Chapter 1

1 Survey of Short Fiction in Commonwealth Countries

1.1 Mapping the Short Stories of chiefly:

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Survey of Short Fiction in Commonwealth Countries

Commonwealth literature is the literature written in the English language by writers living in countries belonging to the commonwealth. There are as many as fifty-four countries in the Commonwealth of Nations. The term Commonwealth is derived from the term 'The Commonwealth of Nations'; which is an association of British independent country that was commonly a part of the British Empire. In the early 20th century 'The British Commonwealth' was the term coined to describe Britain and her self-governing bodies; this term was later supplanted by the coinage 'The Commonwealth of Nation'. In 1926 the status of Britain and her colonies were settled and they were declared as 'Members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.' The coinage was given a legal currency through the statute of Westminster passed by the British Parliament in 1931. It is on these spaces that the modern Commonwealth race, the member countries of the Commonwealth differ in terms of religion, culture, geography and with a host of ethnic differences. The member countries exist all over the world - Australia and Barbados, Cyprus and Mauritius, New Zealand and Nigeria, India and West Indies, Canada and New Zealand, Singapore and Tanzania- show the vast variety in world in membership. The study of Commonwealth literature includes an
enormous range of writers hailing from various commonwealth countries like Katherine Mansfield, Margaret Atwood, Patrick White, Marcus Clerk, Dereck Walcott, Marcus Garvey, Dorris Lessing, Amit Chaudhury and Wole Soyinka. The first conference of Commonwealth literature was held in Britain by Leeds University in 1964. In his key address, Norman Jeffares explained the principle objective before Commonwealth Literature:

...was the awareness of how the traditions of English literature have been continued or adapted or rejected in various countries belonging to the Commonwealth. There should be an exchange of views among member countries on this issue. The concept of Commonwealth literature is an idea with future. (The Commonwealth: A New Look, 10).

Since then Commonwealth literature has been in the process of evolution and its study is gaining ground. Amaresh Dutta in his book Commonwealth of Letters writes:

It is now possible to maintain that Commonwealth is not a mere political concept even in our highly politicized world and their geopolitical implications have not exhausted all its meaning (23).

The features of Commonwealth literature many be enumerated as:
(1) There is an inclination to project their colonial past—the story of exploitation of their countries by the colonizing power, their struggle for freedom and the native inhabitant.

(2) There is a sense of awakening, a new sense of identity, a sense of nationality and a fresh cry in the possession of it with hints of nationalistic and patriotic glory.

Decolonization and postcolonial situation is also used as a theme for writing.

(3) This also records the story of industrial development. All these ex-colonies are technologically backward and development in this field also speaks of their life in specific.

(4) The English language used by the Commonwealth writers also establish their identity. They use English as a second language and it is this language that they are educated in. Their merit would depend much upon their ability to use English as first language. Some writers like Soyinka, Achebe, Katherine Mansfield, Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul use some kind of broken English to depict native features and add distinctiveness.

Commonwealth literature formulates the concept of new literature in the English language and they represent their specific geographical, ethnic, culture and religious differences and similarity. It is a matter of debate whether the literature produced in the English
language is more imitative than original. V.S. Naipaul is of opinion that such literature only "mimicks" the imperial authorities. But then it is rightly believed that mimickry is first step to a new development. European countries have made landmarks in the range of progress and seemed to have reached the acme, which is also identified as "weariness and saturation". The developed countries have carved their imprints by imitating and also learning by way of experiments. Nevertheless there is no doubt that this is an assertion of the new creative force, which is likely to enrich the mainstream. A new sensibility is now seen at its infancy and there are no doubts that this new creative products will not only enrich the mainstream but also widen the frontiers of English literature. It is true that geographical and national boundaries are prescriptive hence it cannot be shared widely owing to physical limitations but literature, the story of human joy and suffering is the hub of the mankind and its universal appeal transcends all boundaries. The range of literature will definitely add to the enhancement of our understanding of human life. Such grouping and classification carry a sense of meaning. This became an introduction to literature and signature to writers for variety in background and a thought to represent a shade of literary sensibility, which is different from other shades but distinctive in every respect.

The concept of Commonwealth literature is subjected to severe
criticism along with ample appreciation. *Salman Rushdie* announced his annoyance when he said, “Commonwealth literature does not exist.” He further adds:

Commonwealth literature is that body of writing, created, I think, in the English language by persons who are not themselves white Briton or Irish or citizen of the United States of America. I don’t know whether black Americans are citizens of the United States, I don’t know whether Black Americans are citizens of this bizarre, Commonwealth or probably not. It is also uncertain whether citizens of Commonwealth countries writing in languages other than English; Hindi; Example-one who switch out of English like Muge are permitted into the club or asked to keep out (Imaginary Homeland, 62).

Rushdie describes the Commonwealth as a ghetto and does not see any strong reason for its existence. *Meenakshi Mukharjee* re-enforces the utility of Commonwealth literature in co-relation with Salman Rushdie when she declares, “it has a retrogressive and limiting connotation rather than a positive integrative function”. She further adds:

... an ‘umbrella’ term, being used to homogenize adverse assortment of text emerging from reasons that differ from each other a great deal in their culture, geography,
ecology and memory ... the only common factor being a British Colonial past that is daily receding into history and the use of the English language... (Twice Born Fiction, 32)

Speaking in favour of what is also called “Anglophone Literature,” Goonetilleke favours “its distinguishing traits and writes; the connotation of a shared prosperity in the incorporation of the idea of a Commonwealth, the literature and criticism of various reasons proving beneficial and enriching ...”. However, the recognition of this particular genre may bring about a convergence in responses by different readers. It might also add to the evolution of new literary traditions because the use of a foreign language in the literature bring in forms, genres and traditions from its own native literature which interact with the forms recognized by the indigenous literary traditions leading to the development of a new and unique form.

However the term is still used and books on Commonwealth literature continue to be written and conferences are also organized. To assess the expanse of Commonwealth literature a few countries are taken to put understudy for the assess of its intrinsic richness.
1.1 Mapping the Short Stories

NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand literature grew rapidly with the meticulous efforts of Samuel Marsden, Augustus Earle's, William Golder, W.J. Barny, J.E.Gorst, Katherine Mansfield, Alfred Grace, Alice F. Webb, Linda Barnel, John A. Lee, Robin Hyde s, A.R.D. Fairburn and the youngers like Eileen Duggan, Colin Newbury, Keith Sinclair, Alistair Campbell and J.R. Hervey, Frank Sargeson, Dan Davin, David Ballatyne and Maurice Gee. William Walsh sums up the present scenario as: "In addition the notable excellence and individuality of the short story in New Zealand has been strengthened and expanded by younger writers in particular by Maurice Duggan (b 1922), by Renato Amato (1928-64), by David Ballantype (b 1929) by O.E. Middleton, by Maurice Gee and C.K. Stead." (Commonwealth Literature, 108).

AUSTRALIA

Australian writings take up a different portion and orientation within Commonwealth literature from that of African and Indian writings. The Australian situation is different because Australia lived considerably under the shadow of British dominance. Besides it has the experience of both aspects of colonization- it is both colonized and colonizer (in relation to the Aborigines). It is also different because racial apartness from Europe is not a point of conflict or discord.
Culturally, Australia had for long assimilated European traditions and it began to evolve its own traditions much later.

Lastly, but importantly Australia is an English speaking country with English as its first language that is not the same in India and Africa. This is the kind of situation within the general 'umbrella' of 'Commonwealth' or new writing in English in which Australian literature has its bearing. Some very popular Australian writers are Andrew Barton Paterson, Henry Lawson, Charles Harper, Henry Kendall, Price Warungard and Patric White.

**INDIA**

With a British colony in India, Indians have found a sense of peculiar intimacy with the English language, making it a second natural voice for the Indian mind and sensibility. Writings in India in English began during the Pre-Macaulay Period. When poets like Henry Derozio (1809-31), Kashi Prasad Ghosh (1809-73), and Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1827-73), writers Aurobindo Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu made their distinctive contribution that were admired by Edmond Gosse, Arthur Symons and the members of Rhymers club indicate her gifted literary talent. The Bengali critic Buddhadeva Bose makes an analysis of the rise of Indian writings when he says:

...the best of Indian English was belonged to the 19th
century when Indians came nearest to ‘speaking, thinking
and dreaming in English’ ...as late as a 1937, Yeats
reminded Indian writers that no man can think or write
with music and vigour except in his mother tongue.

(Modern Indian Poetry in English, 5).

Some forty years later it is clear that Indian now have a host of
genuine novelists whose distinctive form was peculiarly suited to the
Indian Sensibility and made a significant and distinctive contribution in
producing a considerable body of writing. The list is an exhaustive
one- MulkRaj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayana, Bhabani
Bhattayacharya, Manohar Malgaonka, Kamla Markandya, R.
Ruthprawar Jhabvala, Anita Deshai, Sashi Despande, Bharti
Mukharjee, Amit Chaudhuri, Upmanyya Chatterjee, Attia Hosain, Nirad
Choudhury, Nissim Ezekiel, Shobha De, Mina Alexander, Gieve Patel,
Rudiyard Kipling, Gauri Deshpande, P. Lal, Keki Daruwala, A.K.
Ramanujan, Arjun Koltekar, Salim Peeradina, O.P. Bhatnagar, and the
few others. William Walsh commenting upon their contribution
believed that they sketched new theme and elaborated the distinctive
logic. Further it is also noted that each of them used an easy natural
idiom, which was unaffected by the opacity of a British inheritance.
Besides their language was also free of the foggy taste of Britain and
had the smoke from thatch, patched roof and hutment. Indian
Literature now speaks with intellectual energy and analytical skill and is now a monument of creative literary triumph.

AFRICA

African literature, like the literature of West Indies is essentially a creation of the 20th century. It has become all the more eminent recently for it intends projection of the consciousness of the sufferers who have now taken up a pledge to clear off the social, economic, and emotional chaos. Of the Africans, Chinua Achebe demands a special mention for he made formidable contribution to the making of African Literature. Besides he is synonymous to that of a reformer in showing the tragedy of the civilization through the aid of individual memory and social intercourse. His novels Things Fall Apart (1958), No Longer at East (1960), Arrow of God (1964), and A Man of the People (1966) are his masculine, coherent and classical works. Wole Soyinka is as genuine a talent as Achebe. He is both an impressive poet and the novelist too. His highly acknowledged works are The Interpreters (1965), A Dance of the Forests, The Lion and the Jewel as well as The Road. Gabriel Okara, Michael Fcheruo and Christopher Okigbo, Kwsel Brew, David Rubadiri, Gaston Bart-Williams, Okot P’Bitek, Ngugi and Ekwensi are as popular as Christina Ama Ata Aidoo and Robert Serumaga. Ama, the Ghanaian novelist has to her credit two volumes of short stories The Dilemma of a Ghost (1965) and No Sweetness
Robert Serumaga’s *Return to the Shadows* is a tale of corruption, the recent madness of human conduct. Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Once are not yet born* shows the hope and confidence that is essential to fight out decay of human values.

**WEST INDIES**

*William Walsh* says:

...a literature which like the African is primarily the creation of the 20th century. It is the product of a society descended from European landlords, functionaries and traders, African slaves indentured Indians, the scope of whose origins, and indeed sufferings, matches the virtuosity of the language which is its voice.

*(Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 66-67)*.

West Indies had been quite fertile for the production of literature. Writers like Tom Redcam, Michael Scott, Claude Mackay and Dellisa. Claud Mackay’s *Banana Bottom* is about the discovery and re-creation of Negro consciousness and is a significant writing. Some other noticeable writers are also quotable like Frank Collymore, C.L.R. James, J.E. Clare, Mc Farlane and A.J. Seymour. Among the recent, Victor. S. Reid has become a great name. His *The Leopard* is the first necessary process for spiritual regeneration for the Negro. Equally popular is O.R. Dathorne who speaks about rejection of
European culture. *G.R. Coulthard* in his book *Caribbean Literature: An Anthology* speaks about the development of West Indian Literature as:

The historical background in all the islands has followed the same pattern: discovery and conquest by the Spaniards; extermination of the native Indian populations and their replacement by slave-labour from Africa; the introduction of sugar and the world of the sugar estate, both during and after slavery; and independence as late in 1804 with Jamaica and Trinidad gaining their independence as late as 1962. All the islands have known the common experience of colonialism, exploitation, poverty and economic frustration. In all the islands racial discrimination has been a problem, and racial resentments and complexes continue to be an important function. The last twenty-five years have been the growth of a middle class in all the islands, living largely on borrowed values (either American Birth or French), and an intelligentsia seeking urgently a spiritual and cultural orientation of its own.

*(Caribbean Literature: An Anthology, 10-11).*

**CANADA**

Commenting on Canadian Literature is described by William Walsh as the literary activity of the press of voyagers, explorer and
traders, with which Canadian literary history begins, is notable for every thing for quantity, variety, hardship, calamity, documentary and scientific value (and in the case of Radisson for ill-literacy), for everything that is except literary skill. A similar view is also expressed by Douglas Grant in *Literary History of Canada* (ed. by Carl F. Klinek.)

...Canadian literature must contain more writers ... a literature that cannot offer the reader even one great writer in compensation for the hundreds of nonentities that would pour through any sieve... (*Canada’s Literature. The journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 92).

Canadian fiction seems to be improving in the 20's; a new effort at realism is at work. For example, Charles G. D. Robert's animal stories like *Kindred of the Wild* (1902) and the *Hunter of the Silences* (1907) are powerful in imagination and technically focused on the theme. R.J.C. Stead and Morley Callaghan as well as Frederick Philip Grove blend technique with theme to focus consciousness, reason and progress. They uphold the view that the story teller's function 'is to impose and arrests upon them and to outline for a moment and interruption in the flow of time, which it is clear continues as before once the observer's eye is with...'. Hugh Mackhennam is more classical in his style and his preoccupation lies with the analysis of
sociological and historical forces. Some other noticeable writers are Sinclair Ross, Ethel Wilson, Robertson Davie, Mordecai Richler, E.J. Pratt, Dorothy Livesay, A.J.M. Smith, and Earle Birney etc. Nevertheless Douglas Grent said:

   Literary history of Canada upholds the view - for present and future writers in Canada and their readers, what is important in Canadian literature, beyond the merits of the individual works in it, is the inheritance of the enterprise. 

   (Literary History of Canada, 819).
Works Cited


