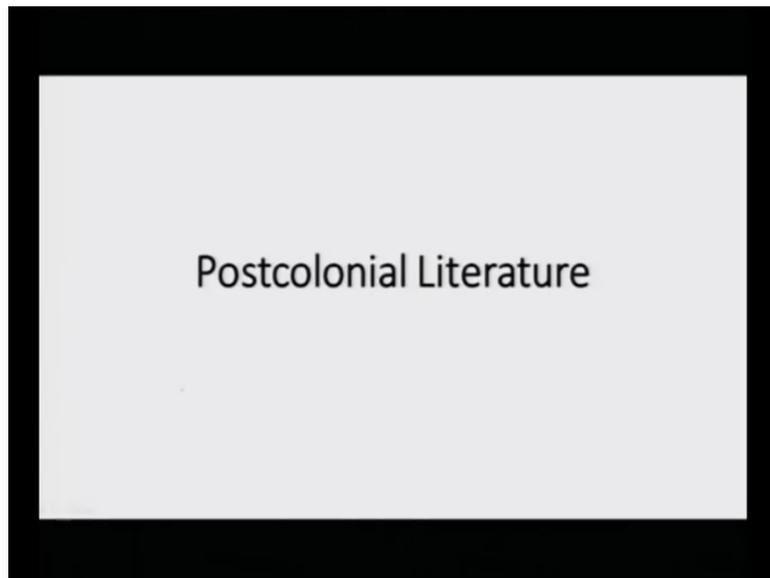


Postcolonial Literature
Prof. Sayan Chattopadhyay
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Lecture No. #02
Commonwealth Literature

Welcome back to the course on postcolonial literature.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:17)

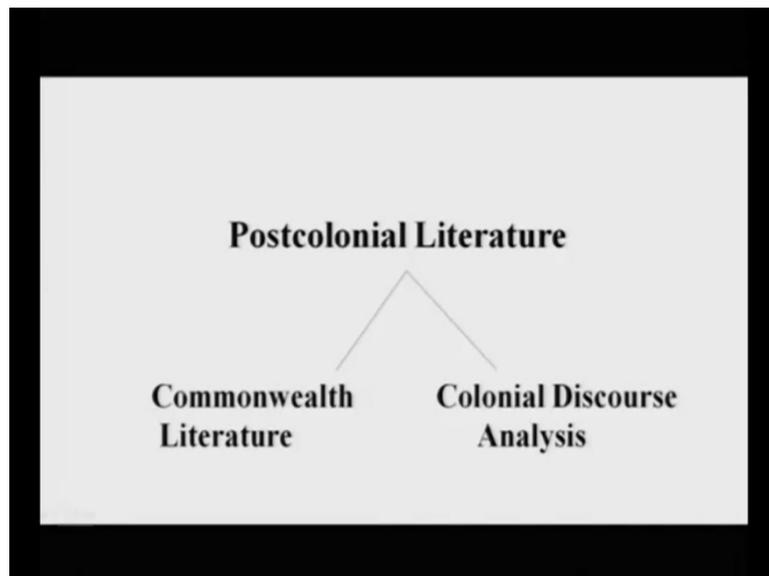


Now in our previous lecture, we discussed the various meanings of the term postcolonialism, and we also explored the various nuances of the two components - the word “colonialism” as well as the prefix “post” - which comes together to form the word postcolonialism. In today’s lecture we will try to understand the relevance of the term postcolonialism from within the field of literary studies.

But before we begin our discussion on that, it is important to note here that the word postcolonialism, unlike, say for instance, the word “imagism”, was not specifically coined to signify a particular kind of literature. In fact, the use of the term postcolonialism, which can be traced as far back as the late 19th century, had little connection with the field of literature till almost the late 1980’s. And till that time in fact, the word postcolonialism was primarily used as an adjective to refer to conditions or situations which occurred or existed after the end of colonial rule in places like America for instance or India.

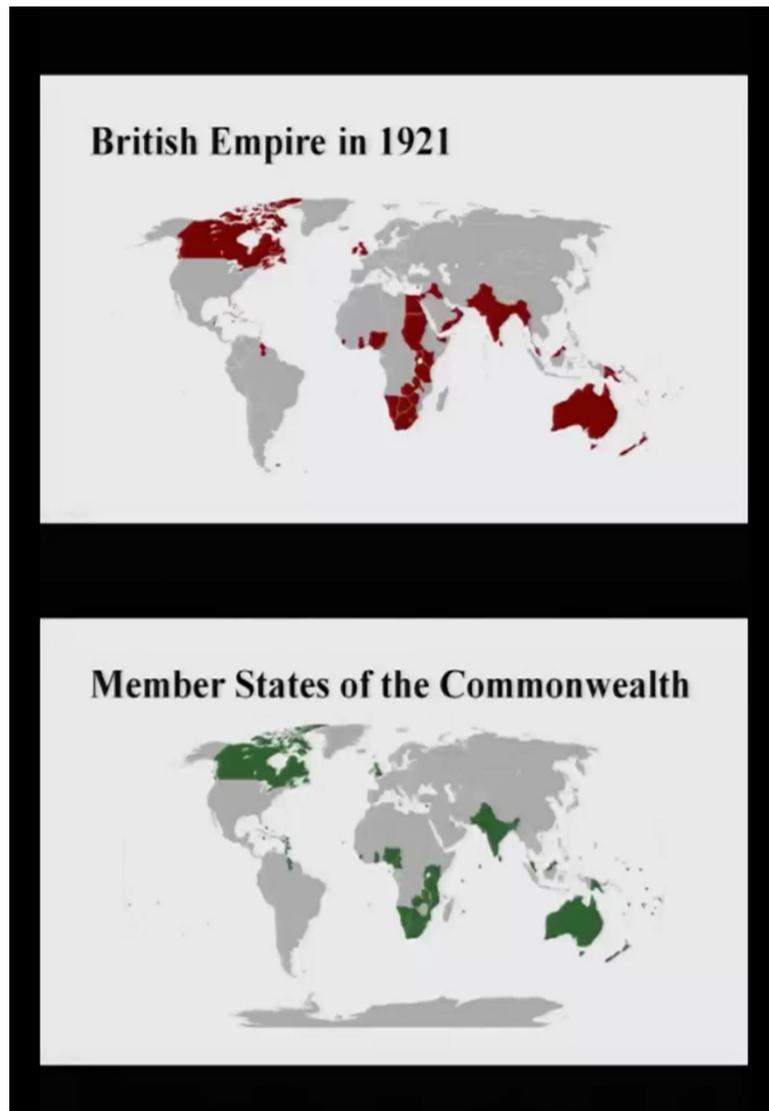
So in this context postcolonialism meant post-independence and it was almost always used, the word postcolonialism was almost always used with a hyphen separating “post” from “colonialism”. Now it was only since the late 1980’s and the 1990’s that postcolonialism became an integral part of literary discussions and it brought together two already existing areas of study within the field of English literature.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:54)



If you look at the slide then you will see that the first area which got incorporated within the field of postcolonial literature was referred to as “commonwealth literature”. And the other area was referred to as the study of “colonial discourse” or “colonial discourse analysis”. So these two separate aspects came together to form the field of postcolonial studies and they in a way form the roots of postcolonial literature as a field of literary studies.

So therefore it is very important to understand these two constituent parts if we want to explore postcolonial literature at any length. So today let us start with the category of commonwealth literature. Now the word commonwealth signifies a grouping of nation. A grouping of those nations or those nation states which were once British colonies. The British empire which had reached its peak in terms of occupied territory by the 1920’s, and here you can see the map of the British empire in 1921, this empire as depicted in this map, by the shaded area in this map, had started breaking up from 1940’s. And in fact, India was



one of the first nation states to break away from the British empire. Now the sovereign nation states which were emerging out of the British empire and which shared a common history of British colonialism, voluntarily decided to form a confederation with the British monarch as its head. And this confederation of sovereign states which were once British colonies came to be known as the commonwealth. And this grouping of nation of course still exists.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:35)

And this is a map of the states that form the commonwealth today. And if you see that the highlighted areas in green are the countries which are the member states. If you look at this map carefully, you will realise that not all countries which were British colonies are now part of the commonwealth. Of course, some states which were once part of the commonwealth decided to leave later on, for instance, the African state of Gambia or more recently Maldives, they have left the commonwealth, initially they were part of the commonwealth. But there is

one country which, though it was a British colony at one point of time, was never really a part of the commonwealth of nations. And that country which is conspicuous by its absence is of course the United States of America. Now if you remember your history, you will know that the United States of America was part of the British empire, was ruled from Britain till 1776.

Indeed, even today America celebrates the 4th of July every year as its date of independence from the British rule. But this erstwhile British colony does not feature in the list of commonwealth nations and it is of course an anomaly. And this anomaly is only one of the anomalies which plague the concept of commonwealth. And, in fact, the number of anomalies got compounded when the term commonwealth started being used by the academicians to designate a particular kind of literature.

The first major attempt to use the term commonwealth to denote a specific literary category was made in 1964 when the University of Leeds in England organised what was called the first Commonwealth Literature Conference. And this conference was an effort to bring under a single umbrella the significant amount of English literature that was coming out of the once colonised part of the British empire. For instance, by the time of the conference by the 1960's, authors like R.K. Narayan from India, V.S. Naipaul from the West Indian island of Trinidad, Chinua Achebe from Nigeria, all these authors who belonged to the once colonised part of the world, colonised by Britain, were being regularly published in Britain and in America and their names had become quite familiar within the field of literary studies.

Now this conference organised by the University of Leeds was an attempt to bring authors like Naipaul, Narayan, Achebe to the fore and to form a field of literary studies around their works. And this field of literary studies was referred to as a field of commonwealth literature. Now, just like in the political group of commonwealth nations America remains conspicuously absent, even in the category of commonwealth literature, the literature of America never featured. But what was even more curious was that the category of commonwealth literature never included the literature of Britain, in spite of the fact that Britain was and still is very much a part of the commonwealth of nations and it was the metropolitan country of the colonial empire. But, in spite of that, British literature was never a part of the category that was studied and discussed using the name Commonwealth literature.

The Indian born novelist Salman Rushdie, while attending another conference on Commonwealth Literature held nearly twenty years after the first conference at Leeds, noted that there was in fact a politics going on behind how the term Commonwealth literature, the category Commonwealth literature was being used. His argument was that Commonwealth literature was used to group under itself all the English literatures that were emerging from the once colonised parts of the world but it did not include British literature because it wanted to segregate the English literature emerging from the colonies as a separate group of literature. Now why this segregation? According to Rushdie there was no way that such a significant amount of English literature could be altogether avoided. But the next best thing was, according to Rushdie, to separate this amount of literature coming from the colonies under a separate category and to label them in a manner that they can be identified as English literature which was not really at par with British literature. So it was a category of inferior kind of English literature almost. This was according to Rushdie the hidden politics that was being played out in the metropolitan universities when the Commonwealth literature was being discussed as a category. What also concerned Rushdie was that within the field of Commonwealth literature, the authors and their works were arranged in neat subgroups according to their nations of origin. It was thus expected that an author born in India will write only about India and his or her writings will represent an essence of Indianness that was unique and that was uncontaminated by anything else. That is for instance, a novel by R.K. Narayan for instance was supposed to embody a unique essence of “Indianness” that was assumed to be different from say the essence of “Australianness” that one might find in the writings of someone like Patrick White, which in turn was supposed to be different from say the essence of “West Indianness” that was supposedly found in the work of V.S. Naipaul.

Now such an attitude towards literature was problematic at two different levels. Firstly, the post 16th century period of European colonialism was also marked by a tremendous amount of human movement. People moved around a lot because travel was much easier compared to earlier times. And they moved around either because they could afford to travel or because they were displaced, forcibly evicted due to various economic and political reasons. Take the case of Rushdie for instance. Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay. He then went to England as a student and subsequently settled down there. His family in turn moved from India to Pakistan and settled down in Pakistan. Now Rushdie of course has written a lot about India but he has also written about Britain, as well as about Pakistan. So does this make Rushdie an

Indian author, does it make him a Pakistani author, does it make him a British author? What is that national category under which we should keep the works of Rushdie?

It is a problem, it is a conundrum. And if it is so difficult to pin down an author coming from one of the ex-British colonies, then it is not difficult to imagine how impossible it would be to pin down entire cultures within the confines of one nation state or another. Take for instance again the example of another Indian author Rabindranath Tagore. Now Tagore's work proved to be very influential in South America after his poetry was translated by the Argentine author Victoria Ocampo. Similarly the literary technique of magic realism which was invented by authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez in South America during the 1960's and 1970's influenced various Indian novelists including Salman Rushdie. Now the category of Commonwealth literature, by not factoring in this interconnected nature of literary and cultural influences as well as the problematic relationship of authors from ex-colonies with the land of their origin, was failing as a category, a category through which works of authors as different as Rushdie, Achebe, Naipaul and Narayan can be studied together.

The attempt to read literature by using national framework was also problematic in another way. The literature that a commonwealth nation like India for instance produces is produced in many different languages. Isn't it? English is definitely one of the languages in which Indian literature is produced but that is far from being the only language in which Indian literature is produced.

Now, though the category of Commonwealth literature used the concept of nation and national traditions to group authors and their works, it never really looked beyond the English literature that was coming out of the colonies. And as the case of India shows us that such a focus on English literature is not only a very limited focus but it is also not in sync with the complex literary landscape that the erstwhile colonies of Britain presented.

So Commonwealth literature, therefore, soon became an unworkable category, both because it was not international enough and because it was not national enough. Not international enough because it did not take into account the cross-cultural influences and the cross territorial affiliations of the authors coming from the once colonised parts of the world. And simultaneously not national enough because it was not taking into account the various kinds of non-English literature that was also emerging out of the colonies.

However, the most problematic aspect of the category commonwealth literature was the way it connected the literature coming out of the colonies with the colonial empire. The notion of

a commonwealth headed by the British monarch is almost inevitably informed by a spirit of nostalgia for the bygone days of the British empire. Indeed the category of Commonwealth literature can be interpreted at one level as an attempt to culturally keep together an empire which was no longer a political reality. But political decolonisation was achieved by the nation-states that emerged out of the shadow of British rule through a prolonged anti-colonial struggle and the authors who came out of these parts of the world, the once colonised parts of the world, were heirs to this anti-colonial legacy as well as to the legacies of colonialism. It is therefore no wonder that the feeling of nostalgia for the colonial empire that lurked, and I would say still lurks, behind the term commonwealth would make the label of commonwealth literature unattractive to some of the very authors that it supposedly describes. And this kind of aversion towards the category of commonwealth literature was perhaps best displayed when the novelist Amitav Ghosh refused to let his novel *The Glass Palace* be considered for the 2001 Commonwealth Writers prize. One major reason for this decision, as Ghosh writes in his letter that he sent to the award giving committee, had to do with the nostalgic memorialisation of the colonial past which informed the idea of commonwealth. According to Ghosh, such glorification or such glorified memorialisation of the colonial past was precisely what he was trying to resist through his novels like *The Glass Palace*. And, therefore, he could not allow it to be included within the race for a prize that had the word commonwealth associated with it. And this was true for many writers who were emerging from the ex-colonies of Britain. They were writing against the idea of the colonial empire.

Yet the category of commonwealth literature remained largely impervious to these elements of anti-colonialism. So by the 1990's commonwealth literature as a literary category was losing favour and it was losing favour for various different reasons. We have already discussed them. But in this slide I have enumerated them.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:48)

Shortcomings of “Commonwealth Literature” as a category

- It neither included the literature of erstwhile colonies like America, nor the literature of metropolitan Britain
- It did not take into account the cross cultural influences and the cross territorial affiliation of authors from the ex-colonies
- It did not take into account the non-English literatures of commonwealth nations
- It involved a nostalgic glorification of the legacies of colonialism

So commonwealth literature was problematic as a category firstly because it neither included the literature of erstwhile colonies like America nor did it include the literature of metropolitan Britain. It was also problematic because it did not take into account the cross-cultural influences and the cross-territorial affiliations of authors from the ex-colonies. It did not take into account the non-English literatures that was emerging from commonwealth nations like India for instance. And finally the category of commonwealth literature involved a nostalgic glorification of the legacies of colonialism. So these were the various problems because of which the category of commonwealth literature was losing favour within literary circles and it started losing favour by the 1990's. And 1990's was the time when postcolonial literature emerged as a replacement.

Now if we look at the kind of literature that was being grouped together using the term postcolonial, we will see that there is not much difference between postcolonial literature or what was being discussed as postcolonial literature and the archive of commonwealth literature. For instance, authors like R.K. Narayan, Derek Walcott, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, all of them who were being read under the banner of commonwealth literature were also relevant within the category of postcolonial literature.

However, though the literature remained the same, almost the same, the critical approach to this literature underwent a sea change. As we will see later in this course, unlike commonwealth literature, the field of postcolonial studies is underlined by a keen awareness of the fact that both cultures as well as people who produce these cultures, both of them are incessantly travelling, they are crossing borders, they are intermixing with one another and they are not fixed within national boundaries.

Also it is worth noting that though postcolonial literature too concerns itself primarily with literature written in English, yet unlike commonwealth literature there is a genuine attempt to incorporate non-English literatures within its canon. And one good example would be the works of the Bengali author Mahasweta Devi, which forms today part of the canon of postcolonial literature. It is very much a part of discussions on postcolonial literature today. And the original works of Mahasweta Devi of course are all in Bengali and not in English.

However, having said this one should also admit that postcolonial literary studies still predominantly confined itself to English language and even though I said that Devi's works are popular within the field of postcolonial literature, yet they are accessed only as translations, in their translated forms. And Gayatri Spivak, a name that you will later encounter during this course, is one of the major theorist of postcolonial literature and also the English translator of Mahasweta Devi's work.

However, the most radical change in the approach to literary texts that distinguishes postcolonial literature from commonwealth literature is the former's focus, the focus of postcolonial literature, on anti-colonial resistance. Whereas commonwealth literature was informed by colonial nostalgia, by a glorification almost of the legacies of colonialism, postcolonial literature is informed by a highly critical approach towards colonialism.

Indeed, postcolonial literature is not merely a grouping of literature that has emerged out of the colonies or ex-colonies of Britain. Rather it is a grouping of literature which attempts to subvert and undo the effects of colonial violence. This critical attitude which informs the postcolonial studies today is a legacy of what I have referred to earlier in this lecture as "colonial discourse analysis". And we will learn more about this concept of "colonial discourse analysis" in our next lecture. Thank you.