

# Commonwealth Literature

Sunayna

Lovely Professional University, Punjab

**Abstract:- The term Commonwealth Literature is an umbrella term coined for the collective literature of all the postcolonial nations. It primarily refers to the literature composed by the writers belonging to the nations which were colonized by the United Kingdom. In general, Commonwealth Literature refers to the literary work done by the writers belonging to Africa, Asia, The Caribbeans and North America. All these nations had been colonized by the United Kingdom. Thus the work of the writers belonging to the countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, Malaysia and Singapore is regarded as Commonwealth Literature. The concept of 'Commonwealth' cannot be easily defined due to the historical, geographical, political and linguistic dimensions that simultaneously hold it as a distinct body of literature. Ironically the literature of the United Kingdom is not considered as Commonwealth, even though its imperial past and language forms the basis of the concept of Commonwealth. The Commonwealth is thus related to a few factors including the common experience of British colonialism shared by the residents of these colonies, the adoption of English language in the day- to- day life, and the introduction of the British literary trends. Commonwealth Literature is thus, a complex amalgamation of different ideologies drawn from the Marxist literature, African literature, Symbolic literature, and the current literary trends which distinguish writers from different sociocultural backgrounds. The paper aims to analyse the various themes, styles and patterns commonly associated with the literature originating from the writings of the Commonwealth nations.**

*Keywords:- Commonwealth Literature, Post-Colonialism, Displacement.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term 'Commonwealth' was first used by Oliver Cromwell, in 1669. The term commonwealth literally means well-being. But it was modified later to define a state in which the people are vested the supreme powers or in other words, the term denotes a democratic state in which people are given almost all the powers to elect their government and change it periodically. The literature composed by the writers belonging to the commonwealth nations is called as commonwealth literature. Commonwealth Literature has been compiled by the writers of the nations who were once held in a colonial state by the British empire. But once such colonial states got freedom, the writers of these colonized nations continued to compose their work based on their past experiences of being the residents of a colony and also they

projected their feelings in their works when their nations were declared as independent. The paper will explore the works of the commonwealth writers.

## II. COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE

In a lecture delivered at the Free University of Brussels, Maes-Jelinek described the term 'Commonwealth Literature' as limiting as it is based on the literary trends of similar nature. He tried to exclude the commonwealth literature from the British mainstream. The Commonwealth has been described in various other ways as well. For instance, the Indian-based writer Salman Rushdie, who authored the famous *Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children*, stated that "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist", and his viewpoint has been supported by other authors. "Isn't this the very oddest of beasts... a school of literature whose supposed members deny vehemently that they belong to it? Worse these denials are simply disregarded! It seems the creature has taken on a life of its own," Rushdie has written adding that the closest definition of Commonwealth Literature he could assume seemed patronizing because it appeared to be "that body of writing created ... in the English language, by persons who are not themselves white Britons, or Irish, or citizens of the United States of America." The creation of this "phantom category obscured what was really going on and worth talking about", Rushdie said, adding further that few of the characteristics of the Commonwealth writers resembled to the 'magical realism' of Latin American writers than that of the other ex-British colonies. He further added that if Commonwealth Literature does not exist, the Commonwealth itself certainly does. The (British) Commonwealth of Nations, to give it its original name, is an association of states comprising Britain and its former colonies, including the nations who still depended on the British nation. The categorization of the nations as the Common Wealth Nations began in 1931 and included Australia, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand. All these nations pledged their allegiance to the British Empire, while governing their countries by their own rules and regulations. The association of these nations was further expanded and restructured in 1949, when the participant nations agreed to ignore both the 'British' and the idea of allegiance as well. Today the Commonwealth exists as an alliance of 53 countries, having a population of more than one billion people. 'Commonwealth Literature' thus refers to the literary works contributed by the countries which were once the part of the British Empire, but it does not acknowledge the work done by the writers from the United Kingdom. But credits the works produced by the writers who reside in the United Kingdom but originally belonged to a nation which was colonized. Ironically the best literature emerging from England in the recent years has

been composed by writers based in the colonized countries. Such as V.S. Naipaul (Trinidad), Salman Rushdie (India), Ben Okri (Nigeria), Timothy Mo (Hong Kong), and the late Jean Rhys (Dominica). Their excellence in writing has led to articles and even books being titled 'The Empire Writes Back'.

'Commonwealth Literature' is frequently used to refer to the 'Post-colonial Literature' despite the fact that the latter involves the literature composed in other languages as well, such as French or Portuguese. One important feature of the Commonwealth Literature is that it is written in one place by people who belonged to another place. Commonwealth writers were the descendants of migrants from other colonies. Thus displacement forms a major characteristic feature of their writing. But this feature is not unique to the literature of Commonwealth countries such as African-American and native American authors who seldom discuss displacement as an issue in their works. Therefore the only thing that is found predominantly in the Commonwealth Literature is the use of English language, yet it is English with a difference. In contradiction to this, there are many writers in Commonwealth countries who have decided to exclude English, either due to political implications or in an attempt to reach out to those who don't speak the language. Thus to conclude, one can say that the term 'Commonwealth Literature' refers to the literary work done by the writers of ex-colonies who were affected by various types of migrations and the cross-cultural events and has been put in place to actively promote the work of those writers whose works did not get recognized. In general, Commonwealth Literature includes the complex fate of people in time, space, history and ecology enabling writers from different continents, cultures and traditions to come together and interact with other to contribute to new creative literary trends and processes.

Published by Edward Arnold in London, *Commonwealth Short Stories* (1971) is a collection of the short stories compiled by the Postcolonial writers. These short stories have been edited by Anna Rutherford, a well-known Australian and post-colonial critic, and Donald Hannah. The commonwealth Short Stories provide an insight into the evolution of the commonwealth literature. The editors of the Short Stories assert that "at the outset we were faced with two possibilities: either we could choose to include a single story from each country in the Commonwealth or we could be guided in our selection by more purely literary standards. Tempting in many ways as the first possibility was, we finally decided to follow the latter course". The featured writers in these stories include VS Naipaul, Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Andrew Salkey (West Indies), R.K Narayan (India), Mordecai Richler (Canada), Frank Sargeson (New Zealand), Chinua Achebe, James Ngugi and Amos Tutuola (Africa). Although the editors did not select them as representatives of their geographical areas, as they represented their regions much skilfully. Being the literary giants in their territories in the 1970s, a few of these writers also emerged as the world leaders gradually. Along with this, these literary figures found place in another book published around the same time,

The Penguin Companion to Literature I: Britain and the Commonwealth (Penguin Books, London, 1971). Regarding the volume, The editor David Daiches states that "this volume is concerned with writers (whatever their language) in the British Isles and with writers who use the English language in Commonwealth countries". Here, too, Daiches comments, "there is the question of quality".

While considering the literature at the wider level, a different style of literary work that was denoted as the Commonwealth Literature emerged in 1970. In the previous two decades span, a number of distinguished writers by means of their outstanding work attempted to make an impact on world literature. These writers belonged to the countries which were formerly colonized by the British kingdom. Prominent countries which were held colonial state by the British rule were the West Indies, India, Pakistan, the continent of Africa, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. During the decolonization times, the term "Empire" was dropped and the politically correct term British Commonwealth was coined. With the further developments, the use of the term "British" had been mostly avoided. Hence a new style of writing named as the Commonwealth Literature was established alongside English, American, French, Spanish, Russian or German literature. But its presence was not felt since the mainstream academy had not acknowledged that individual territories had earned sufficient independence, volume, numbers and/or power to be called "literature" in their own right. Therefore moving into the late sixties and in the 1970, the West Indian, African or Indian Literature did not exist separately. They were all covered under an umbrella term, the Commonwealth Literature, therefore earning their place on university curricula. Gradually, the Commonwealth Literature and the Commonwealth nations started influencing the world to become recognized in their own right. Later on, a number of the writers from these areas faced expatriation in the United Kingdom, and their banishment affected the literature adversely. Since the exiled writers belonged to the former colonies, so their way of writing reflected the political, social and cultural condition of these colonies considerably. The development of the writing was happening rapidly. The literary development was in sync with the mutual relationships existing between the countries, which had acquired independence, with their 'Mother Countries' in Europe. Moreover, the large-scale migration of people following certain phenomena such as as the Windrush and other alike factors happened around in the 1950s, it resulted in the growth of the 'minority' populations thereby leading to a multi-ethnic identity of Europe. There occurred the phenomenon of social and cultural acts such as 'othering' of the minorities resulting in the formation of minority groups assuming the role of the 'Other'. The writers considered the social, political and cultural factors in their writing and made use of various literary forms and styles. Since much of the work was published in the UK it had its effect on day to day events in these regions and English literature itself saw transformation. But more importantly, a body of literature developed out of Commonwealth literature which is now known as post-colonial literature. Many critics recognized the process and

named it – including Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Helen Tiffin, CLR James, Stuart Hall and even Anna Rutherford. Critic (and poet) Edward Baugh while pointing out the eminent role of “the colonial quality” in post-colonial Caribbean literature stated that it “is not something to be outgrown”, thereby indicating the role of colonial literature which had become so integral in the shaping of the background for the advancing literature. In 1971 when the Commonwealth Short Stories and the British and Commonwealth Literature were compiled, R K Narayan was the leading Indian writer of fiction. Since then there has been the powerful emergence of leading post-colonial Indian writers such as Vikram Seth and, more importantly, Salman Rushdie. Mordecai Richler has also been able to establish his eminent place as a novelist in Canadian and world literature. His work has been awarded with the major awards such as the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Along with him, there are several writers in various countries who have been declared as the best short story writers, and some of these writers performed better as leaders alongside being the top-rated novelists. There is O Henry, for example, who belonged to the USA, and Guy de Maupassant from France who have delivered legendary work in this form of literature. There are other Americans, novelist Ernest Hemmingway being most prominent, as well as Mark Twain and Edgar Allan Poe. Anton Chekhov of Russia, DH Lawrence, James Joyce and perhaps Henry James are the other legendary figures of Commonwealth literature who belonged to the British Isles. Some of the most distinguished Caribbean writers also proved to be the leading short story writers such as Olive Senior, Lorna Goodison and Kwame Dawes, who were known as major poets; despite the fact that they have produced prominent works forming the part of the short fiction winning several awards, such as the Commonwealth, for Senior.. Naipaul’s ‘Man-Man’ is undoubtedly his best work and is not even so significant in Miguel Street from which it has been extracted, but Naipaul has been the author of some of the most distinguished short stories existing in the West Indian literature. In citing other examples, the Editors Rutherford and Hannah also included excerpts from novels, as in the case of Amos Tutuola, which might be an issue of the debate, subject to the nature of The Palm Wine Drinkard. Also, the literary work, ‘The Sacrificial Egg’ is a fine example of the commonwealth literature, despite being written by a novelist. Thus this collection of the short stories from 1971, can be mentioned as one of the significant publications of Commonwealth or post-colonial literature. It clearly describes the state of the art in the past and has been proved as a stimulus for comparing and considering the way the literature has developed and progressed.

### III. CONCLUSION

During the first conference held on the Commonwealth Literature in 1965, a collection of essays was published and it was titled commonwealth Literature. The work was edited by John Press. The first essay titled ‘Literature and Environment: Inheritance and Adaptation’ and the last essay of this work named ‘The Novelist as a Teacher’ was contributed by the late Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe.

Through these essays, the writer brings to light the understanding about the interaction of human beings with new and unfamiliar environments making them challenge the old myths in order to sustain their livelihood and in creating new realities for them to be able to survive in the new environment. Such works paved way for the understanding of the aboriginal world. Therefore the main aim of the commonwealth literature composed by the writers belonging to Africa, Indian subcontinent, Australia and the Caribbean is to transcend the national boundaries in an attempt to explore the innermost feelings of the human beings across the world. The Commonwealth literature makes efforts to reveal new realities and makes the readers acknowledge the diversity in habitation and cultures so that the people from all over the world can extend their concerns and sympathy to the strangers and dispossessed people. Also the Commonwealth Literature has played an important role in exposing the richness and variations of the human and natural world. The impact of the Commonwealth literature on the society is profound as the Commonwealth writing has been involved in creating a new consciousness’s out of the old roots of mankind.

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