

Beginnings

Series editors: Peter Barry and Helen Carr

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Rudyard Kipling's 'The Overland Mail' is reproduced with permission from Wordsworth Editions, *The Poems of Rudyard Kipling* (1994).

John McLeod
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Introduction

Beginning

Any new beginning poses several important questions. Exactly what am I beginning, and what am I about to encounter? How shall I best proceed? Where might be the most appropriate position to start from? Beginnings are exciting things, inviting us to explore that which we may not have previously visited; but they also expose us to the unfamiliarity and inevitable disorientation of doing something new.

Beginning Postcolonialism is an attempt to help you to make your own beginnings in one of the most exciting and challenging fields of study that has emerged in recent years. It is a book primarily concerned with reading practices. It aims to introduce you to the various ways that we can approach, perhaps for the first time, literatures in English produced by writers who either come from, or have an ancestral purchase upon, countries with a history of colonialism. In addition, we will reconsider our approaches to older, more familiar literary works that seem to have little to do with the fortunes of Empire. By the end of this book you will have encountered many new concepts which will help you build and develop your readings of the range of literatures which preoccupy postcolonialism.

That said, we should also be clear what this book is *not*. It will not be attempting to offer a full history of the various literatures often considered 'postcolonial'. There already exists some excellent work which narrates the emergence and fortunes of postcolonial

literatures throughout the twentieth century. Neither should we presume that the literary texts we consider in this book are typical of, or adequately represent, the wide-ranging field of postcolonial writing. The choice of texts in the chapters that follow is informed on the whole by my experience of teaching many of them to undergraduate students, and will inevitably reflect some of my own areas of interest. They have served in undergraduate seminars to stimulate successfully the reading strategies which are the primary concern of this book. But they are not the only texts we could choose, and we should not treat them as paradigmatic of postcolonialism.

I hope that this book will assist in kindling your excitement and enthusiasm for the texts and the approaches we cover, and will stabilise to an extent some of the disorientation that is inevitable with any new departure. Yet, disorientation is also very much a productive and valuable sensation, and it is fair to say that many of the reading and writing practices often considered 'postcolonial' achieve much of their effectiveness from derailing accustomed trains of thought. For many of us, postcolonialism challenges us to think again and question some of the assumptions that underpin both *what* we read and *how* we read. So it is important that, throughout this book, some of this valuable disorientation will be maintained.

Postcolonialism?

It is fair to say that beginning postcolonialism is an especially challenging procedure because it is particularly difficult to answer those questions with which we started. Such is the variety of activities often called 'postcolonial' that it is not very easy to find an appropriate point of departure. For example, the literatures of nations such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Kenya, India, Pakistan, Jamaica and Ireland have been called 'postcolonial'. Are they all 'postcolonial' in the same way? What is the best way to begin reading them? Could such a 'best way' of reading ever exist, one that is appropriate to all these literatures (and should we be looking for it)? In addition, readings of postcolonial literatures sometimes are resourced by concepts taken from many other critical practices, such as poststructuralism, feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and linguistics. Such variety creates both discord and conflict within the

field, to the extent that there seems no one critical procedure that we might identify as typically 'postcolonial'.

Due to the variety and wide range of our field, it is worth considering if we can ever really talk of a 'postcolonialism', with all the coherency that this term implies. Rather than using an umbrella term that lets in so much, it might be better for us to begin by questioning 'postcolonialism' as a meaningful concept and seeking better ways of accounting for its prevailing, manifold subject matter and myriad reading strategies.

These are persisting questions for postcolonial critics and writers alike, and we shall be returning to the issues they raise. But it is important that we do not become transfixed by these questions as we try to make our beginnings, to the extent that we cannot proceed at all. For better or for worse, the term 'postcolonialism' does have a history. It has entered common parlance and is frequently used by critics, teachers and writers. It is important that we understand the variety of what the term signifies if we want to begin to use it self-consciously and productively. The range of issues covered by the term is indeed huge, as are the kinds of readings performed in its name. By using the term 'postcolonialism' in this book when describing such various activities, I by no means want to suggest that either the diverse and culturally specific literatures, or our readings of them, can be readily homogenised. There is no one singular postcolonialism. But one of the fundamental arguments of this book is that 'postcolonialism' can be articulated in different ways as an enabling concept, despite the difficulties we encounter when trying to define it. As we are about to see, 'postcolonialism' is not a word we can render precisely. But out of its very variety comes possibility, vitality, challenge. 'Postcolonialism', then, is a term we will use in this book to help us with our beginnings, a term we can begin with; but I hope by the end of reading this book you will be using it with a healthy degree of self-consciousness and suspicion.

In order to bear witness to the enabling possibilities of postcolonialism, each chapter of the book concerns a specific issue – such as 'colonial discourses', 'the nation in question', 'diaspora identities'. They are designed to introduce the major areas of enquiry within postcolonialism, as well as offer concrete examples of various kinds of relevant reading and writing practices. But it is also the intention

that we read *across* the chapters too. Many of the issues which are raised in each chapter can be relevant in other related areas, and I will endeavour to signal some useful points of connection and contrast as we proceed. It is vital that we take into account the cultural specificity of writers when we read them, and consider the dynamic relationship between a writer and the culture(s) about which he or she writes. But it is also true that similar issues can and do preoccupy readers, writers and critics in different areas, and the skills we collect from each chapter will offer productive ways of approaching many texts, not just the small selection we encounter in this book.

In order to enable us to think critically about the ideas and concepts raised in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, I have at times inserted small sections under the heading 'STOP and THINK'. In these sections we review the ideas we have been exploring so far in the chapter, and pose a series of questions about them. The responses to these questions will, of course, be your own. The 'STOP and THINK' sections are designed to assist you in making your own conclusions about the ideas raised within postcolonialism - and, ultimately, the notion of postcolonialism itself. In introducing several debates within the field throughout this book, my intention is to enable you to enter *actively* into these debates. I will not be providing definitive conclusions or answers to the questions we raise (although I cannot pretend to remain neutral either). So, in order to help you begin your active participation in the field, the 'STOP and THINK' sections will identify focal points of debate for you to pursue critically; either with others with whom you may be studying postcolonialism, or in your own further reading. As regards this latter activity, each chapter concludes with a selected reading list which points you in the direction of some of the key texts that concern each chapter, as well as other texts in which the particular issues we are exploring have received more prolonged, sophisticated attention.

A note on terminology

In Chapter 1 we will define the terms 'colonialism' and 'postcolonialism' in some detail. But before we begin, we need to make some provisional decisions about the *form* of words such as 'postcolonial'

and 'postcolonialism'. As we will see, these terms have attracted much debate among scholars who often use them in contrary and confusing ways, and this makes it difficult to fix the meaning of these terms. Indeed, critics often cannot even agree how to spell 'postcolonialism': with a hyphen (as in 'post-colonialism') or without?

So, let us be clear from the start: throughout *Beginning Postcolonialism* we will *not* use the hyphen but spell the term as a single word: 'postcolonialism'. There is a particular reason for this choice of spelling and it concerns the *different meanings* of 'post-colonial' and 'postcolonial'. The hyphenated term 'post-colonial' seems more appropriate to denote a particular *historical period* or *epoch*, like those suggested by phrases such as 'after colonialism', 'after independence' or 'after the end of Empire'. However, for much of this book we will be thinking about postcolonialism not just in terms of strict historical periodisation, but as referring to disparate forms of representations, reading practices and values. These can circulate across the barrier between colonial rule and national independence. Postcolonialism is not contained by the tidy categories of historical periods or dates, although it remains firmly bound up with historical experiences.

To keep confusion to a minimum as we begin, let us use the phrases 'once-colonised countries' or 'countries with a history of colonialism' (rather than 'post-colonial countries') when dealing in strictly *historical* terms with those nations which were previously part of the British Empire. When quoting from other critics we must, of course, preserve their own habits of spelling 'postcolonial'. But, for the duration of *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 'postcolonial' and 'postcolonialism' will be used when talking about historically situated forms of representation, reading practices and values which range across both the *past* and *present*. How and why this is the case will be the subject of the first chapter.

From 'Commonwealth' to 'postcolonial'

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to approach a flexible but solid definition of the word 'postcolonialism'. In order to think about the range and variety of the term, we need to place it in two contexts. The first regards the historical experiences of decolonisation that have occurred chiefly in the twentieth century. The second concerns relevant intellectual developments in the latter part of the twentieth century, especially the shift from the study of 'Commonwealth literature' to 'postcolonialism'. After looking at each, we will be in a position at the end of this chapter to make some statements about how we might define 'postcolonialism'.

Colonialism and decolonisation

At the turn of the twentieth century, the British Empire covered a vast area of the earth that included parts of Africa, Asia, Australasia, Canada, the Caribbean and Ireland. At the turn of the twenty-first century, there remains a small number of British colonies. The phrase 'the British Empire' is most commonly used these days in the past tense, signifying a historical period and set of relationships which are no longer current. In short, the twentieth century has been the century of colonial demise, and of decolonisation for millions of people who were once subject to the authority of the British crown.

Yet, at the start of the twenty-first century Britain remains a colonial power, with several possessions in (for example) the Caribbean and the South Atlantic. In addition, the material and imaginative legacies of both colonialism and decolonisation remain fundamentally important constitutive elements in a variety of contemporary domains, such as anthropology, economics, art, global politics, international capitalism, the mass-media and – as we shall be exploring in this book – literature.

Colonialism has taken many different forms and has engendered diverse effects around the world, but we must be as precise as we can when defining its meaning. This can be gauged by thinking first about its relationship with two other terms: 'capitalism' and 'imperialism'. Let us take each in turn. As Denis Judd argues in his book *Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1765 to the Present* (HarperCollins, 1996), '[n]o one can doubt that the desire for profitable trade, plunder and enrichment was the primary force that led to the establishment of the imperial structure' (p. 3). Judd argues that colonialism was first and foremost part of the commercial venture of the Western nations that developed from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (although others date its origins to the European 'voyages of discovery' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, such as those of Christopher Columbus). The seizing of 'foreign' lands for government and settlement was in part motivated by the desire to create and control markets abroad for Western goods, as well as securing the natural resources and labour-power of different lands and peoples at the lowest possible cost. Colonialism was a lucrative commercial operation, bringing wealth and riches to Western nations through the economic exploitation of others. It was pursued for economic profit, reward and riches. Hence, colonialism and capitalism share a mutually supportive relationship with each other.

'Colonialism' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'imperialism', but in truth the terms mean different things. As Peter Childs and Patrick Williams argue, imperialism is an ideological concept which upholds the legitimacy of the economic and military control of one nation by another. Colonialism, however, is only one form of practice which results from the ideology of imperialism, and specifically concerns the settlement of one group of people in a new location. Imperialism is not strictly concerned with the issue of

settlement; it does not demand the settlement of different places in order to work. Childs and Williams define imperialism as 'the extension and expansion of trade and commerce under the protection of political, legal, and military controls' (*An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997, p. 227). Note how imperialism does *not* require the settling of communities from the imperial nation in another location. In these terms, colonialism is one historically specific experience of how imperialism can work through the act of settlement, but it is not the only way of pursuing imperialist ideals. Hence, it could be argued that while colonialism is virtually over today, imperialism continues apace as Western nations such as America are still engaged in imperial acts, securing wealth and power through the continuing economic exploitation of other nations. Thus, as Benita Parry puts it, colonialism is 'a specific, and the most spectacular, mode of imperialism's many and mutable states, one which preceded the rule of international finance capitalism and whose formal ending imperialism has survived' ('Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review*, 9 (1-2), 1987, p. 34).

To recap: colonialism is a particular historical manifestation of imperialism, specific to certain places and times. Similarly, we can regard the British Empire as one form of an imperial economic and political structure. Thus, we can endorse Elleke Boehmer's judicious definition of colonialism in her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1995) as the 'settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands' (p. 2). Note in this definition (a) the emphasis on the *settlement* of land, (b) the *economic* relationship at the heart of colonialism, and (c) *the unequal relations of power* which colonialism constructs.

Boehmer's phrase 'the attempt to govern' hints at the ways in which British colonialism was not always fully successful in securing its aims, and met with acts of resistance from the outset by indigenous inhabitants of colonised lands, as well as members of the European communities who had settled overseas and no longer wished to defer power and authority to the imperial 'motherland'. As regards the imperial venture of the British Empire, there are three distinct periods of decolonisation when the colonised nations won the right to

govern their own affairs. The first was the loss of the American colonies and declaration of American independence in the late eighteenth century. The second period spans the end of the nineteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth century, and concerns the creation of the 'dominions'. This was the term used to describe the nations of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. These nations (today referred to as 'settler' nations) consisted of large European populations that had settled overseas, often violently displacing or destroying the indigenous peoples of these lands – Native Indians in Canada, Aboriginal communities in Australia and New Zealand, black African peoples in South Africa. The 'settler' peoples of these nations agitated for forms of self-government which they achieved as dominions of the British Empire. Yet, as a 'dominion' each still recognised and pledged allegiance to the ultimate authority of Britain as the 'mother country'. Canada was the first to achieve a form of political autonomy in 1867; Australia followed suit in 1900, New Zealand similarly in 1907, and South Africa in 1909. Slightly after this period, Ireland won self-rule in 1922, although the country was partitioned and six counties in the North East remained under British control. In 1931 the Statute of Westminster removed the obligation for the dominions to defer ultimate authority to the British crown and gave them full governmental control.

The third period of decolonisation occurred in the decades immediately following the end of the Second World War. Unlike the self-governing settler dominions, the colonised lands in South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean did not become sites of mass European migration, and tended to feature larger dispossessed populations settled by small British colonial elites. The achievement of independence in these locations occurred mainly after the Second World War, often as a consequence of indigenous anti-colonial nationalism and military struggle. India and Pakistan gained independence in 1947, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1948. In 1957 Ghana became the first 'majority-rule' independent African country, followed by Nigeria in 1960. In 1962, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean followed suit. The decades of the 1960s and 1970s saw busy decolonisation throughout the declining Empire. So, with the passing of Hong Kong from Britain to China on 1 July 1997, the numbers of those living overseas under British rule fell below one

million for the first time in centuries – a far cry from the days when British colonialism subjected millions around the globe.

There were, of course, as many reasons for decolonisation as there were once-colonised nations. One fundamental reason was due in many ways to the growth of various nationalist movements in both the 'settler' and 'settled' colonies which mounted resistance to British colonial authority. In addition, particularly after the Second World War, Britain's status as a world economic power rapidly declined, while America and the Soviet Union became the military superpowers of the post-war era. The British Empire was becoming increasingly expensive to administer, and it made economic sense to hand over the costly administration of colonial affairs to its people, whether or not the colonised peoples were prepared (economically or otherwise) for the shift of power.

The emergence of 'Commonwealth literature'

Let us move from this very brief history of colonialism and decolonisation to the intellectual contexts of postcolonialism. In particular, we need to look at two areas of intellectual study that have come to influence its emergence: 'Commonwealth literature' and 'theories of colonial discourses'. This will equip us with a useful historical understanding of how postcolonialism has developed in recent years, while indicating its particular, if wide-ranging, scope. Of course, I do not wish to imply that the narrative which follows is a full account or representative of all the work that has occurred in the field; far from it. But in pointing to a few key developments we can begin to understand the intellectual scope and focus of post-colonialism as it is understood today.

One important antecedent for postcolonialism was the growth of the study of Commonwealth literature. 'Commonwealth literature' was a term literary critics began to use from the 1950s to describe literatures in English emerging from a selection of countries with a history of colonialism. It incorporated the study of writers from the predominantly European settler communities, as well as writers belonging to those countries which were in the process of gaining independence from British rule, such as those from the African, Caribbean and South Asian nations. Literary critics began to distin-

guish a fast-growing body of literature written in English which included work by such figures as R. K. Narayan (India), George Lamming (Barbados), Katherine Mansfield (New Zealand) and Chinua Achebe (Nigeria). The creation of the category of 'Commonwealth literature' as a special area of study was an attempt to identify and locate this vigorous literary activity, and to consider via a comparative approach the common concerns and attributes that these manifold literary voices might have. Significantly, neither American nor Irish literature were included in early formulations of the field. 'Commonwealth literature', then, was associated exclusively with *selected* countries with a history of colonialism.

The term 'Commonwealth literature' is important in the associations it beckons, and these associations have historical roots. One consequence of the decline of the British Empire in the twentieth century was the establishment of – to use its original title – the British Commonwealth of Nations. At first, this term was used to refer collectively to the special status of the dominions within the Empire and their continuing allegiance to Britain. However, as the relationship between Britain and the dominions changed in the first half of the century (with the term 'dominions' being gradually dropped) a different meaning of 'Commonwealth' emerged. In the early decades, Britain hosted frequent 'colonial conferences' which gathered together the Governors of the colonies and heads of the dominions. In 1907 these meetings were re-named 'imperial conferences' in recognition of the fact that the dominions were no longer strictly British colonies. After the Second World War, these meetings became 'Commonwealth conferences' and featured the Heads of State of the newly independent nations. The British monarch was recognised as the head of the Commonwealth in symbolic terms only; the British crown held no political authority over other Commonwealth nations, and the word 'British' was abandoned altogether. Thus, 'Commonwealth' became redefined after the war in more equitable terms, as meaning an association of sovereign nations without deference to a single authority. Today, the Commonwealth of Nations as a body exists in name only. It has no constitution nor any legal authority, and its membership – although based on the old map of Empire – is not compulsory for the independent nations (Ireland and Burma elected to leave the Commonwealth in 1948).

This shift from 'colonial' to 'Commonwealth' perhaps suggests a particular version of history in which the status of the colonised countries happily changes from subservience to equality. But we must avoid subscribing to this selective view, not least because the economic and political relations between Britain and the Commonwealth nations have remained far from equal. The identification and study of 'Commonwealth literature' certainly echoed the tenor of the specifically benign usage of 'Commonwealth', but it also had its own problems. In general the term suggested a shared, valuable literary inheritance between disparate and variable nations. It distinctly promoted unity in diversity – revealingly, the plural term 'Commonwealth literatures' was rarely used. However, that common inheritance arguably served to reinforce the primacy of Britain among the Commonwealth nations. As A. Norman Jeffares declared in 1964, addressing the first conference of Commonwealth literature at the University of Leeds in England, 'one reads [Commonwealth writers] because they bring new ideas, new interpretations of life to us' (*Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture*, ed. John Press, Heinemann, 1965, p. xiv). It is not clear whether the 'us' in this sentence referred to the diverse audience at the conference comprising writers and academics from many Commonwealth nations, or specifically British (or, more widely, Western) readers in particular. 'Commonwealth literature' may well have been created in an attempt to bring together writings from around the world on an equal footing, yet the assumption remained that these texts were addressed primarily to a Western English-speaking readership. The 'Commonwealth' in 'Commonwealth literature' was never fully free from the older, more imperious connotations of the term.

One of the fundamental assumptions held by the first Western critics of Commonwealth literature concerned the relationship between literature and the nation. In the introduction to a collection of essays *The Commonwealth Pen: An Introduction to the Literature of the British Commonwealth* (Cornell, 1961), the editor A. L. McLeod (no relation!) proposed that '[t]he genesis of a local literature in the Commonwealth countries has almost always been contemporaneous with the development of a truly nationalist sentiment: the larger British colonies such as Fiji, Hong Kong and Malta, where there are

relatively large English-speaking populations, have produced no literature, even in the broadest sense of the term. The reason probably lies in the fact that they have, as yet, no sense of national identity, no cause to follow, no common goal' (p. 8). Many agreed that the 'novel' ideas and new 'interpretations of life' in Commonwealth literature owed much to the ways that writers were forging their own sense of national and cultural identity. This was certainly one of the functions of the texts regarded as 'Commonwealth literature', and we shall be examining closely the relationship between literature and nationalist representations in Chapters 3 and 4.

However, the attention to the alleged nationalist purposes of much Commonwealth literature often played second fiddle to more abstract concerns which distracted attention away from specific national contexts. Many critics were primarily preoccupied with identifying a common goal shared among writers from many different nations that went beyond more 'local' affairs. Just as the idea of a Commonwealth of nations suggested a diverse community with a common set of concerns, Commonwealth literature – whether produced in India, Australia or the Caribbean – was assumed to reach across national borders and deal with universal concerns. Commonwealth literature certainly dealt with national and cultural issues, but the best writing possessed the mysterious power to transcend them too.

Witness the editorial to the first edition of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* published in September 1965. The editorial saw the need to recognise the important cultural differences between writers from divergent locations. But it also revealed the ways in which literature from Commonwealth countries was unified through the category of 'Commonwealth literature':

The name of the journal is simply a piece of convenient shorthand, which should on no account be construed as a perverse underwriting of any concept of a single, culturally homogeneous body of writings to be thought of as 'Commonwealth Literature'. ... Clearly, all writing ... takes its place within the body of English literature, and becomes subject to the criteria of excellence by which literary works in English are judged, but the pressures that act upon a Canadian writing in English differ significantly from those operating upon an Indian using a language not his mother tongue, just as both kinds differ from those that

affect an Englishman. (*Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 1 (1), 1965, p. v – my emphasis)

Such 'pressures' were presumably the historical and cultural influences of each writer that differed across time and space. How, then, could one account for the common wealth of these writings? As the editorial claims, because the texts studied as Commonwealth literature were written ostensibly in English, they were to be evaluated in relation to English literature, with the same criteria used to account for the literary value of the age-old English 'classics'. Commonwealth literature at its best was comparable with the English literary canon which functioned as the means of measuring its value. It was able to transcend its regional affiliations and produce work of *permanent* and *universal* relevance. As A. Norman Jeffares put it, a Commonwealth writer of value 'wants ultimately to be judged not because he [*sic*] gives us a picture of life in a particular place, in a particular situation, but by the universal, lasting quality of his writings, judged by neither local nor yet national standards. Good writing is something which transcends borders, whether local or national, whether of the mind or of the spirit' (*Commonwealth Literature*, p. vxiii).

Commonwealth literature, then, was really a sub-set of canonical English literature, evaluated in terms derived from the conventional study of English that stressed the values of timelessness and universality. For example, consider the following moment from William Walsh's book *Commonwealth Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1973), when Walsh is discussing a novel by George Lamming. Lamming is from Barbados in the Caribbean and has African ancestry. This is what Walsh made of Lamming's novel *Season of Adventure* (1960):

In this novel the African theme and connection become stronger and more positive, although it is never allowed to puff into a merely abstract existence. Indeed, Lamming's achievement is to make us hear the scream of the humiliated and persecuted and to make it simultaneously a metaphor for the damage *universal in mankind*. (p. 53 – my emphasis)

Walsh identifies 'African' elements in the novel that bear witness to the context of Lamming's position as a writer. But Africa is only a 'theme' and not allowed to be the *primary* focus of the work, which

is the novel's attention to the 'damage universal in mankind'. Later in his book Walsh reads the Australian Patrick White's novel *Voss* (1957) in similar terms, as 'a powerful and humane work coloured with the light and soaked with the sweat and personality of Australia' (p. 134). So, for critics like Walsh, Commonwealth literature dealt fundamentally with the same preoccupations with the human condition as did Jane Austen or George Eliot. National differences were certainly important, adding the novelty of 'personality', 'light' and 'colour'; but ultimately these 'national' specifics were secondary to the fundamental universal meaning of the work.

Today this kind of critical approach that makes secondary the historical contexts that inform a work of literature is often described as 'liberal humanist' (for a discussion of this term, see Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, Manchester University Press, 1995, pp. 11–38). For liberal humanists the most 'literary' texts always transcend the provincial contexts of their initial production and deal with moral preoccupations relevant to people of all times and places. In retrospect, many critics of Commonwealth literature appear very much like liberal humanists. Unlike later critics, they did not always think how the texts they read so enthusiastically might resist their reading practices and challenge the assumptions of universality and timelessness that legitimated the criteria of 'good writing'. Indeed, one of the fundamental differences that many postcolonial critics today have from their Commonwealth predecessors is their insistence that historical, geographical and cultural specifics are vital to both the writing and the reading of a text, and cannot be so easily bracketed as secondary colouring or background. But for many critics of Commonwealth literature, these texts conformed to a critical *status quo*. They were not considered especially radical or oppositional; nor were they seen to challenge the Western criteria of excellence used to read them. Their experimental elements, their novelty and local focus made them exciting to read and helped depict the nation with which they were concerned. But their potential differences were contained by the identification within them of universal themes that bound texts safely inside the aesthetic criteria of the West. For postcolonial critics the *different* preoccupations and contexts of texts were to become more important than their alleged similar abstract qualities.

However, it would be a travesty to condemn or dismiss the work of a previous generation of critics of Commonwealth literature, on the grounds that it does not fit the current critical climate. True, critics like Jeffares and Walsh belong to an earlier phase of literary criticism that was soon to be radically challenged in the latter decades of the century. But they and others were instrumental in securing Commonwealth literature as an important category of artistic endeavour and as a viable area of academic study. In isolating the liberal assumptions of these critics' reading practices it can be too easily forgotten that the attention they gave to Commonwealth literature, and the space they cleared for it on university English courses in the West, constituted a fundamentally important political act. Such critics assisted in ensuring that these literatures were not a minor area of curiosity but a major field that merited serious attention on the same terms as the 'classics' of English literature. What might today look like a liberal humanist enterprise was at the time also an important political investment in these new literatures as significant, despite the limitations we have considered. The patient, detailed and enthusiastic readings of Commonwealth literature laid the foundations for the various postcolonial criticisms that were to follow, and to which much postcolonial critical activity remains indebted.

As Shirley Chew has explained, 'a paradox sits at the heart of the Commonwealth: described as a free association of equal and mutually cooperating nations, it is nevertheless drawn together by a shared history of colonial exploitation, dependence and interchange' ('The Commonwealth: Pedestal or Pyre?', *New Statesman and Society*, 21 July 1995, p. 32). If the study of Commonwealth literature was pursued in the philanthropic spirit of the first side of this paradox, the critical activity of postcolonialism was to concentrate more on the other, darker side of exploitation and dependence. In the late 1970s and 1980s many critics endeavoured to discard the liberal humanist bias perceived in critics of Commonwealth literature, and to read the literature in new ways. In order to understand how and why this happened we need to look briefly at the second chief antecedent to postcolonialism: theories of 'colonial discourses'.

Theories of colonial discourses: Frantz Fanon and Edward Said

Theories of colonial discourses have been hugely influential in the development of postcolonialism. In general, they explore the ways that representations and modes of perception are used as fundamental weapons of colonial power to keep colonised peoples subservient to colonial rule. Colonial discourses have been rigorously explored in recent years by critics working with developments in critical theory, and we shall be looking more closely at these ideas in Chapter 2.

A good introduction to the issues involved in the identification and study of colonial discourses can be made by considering the following statement by the Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon. At the beginning of his 1979 lecture, 'Three Into One Can't Go – East Indian, Trinidadian, West Indian', Selvon recalls an Indian fisherman who used to visit his street in San Fernando, Trinidad, when he was a child. The fisherman, Sammy, was partly paralysed and was often a figure of ridicule by the children. One day Sammy brought a white assistant on his round with him, apparently an escaped convict. Selvon records his utter fury at Sammy for employing the white man as an assistant. This, it seemed to the young Selvon, was not the way life was organised: the white man should be the master, not Sammy. Selvon admits he felt sympathy and dismay for the white assistant, feelings he never had for the lame Sammy. He uses this anecdote to exemplify how as a child he had learned always to regard non-Westerners as inferior: the idea of a white assistant to the Indian Sammy was an affront to his sense of order. This example of the internalising of certain expectations about human relationships speaks volumes about how colonialism operates, as Selvon notes:

When one talks of colonial indoctrination, it is usually about oppression or subjugation, or waving little Union Jacks on Empire Day and singing 'God Save the King'. But this gut feeling I had as a child, that the Indian was just a piece of cane trash while the white man was to be honoured and respected – where had it come from? I don't consciously remember being brainwashed to hold this view either at home or at school. (In *Foreday Morning: Selected Prose*, Longman, 1989, p. 211)

Where indeed? Much work has been done in recent years that could provide an answer to Selvon's question. Many writers have striven to demonstrate how colonialism suggests certain ways of seeing, specific modes of understanding the world and one's place in it that assist in justifying the subservience of colonised peoples to the (oft-assumed) 'superior', civilised order of the British colonisers. These ways of seeing are at the root of the study of colonial discourses.

Colonialism is perpetuated in part by justifying to those in the colonising nation the idea that it is right and proper to rule over other peoples, and by getting colonised people to accept their lower ranking in the colonial order of things – a process we can call 'colonising the mind'. It operates by persuading people to internalise its logic and speak its language; to perpetuate the values and assumptions of the colonisers as regards the ways they perceive and represent the world. Theories of colonial discourses call attention to the role language plays in getting people to succumb to a particular way of seeing that results in the kind of situation Selvon describes. Although the term is often used in the singular, it is more accurate to talk of colonial discourses rather than 'colonial discourse' due to its multifarious varieties and operations which differ in time and space. We shall use the plural term throughout this book to keep this fact firmly in mind.

Colonial discourses form the intersections where language and power meet. Language, let us remember, is more than simply a means of communication; it constitutes our world-view by cutting up and ordering reality into meaningful units. The meanings we attach to things tell us which values we consider are important, and how we learn or choose to differentiate between superior or inferior qualities. Listen to Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o on this point:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other human beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

(*Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, James Currey, 1986, p. 16)

As Ngugi stresses, language does not just passively reflect reality; it also goes a long way towards creating a person's understanding of their world, and it houses the values by which we (either willingly or through force) live our lives. Under colonialism, a colonised people are made subservient to ways of regarding the world which reflect and support colonialist values. A particular value-system is taught as the best, truest world-view. The cultural values of the colonised peoples are deemed as lacking in value, or even as being 'uncivilised', from which they must be rescued. To be blunt, the British Empire did not rule by military and physical force alone. It endured by getting both colonising and colonised people to see their world and themselves in a particular way, internalising the language of Empire as representing the natural, true order of life. Selvon's anecdote reveals just how far-reaching the invidious effects of internalising colonial assumptions about the 'inferiority' of certain peoples can be.

If the internalisation of colonial sets of values was to a degree, as Selvon's example shows, an effective way of disempowering people, it was also the source of trauma for colonised peoples who were taught to look negatively upon their people, their culture and themselves. In the 1950s there emerged much important work that attempted to record the psychological damage suffered by colonised peoples who internalised these colonial discourses. Prominent was the psychologist Frantz Fanon, who wrote widely and passionately about the damage French colonialism had wreaked upon millions of people who suffered its power. Fanon is an important figure in the field of postcolonialism and we shall be meeting his work again later in this book. He was born in the French Antilles in 1925 and educated in Martinique and France. His experience of racism while being educated by and working for the French affected him deeply; in Algeria in 1954 he resigned his post as head of the Psychiatric Department in Blida-Joinville Hospital and joined with the Algerian rebels fighting against the French occupation of the country. Influenced by contemporary philosophers and poets such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Aimé Césaire, Fanon's publications include two polemical books – *Black Skin, White Masks* (trans. Charles Lam

Markmann, Pluto [1952] 1986) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Constance Farrington, Penguin [1961] 1967) – that deal angrily with the mechanics of colonialism and its effects on those it ensnared. *Black Skin, White Masks* examined in the main the psychological effects of colonialism, drawing upon Fanon's experience as a psychoanalyst. In a narrative both inspiring and distressing, Fanon looked at the cost to the individual who lives in a world where due to the colour of his or her skin, he or she is rendered peculiar, an object of derision, an aberration. In the chapter 'The Fact of Blackness' he remembers how he felt when in France white strangers pointed out his blackness, his difference with derogatory phrases such as 'dirty nigger!' or 'look, a Negro!':

On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematisation. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together. (*Black Skin, White Masks*, pp. 112–13)

In this scenario, Fanon's identity is defined in negative terms by those in a position of power. He is forced to see himself not as a human subject, with his own wants and needs as indicated at the end of the quotation, but an object, a peculiarity at the mercy of a group that identifies him as inferior, less than fully-human, placed at the mercy of their definitions and representations. The violence of this 'revision' of his identity is conveyed powerfully in the image of amputation. Fanon feels abbreviated, violated, imprisoned by a way of seeing him that denies him the right to define his own identity as a subject. Identity is something that the French *make for him*, and in so doing they commit a violence that splits his very sense of self. The power of description, of naming, is not to be underestimated. The relationship between language and power is far-reaching and fundamental.

→ *Black Skin, White Masks* explains the consequences of identity formation for the colonised subject who is forced into the internalisation of the self as an 'other'. The 'Negro' is deemed to epitomise

everything that the colonising French are not. The colonisers are civilised, rational, intelligent: the 'Negro' remains 'other' to all these qualities against which colonising peoples derive their sense of superiority and normality. *Black Skin, White Masks* depicts those colonised by French imperialism doomed to hold a traumatic belief in their own inferiority. One response to such trauma is to strive to escape it by embracing the 'civilised' ideals of the French 'motherland'. But however hard the colonised try to accept the education, values and language of France – to don the white mask of civilisation that will cover up the 'uncivilised' nature indexed by their black skins – they are never accepted on equal terms. 'The white world', writes Fanon, 'the only honourable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man' (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 114). That imaginative distinction that differentiates between 'man' (self) with 'black man' (other) is an important, devastating part of the armoury of colonial domination, one that imprisons the mind as securely as chains imprison the body. For Fanon, the end of colonialism meant not just political and economic change, but psychological change too. Colonialism is destroyed only once this way of thinking about identity is successfully challenged.

In 1978 Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* was published. *Orientalism* is considered to be one of the most influential books of the late twentieth century. Said also looked at the divisive relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, but from a different angle. He, like Fanon, explored the extent to which colonialism created a way of seeing the world, an order of things that was to be learned as true and proper; but Said paid attention more to the colonisers than the colonised. *Orientalism* draws upon developments in Marxist theories of power, especially the political philosophy of the Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci and France's Michel Foucault. We will be looking in detail at *Orientalism* in Chapter 2, and how it helps us read texts. Briefly, Said examined how the knowledge that the Western imperial powers formed about their colonies helped continually to justify their subjugation. Western nations like France and Britain, he argued, spent an immense amount of time producing knowledge about the locations they dominated. Looking in particular at representations of Egypt and the Middle East in a variety of

written materials, Said pointed out that rarely did Western travellers in these regions ever try to learn much about, or from, the native peoples they encountered. Instead, they recorded their observations based upon commonly-held assumptions about 'the Orient' as a mythic place of exoticism, moral laxity, sexual degeneracy and so forth. These observations (which were not really observations at all) were presented as scientific truths that, in their turn, functioned to justify the very propriety of colonial domination. Thus colonialism continuously perpetuated itself. Colonial power was buttressed by the production of knowledge about colonised cultures which endlessly produced a degenerate image of the Orient for those in the West, or Occident.

This is a cursory summary of Said's work, and we will flesh it out in the next chapter. But at this stage we need to note that the work of Fanon and Said inspired a new generation of literary critics in the 1980s keen to apply their ideas to the reading of literary texts. What critics learned from the work of people like Fanon and Said was the simultaneously candid and complex fact that Empires colonise imaginations. Fanon shows how this works at a psychological level for the oppressed, while Said demonstrates the legitimisation of Empire for the oppressor. Overturning colonialism, then, is not just about handing land back to its dispossessed peoples, returning power to those who were once ruled by Empire. It is also a process of overturning the dominant ways of seeing the world, and representing reality in ways which do not replicate colonialist values. If colonialism involves colonising the mind, then resistance to it requires, in Ngugi's phrase, 'decolonising the mind'. This is very much an issue of language. The Indian novelist Salman Rushdie puts it this way: 'The language, like so much else in the colonies, needs to be decolonised, to be remade in other images, if those of us who use it from positions outside Anglo-Saxon culture are to be more than artistic Uncle Toms' (*The Times* 3 July 1982, p. 8).

So, freedom from colonialism comes not just from the signing of declarations of independence and the lowering and raising of flags. There must also be a change in the minds, a challenge to the dominant ways of seeing. This is a challenge to those from both the colonised and colonising nations. People from all parts of the Empire need to refuse the dominant languages of power that have divided

them into master and slave, the ruler and the ruled, if progressive and lasting change is to be achieved. As Fanon wrote, '[a] man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language' (*Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 18). The ability to read and write otherwise, to rethink our understanding of the order of things, contributes to the possibility of change. Indeed, in order to challenge the colonial order of things, some of us may need to re-examine our received assumptions of what we have been taught as 'natural' or 'true'.

epistemology

The turn to 'theory' in the 1980s

It would be grossly reductive to assert that Edward Said is the instigator of postcolonialism, not least because this would ignore the important anti-colonial critiques prior to 1978 of Fanon, Ngugi and others who we will be meeting later in this book. However, it is perhaps reasonable to suggest that, institutionally, the success of *Orientalism* did much to encourage new kinds of study. Sensitised by the work of Said and others to the operations of colonial discourses, a new generation of critics turned to more 'theoretical' materials in their work. This was probably the beginning of postcolonialism as we understand it today and marked a major departure from the earlier, humanist approaches which characterised criticism of Commonwealth literature. Emerging in the 1980s were dynamic, excitingly new forms of textual analysis notable for their eclecticism and interdisciplinarity, combining the insights of feminism, philosophy, psychology, politics, anthropology and literary theory in provocative and energetic ways.

Three forms of textual analysis in particular became popular in the wake of *Orientalism*. One involved re-reading canonical English literature in order to examine if past texts perpetuated or questioned the latent assumptions of colonial discourses. This form of textual analysis proceeded along two avenues. In one direction, critics looked at writers who dealt manifestly with colonial themes and argued about whether their work was supportive or critical of colonial discourses. One example is Joseph Conrad's novel about colonialism in Africa, *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Critics debated whether Conrad's novel perpetuated colonialist views of the

alleged inferiority of other peoples, or if it questioned the entire colonial project, dissenting from colonial discourses. In another direction, texts that seemingly had little to do with colonialism, such as Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) or Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), were also re-read provocatively in terms of colonial discourses, as we shall explore more fully in Chapter 5.

Second, a group of critics who worked in the main with the post-structuralist thought of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan began to enquire in particular into the representation of colonised subjects in a variety of colonial texts, not just literary ones. If, as Said claimed, the West produced knowledge about other peoples in order to prove the 'truth' of their 'inferiority', was it possible to read these texts against the grain and discover in them moments when the colonised subject resisted being represented with recourse to colonial values? This issue was pursued in different ways during the 1980s by two of the leading and most controversial postcolonial theorists, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as well as the *Subaltern Studies* scholars based in India. In his work on 'mimicry', Bhabha explored the possibility of reading colonialist discourses as endlessly ambivalent, split and unstable, never able to install securely the colonial values they seemed to support. In her influential essays 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' (in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Routledge, 1988) and 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), Spivak explored the problem of whether or not it was possible to recover the voices of those who had been made subjects of colonial representations, particularly women, and read them as potentially disruptive and subversive. Since the 1980s, Said, Bhabha and Spivak have opened a wide variety of theoretical issues central to postcolonialism and we shall be exploring their ideas on several occasions in this book. They have also, for better or worse, emerged (in Robert Young's unfortunate phrase) as the 'Holy Trinity' of critics working in the field (*Colonial Desire*, Routledge, 1995, p. 163) and their predominance can sometimes be at the expense of other equally important voices.

The Empire 'writes back'

The third form of literary analysis engendered by the turn to theory brought together some of the insights gained by theories of colonial discourses with readings of the new literatures from countries with a history of colonialism. Using the work of Fanon and Said, and later Bhabha and Spivak, it became popular to argue that these texts were primarily concerned with writing back to the centre, actively engaged in a process of questioning and travestying colonial discourses in their work. The nomenclature of 'Commonwealth' was dropped in preference for 'postcolonial' in describing these writers and their work, as if to signal a new generation of critics' repudiation of older attitudes in preference of the newer, more interdisciplinary approaches. The imperious overtones of 'Commonwealth literature' made this term fall increasingly out of favour from the 1980s. In stark contrast to liberal humanist readings by critics of Commonwealth literature, the (newly re-christened) 'postcolonial literatures' were at a stroke regarded as politically radical and locally situated, rather than universally relevant. They were deemed to pose direct challenges to the colonial centre from the colonised margins, negotiating new ways of seeing that both contested the dominant mode and gave voice and expression to colonised and once-colonised peoples. Postcolonial literatures were actively engaged in the act of decolonising the mind.

This approach was crystallised in an important book that appeared at the end of the decade titled *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Routledge, 1989), co-authored by three critics from Australia: Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. Inspired by Rushdie's argument concerning the need to decolonise the English language, *The Empire Writes Back* orchestrated the issues we have been exploring into a coherent critical practice. It epitomised the increasingly popular view that literature from the once-colonised countries was fundamentally concerned with challenging the language of colonial power, unlearning its world-view, and producing new modes of representation. Its authors looked at the fortunes of the English language in countries with a history of colonialism, noting how writers were expressing their own sense of identity by refashioning English in order to enable it to accommodate

their experiences. English was being displaced by 'different linguistic communities in the post-colonial world' (p. 8) who were remaking it as an attempt to challenge the colonial value-system it enshrined, and bear witness to these communities' sense of cultural difference. In a tone often more prescriptive than descriptive, they expressed the belief that the 'crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonised place' (p. 38).

This refashioning worked in several ways. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin claimed that writers were creating new 'englishes' (the lack of a capital 'E' is deliberate) through various strategies: inserting untranslatable words into their texts; by glossing seemingly obscure terms; by refusing to follow standard English syntax and using structures derived from other languages; of incorporating many different creolised versions of English into their texts. Each of these strategies was demonstrated operating in a variety of postcolonial texts, and in each the emphasis was on the writer's attempt to subvert and refashion standard English into various new forms of 'english', as a way of jettisoning the colonialist values which standard English housed.

The Empire Writes Back asserted that postcolonial writing was always written out of 'the abrogation [i.e. discontinuing] of the received English which speaks from the centre, and the act of appropriation [i.e. seizure] which brings it under the influence of a vernacular tongue, the complex of speech habits which characterise the local language' (p. 39). The new 'english' of the colonised place was ultimately, irredeemably different from the language at the colonial centre, separated by an unbridgeable gap: 'This absence, or gap, is not negative but positive in its effect. It presents the difference through which an identity (created or recovered) can be expressed' (p. 62). The new 'englishes' could not be converted into standard English because they have surpassed its limits, broken its rules. As a consequence of this irredeemable difference, new values, identities and value-systems were expressed, and old colonial values wholeheartedly rejected.

Widely influential in discussions of postcolonial literature in university classrooms in the early 1990s, *The Empire Writes Back* made

a valuable contribution to literary studies in the field. It shifted the approach to literatures from the once-colonised nations away from the abstract issue of a text's universal and timeless value and towards a more politicised approach which analysed texts primarily within historical and geographical contexts. For Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, postcolonial writing challenged generally-held values rather than confirmed them. Their 'local' concerns were fundamental to their meanings, not of secondary importance.

However, several criticisms have been made of this important book, the chief one being that it is remarkably totalising in its representation of how literatures from many different areas function according to the same agenda. Throughout *Beginning Postcolonialism* we will pause to consider the problems with postcolonialism as a term, and in Chapter 8 we will review some of the chief complaints made about the term. But it is useful to flag at this early stage some of the potential problems with postcolonialism which we can hold in our minds throughout this book. Three criticisms of *The Empire Writes Back* are useful to list here because they can serve as warnings to some of the problems within postcolonialism as a whole. It is important that we remain on our guard against some of the dangers with the term:

1. *Gender differences.* *The Empire Writes Back* neglects gender differences between writers. How does gender impact on these issues? As Anne McClintock argues in her essay 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-Colonialism"' (in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Barker, Hulme and Iversen, Manchester University Press, 1994, pp. 253-66), and as we shall explore in Chapter 6, 'women and men do not live "post-coloniality" in the same way' (p. 261). This must affect a writer's relationship to language. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin offer us little way of accounting for gender differences in their theory of the uses of language in postcolonial texts. Exactly the same can be said for class differences. Important social facts of a writer's identity are passed over by the authors in an attempt to isolate an identifiable, common mode of postcolonial writing.
2. *National differences.* Similarly, there is little attempt to differentiate within or between writings from divergent nations. Did colonialism happen in the same manner in divergent locations?

Can we assume that the writing from countries with such different historical and cultural relationships with the 'centre' functions in the same way? What status would we give to writings of Maori peoples in New Zealand or First Nations peoples of the American sub-continent, who might view white settler communities more as neo-colonial than postcolonial?

3. *Is 'writing back' really so prevalent?* Some critics have voiced their concern with the assumption that *all* writing from once-colonised locations is writing against colonial discourses. Arun P. Mukherjee makes the important point in an essay called 'Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?' that this assumption 'leaves us only one modality, one discursive position. We are forever forced to interrogate European discourses, of only one particular kind, the ones that degrade and deny our humanity. I would like to respond that our cultural productions are created in response to our own needs ...' (*World Literature Written in English*, 30 (2), 1990, p. 6). The issues surrounding colonialism and postcolonialism may be only *one* part of a wider set of concerns – albeit a fundamentally important part – that preoccupy those writers often regarded as 'postcolonial' due to their cultural or national position. It is vitally important to be clear at the beginning of our readings that we do not assume that all writing from countries with a history of colonialism is primarily concerned with colonial history, colonial discourses and 'decolonising the mind'.

Thus, for all its good intentions, *The Empire Writes Back* ultimately created as many problems as it solved. As Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge argue convincingly in their essay 'What is Post(-)colonialism?' (in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Harvester, 1993, pp. 276–90), Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin collapse together a diverse and plural body of literatures from many places, neglecting to think carefully about the *differences* between the literatures they examine. The book creates a 'grand theory of post-colonialism' that ignores the historical and cultural differences between writers; thus, 'particularities are homogenised ... into a more or less unproblematic theory of the Other' (p. 278). Diversity and variety are ultimately denied. So, we should be alert to the fact that theories of postcolonialism might not

be so remote from the homogenising and generalising tendencies often asserted today as the central weakness of the field of 'Commonwealth literature'.

Postcolonialism at the millennium

In the 1990s, postcolonialism has become increasingly busy and academically fashionable. In a literary context, a peculiar splitting of the field has been in danger of occurring between critical work which explores postcolonial theory, and textual criticism of postcolonial literatures. We saw above how in *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin attempted, albeit problematically, to bring theoretical insights to bear on readings of postcolonial texts. However, in recent years the 'Holy Trinity' of Said, Spivak and Bhabha has become the focus for much commentary and debate in postcolonialism, not least because several aspects of the work of Spivak and Bhabha can seem pretty impenetrable at first sight. Collectively, this has helped create 'postcolonial theory' almost as a separate discipline in its own right, sometimes at the expense of criticism of postcolonial literature. (For a more detailed version of this argument, see Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*, Verso, 1997.)

The most useful surveys of postcolonial theory, not least because they go beyond the Said-Spivak-Bhabha triad, tend to be collections of essays rather than critical texts. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Harvester, 1993) features extracts from the work of the 'Holy Trinity' as well as many other important voices. By including some excellent introductory sections, the editors give a full and wide-ranging sense of the variety and excitement of postcolonial theory. There is a sense of this too in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (Routledge, 1995), although the editors choose to give short extracts from longer pieces and little commentary, making this book seem rather threadbare. Another collection, *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, edited by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen includes several essays which question many of the key assumptions of postcolonial theory, although the complexity of the criticism it includes makes it a text to be

approached once you have made your beginnings in postcolonialism. We shall be referring to material in each of these useful collections throughout *Beginning Postcolonialism*.

As for prolonged critiques of Said, Bhabha and Spivak, the two most useful are Robert Young's *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (Routledge, 1990) and Bart Moore-Gilbert's *Postcolonial Theory*, mentioned above. Robert Young offers useful explanations of the work of the 'Holy Trinity' and situates their work within a wider exploration of poststructuralist approaches to history. Bart Moore-Gilbert's book gives perhaps the fullest and richest work to date on postcolonial theory, and usefully situates it in relation both to 'Commonwealth literature' and the work of other postcolonial writers (although Said, Spivak and Bhabha remain his primary subject-matter). Moore-Gilbert's prolonged attention to the nuances of postcolonial theory is highly impressive and extremely useful, although once again this means his is not really an introductory text.

There are specifically introductory guides to postcolonial theory, but they often struggle to deal adequately with postcolonial literatures; a surprising fact, perhaps, when one considers that their authors tend to work primarily in literary studies. Peter Childs and Patrick Williams's *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997) is certainly the most stimulating in that it deals with much more than Said, Spivak and Bhabha, and in clear and helpful terms, although once again the 'Holy Trinity' remains paramount. Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (Routledge, 1998) is detailed yet rather too often concerned with colonial rather than postcolonial representations. Leela Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh, 1998) is less successful, rendering the work of postcolonial theorists in an often synoptic and disorganised fashion; but at least she devotes a chapter to the problems and possibilities of reading postcolonial literatures with recourse to theoretical developments. But too few texts which deal with postcolonial theory pay this kind of attention to literature. Hence, postcolonialism can appear from one perspective as inward-looking and theoretically preoccupied with the privileged work of Said, Spivak and Bhabha. In its less sophisticated versions, narratives of postcolonial theory can sensitise readers to the Derridean

influences in Spivak's work or Bhabha's use of Lacanian psychoanalysis, but not much else.

Readings of postcolonial literatures in terms of new theoretical insights might not always be found in fashionable discussions of postcolonial theory, but they certainly *do* exist. It is fair to say that the many critics who do produce such readings have remained wary of producing the kind of wide-ranging and homogenising works of criticism that characterised critical texts on Commonwealth literature. Instead, more recent critical activity has attended more closely to the cultural and historical specifics of literature from particular locations in the light of important theoretical developments. Some randomly chosen examples would include Michael Chapman's *Southern African Literatures* (Longman, 1996) and Ato Quayson's *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (James Currey, 1997). This kind of attention to the specifics of location is, as we have seen, vital to postcolonialism.

But there is also the risk that a more *comparative* approach to postcolonial literatures is lost, as well as a sense of how intellectual and artistic activity in one part of the world has been influential in others. However, several good comparative texts do exist. The best example is Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage, 1993), which we will be looking at in Chapter 5. Two further books also attempt a wide-ranging and comparative approach in a strictly literary context. Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* surveys a wealth of writing in a variety of locations both during and after colonialism. Boehmer skilfully identifies the salient literary themes and preconceptions that have crossed both time and space, without sacrificing an awareness of local and historical contexts. However, although she creates a sophisticated and critical comparative account of the variety of postcolonial literatures, some of the theoretical questions concerning *how* we read them do not always infect Boehmer's authoritative scholarship. Dennis Walder also attempts to bring the two together in his *Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (Blackwell, 1998), which looks in particular at 'Indo-Anglian fiction', Caribbean and Black British Poetry, and recent South African literature. His attention to these 'case studies' exemplifies the necessity and rewards of reading texts closely in context, although he cannot always offer the range of Boehmer's study.

'Postcolonialism': definitions and dangers

Having looked at the historical and intellectual contexts for postcolonialism, we are now in a position to make some definitions.

First and foremost, we need to be very precise in how we understand the relationship between 'colonialism' and 'postcolonialism'. As theories of colonial discourses argue, colonialism fundamentally affects modes of *representation*. Language carries with it a set of assumptions about the 'proper order of things' that is taught as 'truth' or 'reality'. It is by no means safe to assume that colonialism conveniently stops when a colony formally achieves its independence. The hoisting of a newly independent colony's flag might promise a crucial moment when governmental power shifts to those in the newly independent nation, yet it is crucial to realise that colonial values do not simply evaporate on the first day of independence. As Stuart Hall argues in his essay 'When Was "the Post-Colonial"?: Thinking at the Limit' (in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, Routledge, 1996, pp. 242–60), life after independence in many ways 'is characterised by the persistence of many of the effects of colonisation' (p. 248). Colonialism's *representations, reading practices and values* are not so easily dislodged. Is it possible to speak about a 'postcolonial' era if colonialism's various assumptions, opinions and knowledges remain unchallenged?

Postcolonialism, as we have seen, in part involves the *challenge* to colonial ways of knowing, 'writing back' in opposition to such views. But colonial ways of knowing still circulate and have agency in the present; unfortunately, they have not magically disappeared as the Empire has declined. Thus, one of Carole Boyce Davies's reservations about 'postcolonialism' is the impression it may give that colonial relationships no longer exist. In her book *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (Routledge, 1994) she argues that we must remember the 'numerous peoples that are still existing in a colonial relationship' around the world, as well as those 'people within certain nations who have been colonised with the former/colonies (Native Americans, African-Americans, South Africans, Palestinians, Aboriginal Australians)' (p. 83). This comment raises the issue of *internal colonialism* which persists in many once-colonised countries; for

such peoples, colonial oppression is far from over. This is why we should beware using 'postcolonialism' strictly as marking a historical moment or period, as I argued in the Introduction, and reserve it for talking about aesthetic practices.

So, the term 'postcolonialism' is *not* the same as 'after colonialism', as if colonial values are no longer to be reckoned with. It does *not* define a radically new historical era, nor does it herald a brave new world where all the ills of the colonial past have been cured. Rather, 'postcolonialism' recognises both historical *continuity* and *change*. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonisation. But on the other hand, it asserts the promise, the possibility, and the continuing necessity of change, while also recognising that important challenges and changes have already been achieved.

So, with this firmly in our minds, we can proceed to make some decisions about what is gathered under our umbrella-term 'postcolonialism'. Keeping in mind the disquiet with the range that the term often covers, we can identify at least three salient areas that fall within its remit. Very basically, and in a literary context, postcolonialism involves one or more of the following:

- Reading texts produced by writers from countries with a history of colonialism, primarily those texts concerned with the workings and legacy of colonialism in either the past or the present.
- Reading texts produced by those that have migrated from countries with a history of colonialism, or those descended from migrant families, which deal in the main with diaspora experience and its many consequences.
- In the light of theories of colonial discourses, re-reading texts produced during colonialism; both those that directly address the experiences of Empire, and those that seem not to.

A central term in each is 'reading'. The act of reading in postcolonial contexts is by no means a neutral activity. *How* we read is just as important as *what* we read. As we shall see throughout this book, the ideas we encounter within postcolonialism and the issues they raise demand that conventional reading methods and models of

material realities of colonialism
and modes of representations

interpretation need to be rethought if our reading practices are to contribute to the contestation of colonial discourses to which postcolonialism aspires. Rethinking conventional modes of reading is fundamental to postcolonialism.

Of course, making distinctions like the ones above always involves a certain degree of generalisation. It would be impossible, as well as wrong, to unify these three areas into a single coherent 'postcolonialism' with a common manifesto. Single-sentence definitions are impossible and unwise. In addition, we must be aware that each area is *itself* diverse and heterogeneous. For example, colonial discourses can function in particular ways for different peoples at different times. We should not presume consensus and totality where there is instead heterogeneity. A sense of the variable nature of the field will be reinforced, I hope, as you read through this book.

One last word of warning. Postcolonialism may well *aim* to oppose colonial representation and values, but whether it *fulfils* these aims remains a hotly debated issue in the field. Postcolonialism may bring new possibilities, but, as we shall see, it is not free from problems of its own. So, in beginning postcolonialism, it is important that we maintain an element of suspicion too.

Selected reading on 'what is postcolonialism?'

Ahmad, Aijaz, 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality' in Padmini Mongia (ed.), *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (Edward Arnold, 1996), pp. 274–93.

An essay highly critical of the ways in which postcolonialism has been enthusiastically discoursed upon in literary studies.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Routledge, 1989).

A ground-breaking work of criticism, still influential today, although many of its arguments have been questioned by several critics (see the essay by Mishra and Hodge cited below).

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (Routledge, 1998).

A very productive reference guide which includes useful definitions of many of the key terms in the field, as well as suggestions for further reading.

Boehmer, Elleke, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

An informative and wide-ranging comparative account of the literary activity in countries with a history of colonialism, which begins with some very useful definitions.

Childs, Peter and Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997).

The introduction, 'Points of Departure', offers an excellent and highly recommended account of the different ways of thinking about postcolonialism which emerge from debates within literary theory.

Hall, Stuart, 'When Was "the Post-Colonial"?: Thinking at the Limit' in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (eds), *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (Routledge, 1996), pp. 242–60.

This is a complex but highly useful discussion of 'the postcolonial', and an excellent place to start your deliberations concerning the usefulness of this and related terms. But work through it slowly.

Loomba, Ania, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (Routledge, 1998).

The first section of this book, 'Situating Colonial and Postcolonial Studies', explores usefully some of the origins of postcolonialism in post-war developments in Western literary and cultural theory.

Mishra Vijay, and Bob Hodge, 'What is Post(-)colonialism?' in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 276–90.

An excellent critique of *The Empire Writes Back* which also raises several of the problems and possibilities of postcolonialism.

Moore-Gilbert, Bart, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (Verso, 1997).

The opening chapter, 'Postcolonial Criticism or Postcolonial Theory?', has an excellent and detailed account of the shift from 'Commonwealth literature' to 'postcolonialism' in literary studies.

Tiffin, Chris and Alan Lawson (eds), *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality* (Routledge, 1994).

The introduction, 'The Textuality of Empire', offers several illuminating points concerning the supportive relationship between colonialism and forms of representation, and their significance to postcolonialism.

Walter, Dennis, *Post-Colonial Literatures in English* (Blackwell, 1998).

The first half of this book offers a clear and illuminating discussion of postcolonialism in relation to history, language and theory. Very readable.

Walsh, William, *Commonwealth Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1973).

A typical example of the older, 'liberal humanist' criticism of Commonwealth literature which surveys the field region by region.

2

Reading colonial discourses

Reading and politics

In Chapter 1 we touched briefly upon some of the issues raised by the study of 'colonial discourses'. Colonialism was certainly dependent upon the use of force and physical coercion, but it could not occur without the existence of a set of beliefs that are held to justify the possession and continuing occupation of other peoples' lands. These beliefs are encoded into the language which the colonisers speak and to which the colonised peoples are subjected. This results in the circulation of a variety of popularly held assumptions about the relative differences between peoples of allegedly dissimilar cultures. As Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson explain, 'Colonialism (like its counterpart, racism), then, is an operation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation' (*De-Scribing Empire*, Routledge, 1994, p. 3). Their use of the term 'interpellates' is derived from Louis Althusser's work on the important role of interpellation in the functioning of ideology. Very basically, 'interpellation' means 'calling'; the idea is that ideology calls us, and we turn and recognise who we are. In the previous chapter we looked at Fanon's memory of being called a 'dirty nigger' while in France, and the damaging effect this had on his sense of identity. This is a vivid example of interpellation in action. Fanon is *called* by others, and this makes him suddenly consider himself in terms of the racist ideology which informs how others see him. Ideology assigns him a

role and an identity which he is made to recognise as his own. Or, to put it another way, the ideology of racism is calling to him through the mouths of the white French who tell him who he is.

Although this example highlights the pain of being represented by other people, interpellation also works through pleasure: by inviting individuals to regard themselves in flattering ways. Some would argue that it is easier to make a person act according to your wishes by making them feel valuable or special, rather than bereft or contemptuous, as this fulfills an individual's sense of worth and makes them happy with the identity that has been written for them. Indeed, we might consider that colonial discourses have been successful because they make the colonisers feel important, valuable and superior to others; as well as gaining the complicity of the colonised by enabling them to derive a new sense of self-worth through their participation in the furthering the 'progress' of 'civilisation' (represented, of course, squarely in Western terms). So, the central point to grasp from the outset is that theories of colonial discourses are predicated upon the important mutually supportive relationship between the material practices of colonialism and the representations it fashions in order for it to work.

Reading literature in the context of colonial discourses serves several purposes. First, this reading approach, sometimes called 'colonial discourse analysis', refuses the humanist assumption that literary texts exist above and beyond their historical contexts. It situates texts in history by exposing how historical contexts influence the production of meaning within literary texts, and how literary representations themselves have the power to influence their historical moment. Second, and more specifically, criticism of colonial discourses dares to point out the extent to which the (presumed) 'very best' of Western high culture – be it opera, art, literature, classical music – is caught up in the sordid history of colonial exploitation and dispossession. Third, the attention to the machinery of colonial discourses in the past can act as a means of resisting the continuation in the present of colonial representations which survive after formal colonisation has come to an end: a situation often referred to as 'neo-colonialism'. In understanding how colonial discourses have functioned historically we are in a better position to refuse their prevailing assumptions and participate in the vital

process of 'decolonising the mind'. So at the local level of literary study, our reading practices can constitute a political act. Reading practices are never politically neutral; how we wish to read a text will always tell us something about the values we hold, or oppose.

In this chapter we will look first at Edward W. Said's influential book *Orientalism* (Penguin, 1978). Although Said was not the first writer interested in colonial discourses, as evidenced by our brief glance at Fanon's work in the previous chapter, his definition of Orientalism has been important in instigating postcolonial studies today, and it remains highly influential. Next, we shall survey some of the important criticisms of his work in order to gain a sense of how the study of colonial discourses has developed. The chapter concludes with an example of writing from the colonial period that directly addresses colonial life, as we consider Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The Overland Mail' in the light of the reading strategies we have explored.

Reading *Orientalism*

Although our doorway into colonial discourses is through Said's definition of Orientalism, let us be quite clear at the outset that Orientalism and colonial discourses do *not* amount to the same thing. They are not interchangeable terms. As I shall explain, colonial discourses are more complex and variable than Said's model of Orientalism; they encapsulate Orientalism, to be sure, but go beyond it.

Said's *Orientalism* is a study of how the Western colonial powers of Britain and France represented North African and Middle Eastern lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although Said draws upon other historical moments too. 'The Orient' is the collective noun Said uses to refer to these places (although it is also sometimes used by others when discussing Far Eastern lands). 'Orientalism' refers to the sum of the West's representations of the Orient. In the book's later chapters, Said looks at how Orientalism still survives today in Western media reports of Eastern, especially Arab, lands, despite formal decolonisation for many countries. This reinforces the point made previously that the machinery of colonialism does not simply disappear as soon as the colonies become independent. Indeed, Said shows how the modes of

Contemporary Orientalism

representation common to colonialism have continued after decolonisation and are still very much a part of the contemporary world.

One of *Orientalism's* many commendable qualities is its readability. Although a lengthy academic work that draws upon some complex scholarship, particularly the political theories of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, Said's written style is accessible and noted for its clarity and lucidity. None the less, it raises many challenging ideas and issues, and you may well profit by looking closely in the first instance at an extract or two, rather than initially attempting the book in its entirety. Several editions of collected essays concerning postcolonialism include useful excerpts that can be used to experience the tenor and substance of *Orientalism* – such as *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (eds Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, pp. 87–91) and *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (eds Williams and Chrisman, pp. 132–49). Alternatively, the introductory chapter to *Orientalism* (pp. 1–28) contains many of the points Said elaborates in his book, and is worth getting to grips with before proceeding to the body of the text.

Let us look at a brief outline of Said's definition of Orientalism that should help us begin. To support your study, choose one of these three extracts suggested above and spend time working through the ideas it contains in the light of my outline, allowing your understanding of Orientalism to build gradually to a suitable and productive level of sophistication. I have divided the outline into two sections: the first highlights the general *shape* of Orientalism and its manifold manifestations as defined by Said, while the second looks in a little more detail at the *stereotypical* assumptions about cultural difference that it constructs. The salient points are summarised under a series of sub-headings.

The shape of Orientalism

1. *Orientalism constructs binary divisions.* Fundamental to the view of the world asserted by Orientalism is the binary division it makes between the Orient and the Occident (the West). Each is assumed to exist in opposition to the other: the Orient is conceived as being everything that the West is *not*, its 'alter ego'.

However, this is not an opposition of equal partners. The Orient is frequently described in a series of *negative* terms that serve to buttress a sense of the West's superiority and strength. If the West is assumed as the seat of knowledge and learning, then it will follow that the Orient is the place of ignorance and naiveté. Thus in *Orientalism*, East and West are positioned through the construction of an *unequal* dichotomy. The West occupies a superior rank while the Orient is its 'other', in a subservient position. This makes the relations between them asymmetrical.

Orientalism reveals by proxy more about *those that describe the Orient* than the peoples and places that are being 'described'. As David Richards points out in *Masks of Difference: Cultural Representations in Literature, Anthropology and Art*, (Cambridge University Press, 1994), '[t]he representation of other cultures invariably entails the presentation of self-portraits, in that those people who are observed are overshadowed or eclipsed by the observer' (p. 289). Said stresses in the introduction to *Orientalism* that the Orient has been fundamental in defining the West 'as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience' (*Orientalism*, p. 2). The West comes to know itself *by proclaiming via Orientalism everything it believes it is not*. Consequently, Said claims that 'European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self' (p. 3).

2. *Orientalism is a Western fantasy.* It is important to grasp Said's argument that Western views of the Orient are not based on what is observed to exist in Oriental lands, but often result from the West's dreams, fantasies and assumptions about what this radically different, contrasting place contains. Orientalism is first and foremost a *fabricated* construct, a series of *images* that come to stand as the Orient's 'reality' for those in the West. This contrived 'reality' in no way reflects what may or may not actually be there in the Orient itself; it does not exist outside of the representations made about it by Westerners. It is not 'an inert fact of nature' (p. 4) but 'man-made' (p. 5), a creation fashioned by those who presume to rule. So, Orientalism imposes upon the Orient specifically Western views of its 'reality'. But crucially, its creation from the stuff of fantasy does not make it any less

remote from the world. Orientalism may be fundamentally imaginative, but material effects result from its advent.

3. Orientalism is an institution. The imaginative assumptions of Orientalism are often taken as hard facts. They find their way into, and make possible, a whole institutional structure where opinions, views and theses about the Orient circulate as objective knowledges, wholly reliable truths. These are some of its material effects. As Rana Kabbani argues in *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* (Pandora, rev. 1994), 'the ideology of Empire was hardly ever a brute jingoism; rather, it made subtle use of reason, and recruited science and history to serve its ends' (p. 6). The Orient, writes Said, became an object 'suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national religious character' (*Orientalism*, pp. 7-8). Such a dizzying, exhaustive list underlines just how far-reaching Orientalism was, the large part it played in helping those in the West formulate their knowledge of the world, and their (superior) place therein, in a variety of disciplines from anthropology to zoology.

In these terms, the Western project of Enlightenment that aimed to secure the progress of humanity through developments in scientific and other 'objective' knowledges is deemed to be tainted by the subjective fantasies of the Orient upon which Western 'rational' knowledge rests. The variety of institutions, academic or otherwise, mentioned above indicates how ingrained Orientalism was (and, arguably, still is) in the imagination and institutions of daily life in the West, and its central contribution to intellectual and daily life.

4. Orientalism is literary. If Orientalism suffuses a vast institutional network, it similarly influences the multitude of literary (and non-literary) writings. Said identifies 'philology [the study of the history of languages], lexicography [dictionary-making], history, biology, political and economic theory, novel-writing and lyric poetry' (p. 15) as coming to the service of Orientalism. Orientalism also made possible new forms of writing that

enshrined and often celebrated Western experience abroad, such as the heroic boys' adventure story popular during the Victorian period (see Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World*, HarperCollins, 1991). These various kinds of writing are all influenced by the structures, assumptions, and stereotypes of Orientalism, reminding us that Western culture is inextricably bound up with Western colonialism.

5. Orientalism is legitimating. All these points underline the important detail that Orientalism is a far-reaching system of representations bound to a structure of political domination. Orientalist representations function to justify the propriety of Western colonial rule of Eastern lands. They are an important part of the arsenal of Empire. They legitimate the domination of other peoples and lubricate the political and judicial structures which maintain colonial rule through physical coercion.
6. There is 'latent' and 'manifest' Orientalism. In order to emphasise the connection between the imaginative assumptions of Orientalism and its material effects, Said divides Orientalism into two. Borrowing some terms from Freud, he posits a *latent* Orientalism and a *manifest* Orientalism. Latent Orientalism describes the dreams and fantasies about the Orient that, in Said's view, remain relatively constant over time. Manifest Orientalism refers to the myriad examples of Orientalist knowledge produced at different historical junctures. Said's argument proposes that while the manifestations of Orientalism will be different, due to reasons of historical specifics and individual style or perspective, their underlying or latent premises will always be the same. For example, a Victorian travel writer and Edwardian journalist might produce texts about the Orient which on the surface appear to differ, but their assumptions about the division between East and West and the character of the Orient (and of Orientals) will, at a deeper level, be alike.

Latent Orientalism, then, is like a blueprint; manifest Orientalism is the many different versions that can built from fundamentally the same design. When a writer or painter makes an Orientalist representation, they will be drawing upon the same assumptions regardless of the differing styles or forms they may choose to adopt.

Stereotypes of the Orient

1. *The Orient is timeless.* If the West was considered the place of historical progress and scientific development, then the Orient was deemed remote from the influence of historical change. 'Orientalism assumed an unchanging Orient' (p. 96), it is argued. It was considered to be essentially no different in the twelfth century than it was in the eighteenth, trapped in antiquity far behind the modern developments of the 'Enlightened' West. Conceived in this way, the Orient was often considered as 'primitive' or 'backwards'. A Westerner travelling to Oriental lands was not just moving in *space* from one location to the other; potentially they were also travelling back in *time* to an earlier world. Hence in Orientalism, the Orient exists as a timeless place, changeless and static, cut off from the progress of Western history.
2. *The Orient is strange.* Crucial to Orientalism was the stereotype of the Orient's peculiarity. The Orient is not just different; it is oddly different – unusual, fantastic, bizarre. Westerners could meet all manner of spectacle there, wonders that would beggar belief and make them doubt their Western eyes. The Orient's eccentricity often functioned as a source of mirth, marvel and curiosity for Western writers and artists; but ultimately its radical oddness was considered evidence enough of the Orient's inferiority. If the Occident was rational, sensible and familiar, the Orient was irrational, extraordinary, abnormal.
3. *Orientalism makes assumptions about 'race'.* Oriental peoples often appeared in Western representations as examples of various invidious racial stereotypes. Assumptions were often made about the inherent 'racial' characteristics of Orientals: stock-figures included the murderous and violent Arab, the lazy Indian and the inscrutable Chinaman. The Oriental's 'race' somehow summed up what kind of person he or she was likely to be, despite their individual qualities and failings. So racialising categories like 'Arabian' and 'Indian' were defined within the general negative representational framework typical of Orientalism, and provided Orientalism with a set of generalised types (*all Arabs were violent, all Indians were lazy*). The Orient was

- where those in the West would encounter races considered inferior to them – which helped, of course, to buttress the West's sense of itself as inherently superior and civil.
4. *Orientalism makes assumptions about gender.* Similarly, popular gendered stereotypes circulated, such as the effeminate Oriental male or the sexually promiscuous exotic Oriental female. The Oriental male was frequently deemed insufficiently 'manly' and displayed a luxuriousness and foppishness that made him appear a grotesque parody of the (itself stereotyped) 'gentler' female sex. The exoticised Oriental female, often depicted nude or partially-clothed in hundreds of Western works of art during the colonial period, was presented as an immodest, active creature of sexual pleasure who held the key to a myriad of mysterious erotic delights. In both examples, the Orient is deemed as failing to live up to received gender codes: men, by Western standards, are meant to be active, courageous, strong; by the same token, women are meant to be passive, moral, chaste. But Oriental men and women do not comply with these gender roles; their gender identity is transgressive. This adds to the general sense of oddness and abnormality ascribed to the Orient.
 5. *The Orient is feminine.* In addition to the gendering of individuals in Orientalism was the more general gendering of the opposition of the Occident and the Orient as one between rigidly stereotypical versions of masculinity and femininity. In Orientalism, the East as a whole is 'feminised', deemed passive, submissive, exotic, luxurious, sexually mysterious and tempting; while the West becomes 'masculine' – that is, active, dominant, heroic, rational, self-controlled and ascetic. This trope makes way for a specifically sexual vocabulary available to those from the West when describing their encounters: the Orient is 'penetrated' by the traveller whose 'passions' it rouses, it is 'possessed', 'ravished', 'embraced' ... and ultimately 'domesticated' by the muscular coloniser. According to Said, this is in part a result of the fact that Orientalism was 'an exclusively male province' (p. 207). So it responded to and buttressed the discourses of heroic, muscular masculinity common in the Western colonial nations.
- It is worth considering the extent to which this vocabulary of

sexual possession common to Orientalism reveals the Orient as a site of perverse *desire* on the part of many male colonisers. Projected onto the Orient are fantasies of the West concerning supposed moral degeneracy, confused and rampant sexualities. These fantasies did much to stimulate the domination of the Orient, but also its continuing fascination for many in the West. It seemed deliciously to offer Western men the opportunity to sample an untrammelled life free from the prohibitions of society back home. Travellers to the Orient might think they were going to a place where moral codes of behaviour did not function, and where they could indulge in forms of sexual excess. The fantasy of the Orient as the desirable repository of all that is constrained by Western civilisation acted as a continual stimulus for those that studied it or travelled through it. So, as we noted previously, in writing 'about' the Orient, they were actually writing about themselves, putting on the page their own desires, fantasies and fears.

6. *The Oriental is degenerate.* Compositely, Oriental stereotypes fixed typical weaknesses as (amongst others) cowardliness, laziness, untrustworthiness, fickleness, laxity, violence and lust. Oriental peoples were often considered as possessing a tenuous moral sense and the readiness to indulge themselves in the more dubious aspects of human behaviour. In other words, Orientalism posited the notion that Oriental peoples needed to be civilised and made to conform to the perceived higher moral standards upheld in the West. So, once again, in creating these stereotypes, Orientalism justified the propriety of colonialism by claiming that Oriental peoples needed saving from themselves.

Criticisms of Orientalism

With a sense of what is involved in Said's theory of Orientalism, let us turn next to look at the various critiques of *Orientalism* which have been voiced since its publication. In so doing, we will gain a fuller sense of how colonial discourses operate. These criticisms do not invalidate Said's ground-breaking study, but they do invite us to think more flexibly about the operations of colonial discourses.

1. *Orientalism is ahistorical.* The major criticism of *Orientalism*, from which several of the others stem, concerns its capacity to make totalising assumptions about a vast, varied expanse of representations over a very long period of history. As Dennis Porter describes it in his essay of 1983, 'Orientalism and its Problems' (in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Williams and Chrisman, pp. 150–61), Said posits the 'unified character of Western discourse on the Orient over some two millennia, a unity derived from a common and continuing experience of fascination with and threat from the East, of its irreducible otherness' (p. 152). Said's examples of Orientalist writing range from the Italian poet Dante writing in the early fourteenth century up to twentieth-century writers. Can it be true that they *all* hold essentially the same latent assumptions? Can such a massive archive of materials be so readily homogenised? Has nothing changed? Said's view takes in a broad, generalising sweep of history but attends little to *individual* historical moments, their anomalies and specifics. As John MacKenzie points out in his book *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester University Press, 1995), Said's history of Orientalism is perhaps 'in itself essentially ahistorical' because it glosses over the variable factors that make historical moments unique, such as the 'contrasting economic and social circumstances of different territories' (p. 11).

In these terms, we could say that Said privileges latent Orientalism over manifest Orientalism by neglecting to think whether the representations of the Orient made by those in the West at particular moments might modify or challenge the enduring assumptions of the Orient. MacKenzie argues that Western artists have approached the Orient at various moments with perfectly honourable intentions and 'genuine respect' (p. 60) for other peoples, in order to learn from and value their cultures. Not everybody looked down upon the Orient so crudely. This was no doubt true in some cases. However, in fairness to Said, MacKenzie is too trusting of the examples of 'benign' Orientalist art he reproduces and fails to grasp the point that even the most gracious and respectful artist may *unwittingly* reproduce Orientalist assumptions. If Said's work privileges the latent

aspect of Orientalism, MacKenzie pays it too scant attention and forgets that the road to hell is often paved with good intentions. It does not necessarily follow that a sympathetic representation of the Orient or the Oriental will automatically be free from the latent assumptions of Orientalism.

2. *Said ignores resistance by the colonised.* This is another major criticism of *Orientalism*. If Said is to be believed, Orientalism moves in one direction from the active West to the passive East. But he rarely stops to examine how Oriental peoples *received* these representations, nor how these representations circulated in the colonies themselves. In what ways did the colonised peoples respond to Orientalist representations? Did they readily submit to the colonisers' view of themselves? How might they have *contested* Orientalism and brought it to crisis? As Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman have argued in their introduction to *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, there is little notion of the colonised subject as a *constitutive* agent (p. 16) with the capacity for political resistance. And in the words of Aijaz Ahmad, one of Said's fiercest critics, *Said never thinks about how Western representations 'might have been received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown or reproduced by the intelligentsias of the colonised countries'* (*In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Verso, 1992, p. 172). In these terms, *Said stands accused of writing out the agency and the voice of colonised peoples* from history as he never stops to consider the challenges made to dominant discourses. In so doing, his work is in danger of being just as 'Orientalist' as the field he is describing by not considering alternative representations made by those subject to colonialism.

3. *Said ignores resistance within the West.* According to Said, 'every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric' (*Orientalism*, p. 204). This is certainly a sweeping statement. What about those within the West who opposed colonialism and were horrified by the treatment of colonised peoples? As Dennis Porter argues, *Orientalism* leaves no room to accommodate what he calls, adapting a term from Antonio Gramsci, '*counter-hegemonic thought*' ('*Orientalism and its Problems*', p. 152); that

is, opinions contrary to the dominant views within the West which contest the authority of Orientalist representations.

4. *Said ignores gender differences.* As we noted previously, Said argues that Orientalist representations were made in the main by men. This explains why the Orient is a specifically *male* fantasy and is often represented in feminine terms. Said maintains that in Orientalist writing 'women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing' (*Orientalism*, p. 207). But did Western women write about the Orient? And if they did, did they also resort to the same stereotypes? As Sara Mills has argued importantly in *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (Routledge, 1992), many women travelled to the colonies and made their own observations in a variety of writings, but Said rarely looks at women's writing in *Orientalism*.

However, it is not just a case of 'adding in' women's writing to Said's theory in order to fill the gaps in his more male-centred study. Mills points out that the position of women in relation to Orientalism is often different to that of men because of the tensions between the discourses of colonialism and the discourses of gender. Looking at late-Victorian and early twentieth-century travel writing by Western women, Mills maintains that these women were, at one level, *empowered* by colonialism due to the superior position they perceived themselves to hold in relation to colonised peoples. Yet, not unlike colonised peoples, women were *disempowered* due to the inferior position they were placed in in relation to Western men. This might make available, if only fleetingly, a partial and problematic accord between the Western woman traveller and the colonised peoples she encountered. Her position in relation to the colonised is not the same as the Western male. Hence, the intersection of colonial and patriarchal discourses often places Western women in a contradictory position. They occupy a dominant position due to colonialism, but a subordinate place in patriarchy. Women 'cannot be said to speak from outside colonial discourse, but their relation to [it] is problematic because of its conflict with the discourses of "femininity", which were operating on them in an equal, and sometimes stronger, measure. Because of these discursive pressures, their work

exhibits contradictory elements which may act as a critique of some of the components of other colonial writings' (*Discourses of Difference*, p. 63). Women's writing about the colonies may not be so readily explained with recourse to Said's theory of Orientalism due to its particular contradictions borne out of the contrary positions frequently held by women. (We will consider these issues again in Chapter 6.)

As Sara Mills's argument above suggests, the various criticisms of Said's work collectively give the impression that colonial discourses are multiple, precarious and more ambivalent than Said presumes in *Orientalism*. They do not function with the smoothness or the complete success that he awards the totalising concept of Orientalism. Colonial discourses were in constant confrontation with resistances and contrary views of various kinds, in the colonies and in the West. Colonial discourses, then, are by no means homogeneous or unitary. Said is certainly right to identify a series of representations about the Orient which functioned to justify and perpetuate the propriety of colonial rule, but these representations were not monolithic, static and uncontested.

In these terms, we can propose that Orientalism as defined by Said describes the operations of colonial discourses *up to a point*. The institutionalised system of asymmetrical, repetitive stereotypes tells only part of the story of how colonial discourses function in the world. To be fair, Said has responded positively to some of the criticism of *Orientalism*, especially the argument that he ignores insurgency, although he disagrees with certain of the charges made against him such as the accusation that his work is ultimately ahistorical (see Said's 'Afterword' to the 1995 Penguin edition of *Orientalism*). In recent years he has looked more closely at the resistance to Orientalism, as well as its continuing presence in the contemporary world. These are some of the major preoccupations of his more recent book *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage, 1993). None the less, we should not underestimate the power which Orientalist representations clearly achieved when holding Said's theory up for questioning. Just because these representations were more volatile than Said assumes, it does not mean that they were (and are) without substantial power and influence in Westerners' views of other peoples. This, the central premise of *Orientalism*, must not be underestimated.

'Ambivalence' and 'mimicry' in colonial discourses

Let us probe further into how colonial discourses are not always so sure of themselves as might be presumed. In 'Orientalism and its Problems', Dennis Porter argues that even the most seemingly Orientalist text can include within itself moments when Orientalist assumptions come up against alternative views that throw their authority into question. Texts rarely embody just one view. Often they will bring into play several different ways of seeing without always deciding which is the true or most appropriate one.

An example Porter gives is T. E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922). Sure, he admits, this text might seem a fairly robust example of Orientalism. But there can be identified moments when Lawrence seems to depart from an Orientalist position and articulates *alternative* ways of thinking about the differences between East and West. Porter concludes with the important point that 'literary texts may in their play establish distance from the ideologies they seem to be reproducing' ('Orientalism and its Problems', p. 160). Even the most seemingly Orientalist text can articulate 'counter-hegemonic' views within itself. As Porter usefully reminds us in his use of the phrase 'in their play', literary texts are mobile and often contradictory affairs, positing several opinions rather than just one. Cross-currents of 'Orientalist' or 'counter-Orientalist' thinking can exist simultaneously within a single text.

The lack of conviction within colonial discourses is also the concern of Homi K. Bhabha. Like Said, Bhabha has become one of the leading voices in postcolonialism since the early 1980s; but unlike Said, his work is often very difficult to understand at a first reading because of his compact and complex written style. In his essay 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism' (in *Critical Inquiry*, 20, 1994, pp. 328–56), Arif Dirlik argues that Bhabha is 'something of a master of political mystification and theoretical obfuscation' (p. 333) and attacks his incomprehensibility. Bhabha is difficult to read, to be sure, but he is not completely incomprehensible and his ideas can be some of the most thought-provoking within postcolonialism. Whereas Said draws upon more materialist theoretical work in his thinking, Bhabha is indebted to psychoanalysis and is influenced by Sigmund Freud,