Literature Studies

An Introduction to Some of the Central Concerns of Post Colonial Literature

Place and Displacement

It is not difficult to see why place and displacement are often seen as perhaps the most central theme of post colonial literature. The process of colonisation inevitably causes peoples to be displaced or have their sense of place threatened. This can be caused by migration, in the case of the colonialists themselves, or in the case of refugees, or by transportation, such as the movement of slaves from Africa to the Caribbean.

The English Patient: Ondaatje's own biography demonstrates a lack of secure place, of Dutch ancestry, born in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) now living in Canada. The novel's main characters are 'international bastards', displaced from thei homelands in the aftermath of war fought over national boundaries. The ideals of desert exploration by a multinational group of explorers, crossing and recrossing the African desert without regard for invisible national boundaries in the shifting sands, are destroyed by the onset of the Second World War. One of the most striking characters is Kirpal Singh who volunteers for Allied army service in English-occupied India and picks up English values, including his nickname Kip, during his military training in England. He spends the war as a bomb disposal expert in England and Italy until his allegiance to the Allied cause is undermined by the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Derek Walcott's poetry often expresses the sense of displacement experienced by the Caribbean population. The Caribbean situation is striking as the entire population of the islands can trace its history to other parts of the world. Thi history of migration, voluntary and involuntary, often informs Walcott's writing, for example in 'Forests of Europe'.

The Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys tells the story of the mad woman in the attic in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, going back to her Creole history. The novel explores both Rochester's sense of displacement in the Caribbean and Bertha's in England, where her displacement takes the form of mental displacement in her madness.

As well as literal movement between one location and another, place and displacement can be considered metaphorically. By its very nature, colonialism suggests a cultural denigration; the indigenous culture is undermined by the supposedly superior cultural model of invader. The colonial culture invades, then exercises economic and judicial power over the indigenous population, which undermines the existing cultural systems.

Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* is centred on the day of Uhuru, or Kenyan Independence from English rule. The exercise of English power is shown to have subjugated the Kenyan population, at times brutally. The novel, though, explores both the Kenyan urge towards self-expression and cultural re-establishment as well as the English disillusion with the failure of the colonial vision.

The central character Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, resists the marginalisation of his own culture consequent to the arrival of the white European Christian missionaries. His resistance ultimately leads to his own downfall, and the novel suggests, as Achebe argues in his theoretical writings, that once history has happened, and the white man has arrived, the only future is in adaptation and sycreticity, rather than in unbending resistance.

Brian Friel's play *Translations*, about English control of Ireland through remapping and renaming, explores these issues in both a literal and metaphoric way, as the Irish population is displaced, not by geography itself, but how that geography is signposted. Behind this are questions of language (the 'quaint archaic tongue' the Irish speak versus 'the King's good English'), law, taxation and education to establish English control.

Appropriation and Abrogation

Post colonial literature often displays a tension between the indigenous values and an aspiration towards the values of the colonist, since they have, by the fact of their colonial control, proved powerful. Rather than reject, or abrogate, the values of the coloniser, there is often therefore the urge to appropriate those values.

The value that Mr Biswas places on his house in V.S. Naipaul's *The House of Mr Biswas* shows his urge to be placed, but the architecture of the building suggests western aspirations, however inappropriate in context. At the same time hi home-owning individualism undermines the values of extended family apparent in his own community.

Although set in post-independence India, Arundhati Roy's *The Gold of Small Things* concerns a family who see social status and class indissolubly linked with Englishness. The insist that the children speak English, value The Sound of Music above Indian culture and take great pride in Chacko's Oxford education and his English ex-wife.

Walcott's poem 'Parades, Parades' questions why societies, once they have gained their independence from colonialism, rely on the rituals and systems of the coloniser and thus remain mentally colonised.

As a response to voluntary and imposed cultural denigration, a number of post colonial writers have sought to reassert the value and integrity of their own cultures. A number of texts demonstrate the value of the indigenous culture, its systems, laws, beliefs and mythologies. In this way there is at least an implicit abrogation of the coloniser's values by the promotion of indigenous values.

Achebe clearly establishes the world of Ibo traditions in the first half of *Things Fall Apart* before the white missionaries arrive. In this way he introduces the reader to the social structures of the Ibo culture, including agriculture, family organisation, religious ritual, judicial settling of disputes and settlement of inter-village rivalries. In this way he portrays a thriving and structured society; it is the white systems, once they arrive, which seem alien and arbitrary.

Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* demonstrates the tensions between abrogation and appropriation. The novel celebrates the rejection of English control and the success of the military insurgency which led to English withdrawal and independence, but is also clear-sighted about the political system, and its corruption, which has been appropriated.

These issues are brought crucially into focus by the question of language itself. There is an inevitable tension between accepting the imposed language as a means of expression and rejecting it and its cultural values. This tension is apparent in the positions taken by Chinua Achebe and Ngugi. Ngugi argues that decolonisation needs to be fundamental, including rejecting the language of colonisation, and took the decision himself to cease writing in English and to write only in Gikuyu, a Kenyan language. Thus, he argues, he writes for his own people rather than foreigners or a foreign-educated elite. Achebe, on the other hand, argues that it is essential to write in English, both to gain as large an audience as possible and because to refuse to do so would fail to acknowledge Nigeria's history, which cannot be undone.

Language

Most post colonial writers use a language which has been historically imposed, rather than one which has historically and culturally evolved. This naturally produces a tension when using English to describe the post colonial experience.

These issues are explored dynamically in Friel's *Translations*, which focuses on the Irish language being replaced by English. One of the ironies of the play itself is that it is written in English, Friel creating a dramatic trick so that the audience understands that the characters are speaking Gaelic even though the actors are speaking English.

Although writing in their own language, this problem is not dissimilar for colonial writers in settler colonies, who use a language which has been imported and therefore can be considered inauthentic for the experience it describes.

Aside from rejecting the use of English altogether, as Ngugi has, post colonial authors often incorporate their indigenous language into English. At first this was done with explanatory glosses, but more frequently such inclusions are left unglossed, creating a hybrid language. In addition, the rhythms and syntactic structures of the indigenous tongue are often recreated in English, so that the hybrid language is no longer the English of the colonist. This means, of course, that there are many different versions of English across the globe.

Both Achebe and Ngugi (before he rejected English as his language) incorporate Ibo and Gikuyu vocabulary into their novels. *Things Fall Apart* in particular uses Ibo words frequently, such as *obi* and *egwugwu*, without any gloss. A reade may recognise that glossing for meaning would in any case be inadequate; neither *hut* nor *spirits* conveys the cultural dimensions of the two words. In a similar way, much of the chanting and greeting in the rituals is also conveyed in Ibo direct speech. Achebe's narrative and sentence structure is also very direct and apparently simple, a reporting of event intersprinkled with colloquial idiom, and in this way it carries an echo of the Ibo oral tradition, despite the text being written in English.

Time and Chronology

Lineage, history and consideration of the past have long been central to European thinking and understanding. The conventional idea that history is written by the victor shows why many post colonial writers seek to realign history to the perspective of the oppressed or at least offer an alternative perspective to that of the imperialist. In addition, several writers seek to offer an alternative view of time itself, undermining the European value placed on chronological time, by fracturing and rearranging chronological time, questioning the linear model of history and narrative.

Many texts demonstrate this fracturing of chronology with different styles and different effects including Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* and R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, to name but five. One can see that Rushdie's slippage of tim is appropriate to the magical and mythic world of the novel, while Ondaatje's looseness of structure perhaps parallels the looseness of boundaries in the desert sands. The absence of conventional narrative structure in *The English Patient*, though, as in *The God of Small Things* and *A Grain of Wheat*, is also used to hold information from the reader and to offer multiple perspectives on events rather than a logical sequence of cause and effect. Thus the real focus of Roy's novel is not known for some time and Ngugi's focus on the day of Uhuru is inextricably linked with the past which has gone before it. In Narayan's novel, the reader learns two linked narratives almost simultaneously, so that they inform each other.

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Place and Displacement

The experience of colonialism often creates a question of identity, as the domination of the country by outsiders threatens the identity of that country, and the indigenous people's place in it. In the colonies of intervention, the indigenous peoples were subject to cultural denigration, their own identity and culture oppressed by a culture and language which was supposedly superior. In this way the homeland itself loses its identity and integrity as the colonial power assumes dominance. In this context, the urge to reassert the vitality of the indigenous culture (Week 2) becomes fully comprehensible. It is this which motivates both Achebe and Ngugi in Africa, but the idea is very interestingly explored in Brian Friel's play *Translations*, set in mid-19th century Ireland. It raises the questions both metaphorically and literally, as the play centres on the British Ordnance Survey teams mapping and renaming Ireland, so that the named topography of the landscape is no longer recognisable to its inhabitants.

Link:
Essay on naming in *Translations*

Extracts:
Episodes from *Translations*

On the other hand, the population of the Caribbean are literally displaced, the majority by involuntary migration. In this case, not only were the people forcibly severed from their roots and taken thousands of miles from their homelands, bu their languages were also actively suppressed. After slavery was abolished, many Asians travelled to the Caribbean as indentured labourers on the plantations. In both cases, this voluntary and involuntary migration leads to a sense of profound alienation, and of loss, which is often apparent in the poetry of Derek Walcott and the novels of V.S. Naipaul.

The displacement of the settlers in New World colonies is of a different order, but no less important. New arrivals in Australia, New Zealand and Canada struggled to reproduce their sense of 'Englishness' and the way of life they had known in a strikingly different landscape and climate, thousands of miles from home, and therefore with no real prospec of return. Even their England-honed language was inadequate to describe their new experiences, so a process of change and adaptation is enforced, which further separates the colonisers from their homeland, while in the early stages they often hanker after the links to England. The work of Peter Carey and David Malouf in Australia demonstrates these concerns, and they are also reflected in the winner of the 2006 Orange Prize for Fiction, *The Secre River* by Kate Grenville. Katherine Mansfield's short stories often fit very European-style narratives within the turbulent background of a developing New Zealand society, where European manners and conventions begin to break down.

Though the causes of displacement vary, it is perhaps the most widespread concern of post-colonial literature, and is a recurrent theme in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, as Samad yearns for Bengali Muslim values and Irie seeks to rediscover her Jamaican roots. It is no accident that so many of the chapter titles refer to root canals.

Link:
See also the Post Colonial Literature Concerns page for further discussion of this issue.

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Settler colonies: USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand

The issues and concerns for the literature of the settler colonies are different from, but linked to, other post colonial literature. There are three main areas of concern: the relationship between old and new social and literary practices, the relationship between the settlers and the indigenous population and the relationship between the imported language and the new place.

Language inevitably carries values and ideas with it, so settler writers have been concerned with the creation of new national voice, distinct and separate from the imported voice, while using the same language. At the same time they have wanted to be recognised on an equal footing with literature from Europe.

These countries do have their indigenous populations, and there is diglossic potential as Aboriginal and Maori writers, for example, appropriate English. At the same time, some settler writers have consciously attempted to incorporate elements of Aboriginal and Maori language and structures into English to give it a distinct local form evolved in some way from the location.

The potential for hybridity in American literature is enormous, as its society is composed of so many international influences.

Willa Cather's *My Antonia* gives a striking illustration of the early life of a settler colony in the USA, made up of disparat European influences.

Katherine Mansfield's short stories are often strikingly European in flavour and attitude, as 19th century European ideas try to find a place in New Zealand, in a location which tests those ideas and social preconceptions.

David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* explores the anxieties of early settlers in the hostile terrain of Australia, heightened by the arrival of the novel's central character, whose past, including time spent with the Aborigines, has robbed him of clear memory and language.

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Abrogation and Appropriation

The development of Négritude and a writing which clearly establishes the legitimacy and validity of the indigenous culture of a colonised country is demonstrating a rejection of the coloniser's values and culture; it is an *abrogation* of the colonising culture. The ideal of abrogation is to cast off the coloniser in order to completely shake off European legitimacy, culture and influence in order to return to the essence of the colonized people, with its own values and organisation.

On the opposite side of this argument are those who appropriate elements of the colonising culture and claim them for their own, adapting them for their own use. This refusal to reject the coloniser outright might be seen as more open-minded; it shows a greater ability to adapt to changing times and conditions. It is perhaps Okonkwo's inability to appropriate and adapt with the arrival of the whiteman that leads to his downfall in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. On the other hand, Karanja, who appropriates so much of the English view of Kenya that he becomes a homeguard serving the British administration in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, is clearly portrayed as a traitor.

These two character examples highlight the opposition of views exemplified by Achebe's and Ngugi's approach. Ngugi's novel is a much more anti-colonial polemic, although his characterisation of both black and white characters is balanced. Achebe's novel takes a much more open and non-judgemental approach to colonisation, acknowledging the Ibo culture's difficulty in adapting to the arrival of Europeans. A sign of Ngugi's abrogation of European expectations an traditions was his refusal in 1977 to write in English, using instead Gikuyu, his own Kenyan language. This was a conscious rejection of the language of the coloniser and a decision to write in the language of ordinary Kenyans, rather than the British-educated elite.

In 1968 he responded to a paper by the Acting Head of English at Nairobi University, which had mapped out a development which continued the close reference to English traditions. Ngugi argued for the abolition of the English Department, saying that there was “a basic assumption that the English tradition and the emergence of the modern west is the central root of our consciousness and cultural heritage. Africa becomes an extension of the west… If there is a need for a study of the historic continuity of a single culture, why can’t it be African? … there is no need to substitute a study of English culture for our own. We reject the primacy of English literature and culture.” (*On the Abolition of the English Department*)

Chinua Achebe takes quite a different attitude. His argument is that colonialism has happened; it is part of history, and therefore cannot be undone. It is impossible for formerly colonised peoples to return to the state they enjoyed before the experience of colonisation. Like the state of innocence, once lost, it cannot be regained. Achebe argues that since these peoples' histories include the experience of colonialism, they should accept that, rather than try to eradicate the memory or the effects of that experience. For this reason, he argues strongly for the use of English, accepting that as an international language it gives him the ability to speak to far more people, far more influentially, than he would if he chose to write in Ibo. He said that using another's language "looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling," but at the same time argued "But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it." Issues of language will be more fully explored in Week 5.

Other aspects of appropriation can be recognised in *The God of Small Things*. Though the main events of the novel take place about twenty years after independence, the influence of the British is still very strong. Roy emphasises how the children, Rahel and Estha, are encouraged to speak English, and even Comrade Pillai's child is made to recite speeches from Shakespeare. There is an aspiration towards Englishness; it grants a higher station or class. The family are proud of Chacko's Oxford education (and when being pompous, he speaks in his 'Oxford voice') and of his white English wife, even though she is an '*ex*-wife, Chacko.' Ammu's parents do not believe her story of Horlick's attempted exploitation of her, because they cannot accept that a white man would do that. Even the family's adherence to Christianity can be seen as part of this. There is a price for this appropriation; in the section after Rahel's return, Roy describes the threadbare decline of the indigenous culture with the Kathakali performance while Baby Kochamma watches American television beamed in by satellite.

The same concerns occur for migrants. In *White Teeth*, Samad is deeply worried by the effects of western culture on his sons as they assimilate the values of society around them: "No respect for tradition. People call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption!" he says (p.190). He, like Ngugi, sees assimilation, appropriation, or hybridity a threat to his own culture. Perhaps Shiva argues, though less eloquently, on Achebe's side: "Fuck knows I haven't made anything of this country... Who knows what Shiva Bagwhati would have turned out like back in Calcutta? Prince or pauper? And who... can pull the West out of 'em once it's in?" (p.145)

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Language and Naming in *Translations*

As the title of the play indicates, the issues of the nature of language and its ability to define identity are central to *Translations*. Friel himself remarked that he wanted write a play 'about the nineteenth century, somewhere between the Act of Union and the Great Famine' a play about the death of the Irish language and the acquisition of English and the profound effect that that change-over would have on people.' (Friel, Andrews and Barry: 'Translations and paper landscape: between fiction and history', *The Crane Bag* vol. 7 no. 2)

Part of that 'profound effect' is that the play itself is written in English, with a careful dramatic contrivance created to ensure that the audience understands when characters are speaking in their native Irish tongue. Friel's position is therefore ambiguous; although he also wrote in his diary that he did not 'want to write a threnody on the death of the Irish language' and the play itself is written in English, the play clearly considers the fate of the identity of a people whose language is threatened with eradication. Tom Paulin comments 'The history of language is often a story of possession and dispossession, territorial struggle and the establishment or imposition of a culture'. (*A new look at the language question* 1983)

This ambiguity is pointed in the play itself. Maire, looking forward to a new life of greater opportunities in America, feels she needs to learn English, and voices the words of Daniel O'Connell in 'the old language is a barrier to modern progress'. Owen, who has moved away from Baile Beag to find affluence in Dublin, has achieved his success at least partially because of his acquisition of English, to which he refers as 'the King's good English' compared with the 'quaint archaic tongue' still spoken in his father's hedge school. Hugh himself, though he initially refuses even to discuss the teaching of English with Maire, can speak the language, and does, if only 'outside the parish' and 'for the purposes of commerce'. In this he is showing a necessity to be adaptable with language and even hinting at the economic power of English. On the other hand, we have Manus, who pointedly refuses to use English in front of Yolland, and Sarah, who learns to express herself vocally at the beginning of the play and is struck back to silence by Lancey's imperiousness at the end. It is left to Yolland, the English soldier whose job it is to effect the renaming of the places on the map, to express most clearly the effect of this 'eviction' of Irish, recognising that 'Something is being eroded.' While Owen dismisses this as 'romance' and describes Yolland after his disappearance as 'a bloody romantic', the play suggests that Owen is right the second time but wrong the first.

Yolland's and Owen's discussion of Tobair Vree illustrates this neatly. Owen knows the narrative, the history, which gave the place its name, the story of Brian's well. The well has dried up and Brian's story has been forgotten by all except Owen, but the corrupted place name remains. 'Where there's ambiguity,' Owen told Manus in Act One, the place names will 'be Anglicised.' The question with Tobair Vree is whether the new map should 'keep piety with a man long dead' or with 'a trivial little story'. In the shape of the play, the story is far from trivial. However corrupted and however tenuous the link in people's memory, the name still identifies Brian and his story and gives the name a historical meaning; it is the story of the place. Even aside from that, there is the issue which applies to all the changes of map names, that of dislocating a community from its own orientation, illustrated tactlessly by Owen when he shows that the priest's home has changed its place, according to the map: 'Lis na Muc, the Fort of Pigs, has become Swinefort. And to get to Swinefort you pass through Greencastle' And the new school isn't at Poll na gCoarach — it's at Sheepsrock. Will you be able to find your way?'

Hugh would, of course, be able to find his way, but the new map, new signposts, the imposition of order on the country, would mean nothing to him. The answer to Yolland's question 'Who's confused' Are the people confused" is that the people will be confused when the new names are applied by the administration.

Owen's dismissal of the story of Tobair Vree echoes the politician Daniel O'Connell, who said: 'Although the Irish language is connected with many recollections that twine round the hearts of Irishmen, yet the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of all modern communication, is so great that I can witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of the Irish.'

Against this, Thomas Davis, founder of the Young Ireland movement, said: 'A people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard a language more than its territories.

'So while Friel did not want to write a 'threnody', the play questions closely the relationship between identity and language. It is significant, perhaps, that Hugh and Jimmy speak as easily in Ancient Greek and Latin as they do in Irish creating an implicit link between dead and dying languages. It is also not a practical proposition for Friel to write in Irish as the dominance of English in Ireland has become so firmly established. This separates him from Ngugi, the Kenyan writer who recanted his use of English in order to write in Gikuyu, his Nigerian dialect, and makes an interesting comparison with Arundhati Roy, who was the subject of criticism in 1997 when she won the Booker prize with *The God of Small Things* because it was written in English rather than a Keralan dialect.

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Student Responses to *Things Fall Apart* and Négritude

One of the main ambitions of African writing is to dispel colonial attitudes towards Africans in general. For example, Achebe said, regarding *Things Fall Apart: "*Colonial education was saying that there was nothing worth much in my society, and I was beginning to question that." However, it has been said that some of the African post-colonial writing actually does the opposite to this and reinforces stereotypes. In *Things Fall Apart,* Achebe presents certain tribal rituals and describes them using similar language, surprisingly, to Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. For example, he uses the words "frenzy" and "mad rush" in the description of Ezeudu's funeral. To some readers this may suggest a sense of uncontrollable passion that spills into violence, confirming colonial prejudice.

However, by first describing a rich Ibo culture in the first part of the novel, Achebe seems to avoid the criticisms of Négritude in *Things Fall Apart*. For the first section, Europeans or "white men" are given at most a passing reference. This allows Achebe to create an image of an Ibo society completely independent of European influence. This is a very conscious decision. The idea of Négritude is to avoid European attitudes or styles of writing, but this deliberate departure from European methods leads to the criticisms of negritude, as being as much a stereotype as the European view.

Defining Ibo civilisation without reference to Europeans avoids the criticism that black culture is only defined by contras to white culture in Négritude thought. However, we know from Achebe's subsequent comments on the novel that he ha the European reader in mind when he wrote the novel, so there may be an implicit comparison with European civilisation.

Alex Dismore and Tom Rawlinson

Achebe is in an awkward position of attempting to define his own culture in the language of another in *Things Fall Apar* By setting the novel in pre-colonial Africa, he avoids having to directly refer to European culture, and can establish Ibo society on its own terms with its own traditions and culture. Achebe therefore challenges the colonial perception that 'there was nothing worth much in my society.' However, one cannot avoid the fact that Achebe was consciously writing for a European readership, and is obviously aware of the context of centuries of colonial oppression and the denial of the Ibo identity. He therefore is referring implicitly to the European view of Africa, relying on the European to fill in the blanks, and in a more subtle way is creating a distinct African identity in literature. The European reader is dropped into Ibo society with no regard for his ignorance, and is submerged in Ibo cultural reference so that by the time the Europeans arrive in the narrative, it is they who appear alien. Writing in English also shows Achebe's awareness of the colonial tradition, yet one could argue that by rendering Ibo proverbs into English he modifies their sense and makes them live on, and he creates English with an Ibo accent by using terms like *egwugwu* and *obi*. In defining his culture by appropriating the language of the white man, Achebe could be being even more subversive than is first apparent.

Alex Turner and Tom King