgrace* (1999**) is about a professor of English literature who loses his reputation and his job when he has an affair with a vulnerable student. His daughter, with whom he stays afterward, is attacked and raped by three black men, and decides to keep the child. Reflects on good and evil, violence, trauma, confusion black/white and self/other in post-apartheid world. Sober style; relies on postmodern techniques (pastiche, intertextuality, metafictional comments).

After 1990 / post-apartheid

South African writers address legacy of apartheid; themes of power, authority; often use postmodern techniques. Sense of change, flux, country rebuilding itself (country needs to “forgive but not forget”, Nelson Mandela).

* Most influential novelists include Zakes Mda (*Ways of Dying*, 1995, *The Heart of Redness*, 2001).

Nigeria

Nigeria became independent in 1960. Indigenous literature emerged in the mid-20th century, in part after the creation of the University of Ibadan in 1948 + creation of literary journal *Black Orpheus* (1957) + Mbari Club founded in Ibadan (1961). Nigeria divided into three main regions: \*the North (Muslim, little impacted by colonization) \*East (Ibo) \*and West (Yoruba, traditional culture severely impacted). + multiple communities and languages; diverse reactions to colonialism, little national unity 🡪 partly explains bloody conflicts after independence (two military coups and the Biafran war).

* **Chinua Achebe**: first internationally-renowned Nigerian writer; wrote in English to reach more readers, but modified and experimented with it. His novels portray traditional Igbo society and how colonization, Christianity, then independence altered it. Draws on Igbo oral traditions, proverbs, myths and folktales. ***Things Fall Apart* (1958**), his most famous novel, is set in an Ibo village in the 1890s, in the early days of colonization; shows how Okonkwo, the local chief, tragically confronts the colonial government. Other works include *No Longer at Ease* (1960), about a man trapped between two cultures, and *Arrow of God* (1964).
* Wole Soyinka: prolific writer, politically committed; renewed Nigerian theater, Nobel Prize in 1986. Writes of Yoruba culture with humor (*The Lion and the Jewel*, 1959, satire on modern Nigeria, *Madmen and Specialists*, 1970, a play about the Biafran war).
* Ben Okri: a leading African writer; divided between England and Nigeria; novels with fantastic elements, but refuses “magic realism” tag. Wrote a trilogy (starting with *The Famished Road*, 1991) about a spirit-child trying to survive hunger and violence in an unnamed country during the civil war.
* **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**: world-renowned writer, born and raised in Nigeria, studied in the US; divides her time between both countries. ***Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006**) is an epic about the Biafran war. ***Americanah* (2013**) tells the story of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who arrives in the United States to attend university, and follows her in both countries. Writes about the impact of history on individual lives, the fact of being torn between two cultures, and on women’s conditions. She wrote short stories (collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*, 2009) and a feminist essay (*We Should All Be Feminists*, 2014).

Kenya

Independent in 1963. Experience of colonization differed from Nigeria. Large amounts of land taken by white settlers; Kenyans were moved to less fertile lands and used as cheap labor for the colonizers. Divisions inside the Kikuyu society (still today) were used by the British during the Mau Mau uprising.

* **Ngugi wa Thiong’o**: best-known Kenyan writer; politically committed; first wrote in English, then in indigenous Gikuyu, as thought English was a neocolonial instrument. His works speak of social justice, esp among the Kikuyu tribe. In ***A Grain of Wheat* (1967**), his best novel set before Kenya’s independence, several characters reflect on the Mau Mau Rebellion and its effects on their lives.

India

* English: language of the colonizers and of the Empire; but now fully accepted; more literary works written in English than in the other 16 other languages; 1913 Nobel Prize awarded to Rabindanath Tagore for his translation of the poem *Gitanjali* into English.

Until 1947

* East India Company created 1600, but British rule the strongest in the 19th century (linguists and priests started using English). 1857 major Indian mutiny against English rule; 1858 Britain tightened control over India, abolished East India Company, placed the colony under full authority of the Crown; Queen Victoria = became “Empress of India”, English language compulsory. Anti-British feeling grew in 19th and 20th c. Peaceful demonstrations brutally repressed in Amritsar 🡪 resistance to British spread. With non-violence and passive resistance, Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu contributed to independence of India (1947).
* Indian writers include Mulk Raj Anand (socio-realist novels about the injustice of society, cf. *Untouchable*, 1935, *Coolie,* 1936).
* **R.K. Narayan**: most influential novelist in pre-independence India; novels set in imaginary Malgudi (microcosm of India); characters torn between personal freedom and weight of family and social structures; tradition v. modernity, tradition often ‘winning’. Major novels include *The Guide* (1958, an ex-prisoner becomes a spiritual guide) or *The Painter of Signs* (1976).

After Independence

* 1940s: growing violence between Hindus and Muslims; Muslims called for the creation of separate state. August 1947: India declared independent + Pakistan became an independent state; divided into West and East Pakistan. Thousands killed and millions fled one way or the other. Violence continued after 1947 (Gandhi assassinated 1948). Independence and violence both left scars in modern Indian writing.
* **Salman Rushdie**: expatriate Muslim writer, born in Bombay, moved to Pakistan, then to England (Cambridge). Subject to a *fatwah* since *The Satanic Verses* (1988): has lived in exile since then. Novels about India’s history and society; use magic realism: realistic works with fantastic and supernatural elements, Indian mythology and Hindi storytelling. Complex narrative structures, numerous points of view, embedded tales, inventive and humorous (sometimes close to postmodernist aesthetic); hybrid Eastern/Western genres and cultures. ***Midnight’s Children* (1981**) epic and fantastic novel which follows children born on the day of India’s Independence, who all have specific powers, and whose fate is intertwined with India’s. The narrator, Saleem Sinai, has telepathic skills and can communicate with all the other children; writes in order to survive. Digressions, non-sequiturs, broken chronology, meta-fictional comments and intertextual references, to suggest difficulty of reconstructing history and blurred limit fact/fantasy. Other major works include *Shame* (1983), *The Satanic Verses* (1988), or *Fury* (2001), set in New York.
* **Anita Desai**: spent most of her life in India; novels about marginal characters, misfits longing for recognition and love; fiction about inner life, but intimate & personal sphere reflects social and political situation. Her most famous novel, ***In Custody* (1984**), is about racial & cultural tensions in India, illustrated by linguistic tensions (Hindi, dominant language v. Urdu, language of Muslims and educated elite). A mediocre teacher who has to teach Hindi for a living tries and fails to interview a famous Urdu poet.
* **Arundhati Roy**: politically committed female writer, still lives in India; published the widely-acclaimed ***The God of Small Things* (1997**), where two twins are reunited after 23 years and reflect on the death of their cousin; examines how laws and rules affect individuals and families; denounces the treatment of women and untouchables. Roy published a second novel in 2017 (*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*).
* Expatriate writers include: Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), about cultural differences and alienation, *The Namesake* (2003) about an Indian family in the US.

The Caribbean

The Caribbean: refers to several islands forming the British West Indies (including Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Dominica, St Lucia, Barbados, and Guyana). Hard to speak of a Caribbean identity because of the diversity of cultures + different responses to colonialism & modes of accession to independence. Often brought poverty and dependence on Britain or the US.

**“Caribbeanness”**: several common points include: \*importance of African culture and African roots (slave trade and slavery) \*black men and women as double victims of slavery and colonialism \*language: distinction between colonists’ English and the slaves and colonized people’s Creole dialects \*hybridity: blends of languages, cultural and literary traditions, due to changing nationality of some of these islands and of migration flows \*linguistic creativity, fostered by cultural hybridity \*sense of diaspora, as Caribbean culture spread abroad through diaspora.

Caribbean literature started emerging in the 1940s.

* **Jean Rhys**, a Dominican writer with Welsh and Creole origins, spent most of her life in Europe; felt never belonged. ***Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966**): rewriting of C. Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, but set in the West Indies; tells the story of Bertha, the mad woman in the attic and Rochester’s wife in Brontë’s novel. Rewrites the English canon and gives a voice to silenced character in Victorian novel = postcolonial novel. The female character is presented as the victim of various kinds of oppression: economic, social, racial, and sexual; sinks into madness. Depicts Jamaica as Eden tainted by British imperialism.
* Derek Walcott: famous poet and dramatist from St Lucia; Nobel Prize in Lit in 1992. His language: blend of standard English, French patois of St Lucia and Creole. About isolation and rootlessness of people with mixed heritage.
* **V.S. Naipaul**, born in Trinidad, Hindu Indian origins; Oxford graduate, BBC journalist, travelled the world; Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001. Wrote about characters caught between two cultures; displacement and ‘homelessness’, and of alienation in developing countries (*A House for Mr Biswas*, 1961, *A Bend in the River*, 1979, revisits *Heart of Darkness*).