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Our Neighbours Across the Sea
a study of post-colonial african literature in english

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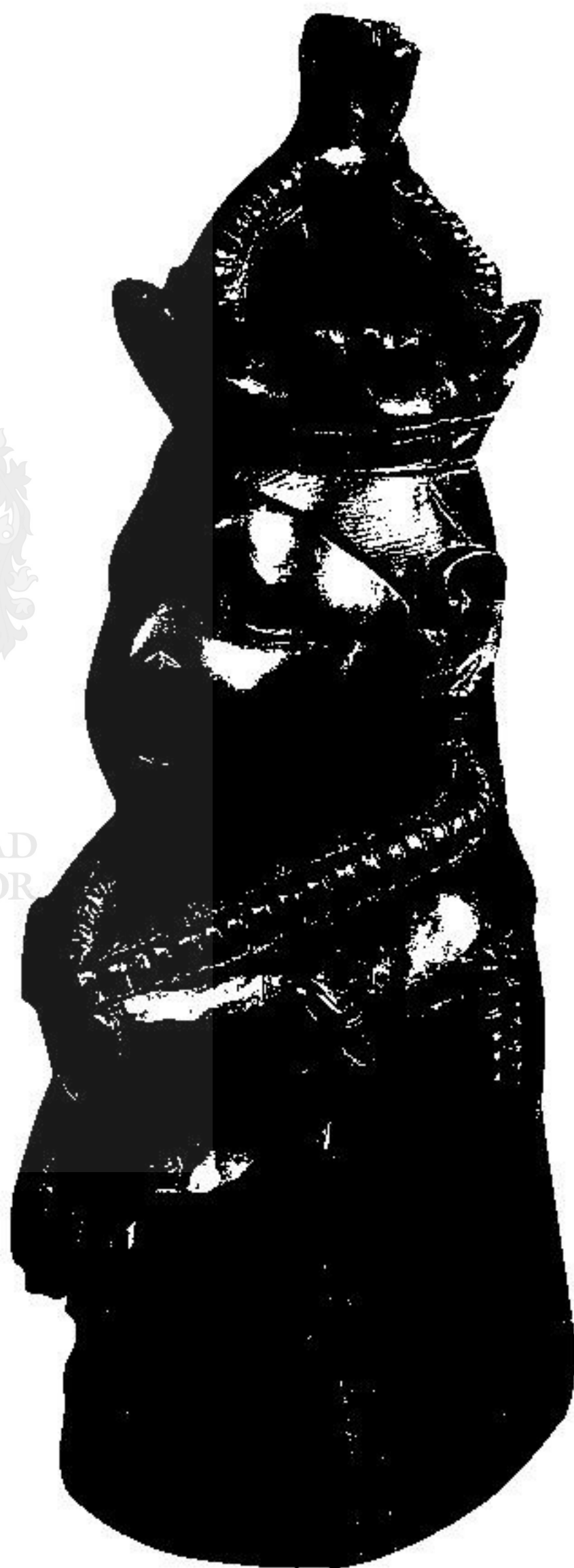


USAL
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Curso de Doctorado
en Lenguas Modernas
Registro 95 1622
Trabajo Escrito de Tesis (1060)
Madrina Prof. Susana Walsh
Año 1996



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Our Neighbours Across the Sea : the Novels of Chinua Achebe
A Study of Post-colonial African Literature in English

My soul frets in the shadow of his language
James Joyce

Preface

This study was prompted by emotion as well as by intellectual curiosity: the emotion of recognition, in people as removed from our immediate environment and traditions as the ancient inhabitants of the African continent, of a similar feeling and response to the experience of colonialism in our territory. From that initial epiphany there followed a keen interest in the theoretical approaches evolved to account for common ways, life outlook, attitudes and behaviour in widely differing people all over the world who had undergone the same kind of experience i.e. colonialism. Above all, some of these peoples' recurrent failure to constitute a solid identity beyond their ethnic origins, to reconcile differences and establish a common ground from which growing into a nation became possible.

Such an account, articulate and well founded -yet not without its critics- is the groundbreaking 1989 text by the Australians Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory & Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, completed later on with a Reader (1995). Its second London edition of 2002 for Routledge's collection New Accents, published in Spanish the following year, confirm their currency and will be the basis of our present study. Other views will occasionally be brought into the picture to build our own response to the subject, to state our perspective (as Southern Americans) on the narratives of those we have chosen to call 'our neighbours across the sea'.

The Atlantic basin will thus bound the scope of our study: we have focused on the coastline facing us, more precisely on the Western Subsaharian fringe of the African continent from which the infamous slaveships set out to ply their trade on these coasts. Among the countries that feature in that region, geographically identified as the Gulf of Guinea, we have singled out the nation of Nigeria. We have done so not solely on the grounds of its importance in the area, but on the fact that it happens to be the birthplace of our chosen author, Mr Chinua Achebe. Two considerations have lead us to this choice. The

first one concerns the splendour of his writing; the second one, his unique position as an icon of artistic power and intellectual honesty in the African continent¹ as well as his political involvement in the cause of 'Nigeria', that is his championing of a newly-born, independent nation, out of the territories of what was considered for some time a part of the British Empire. In spite of the fact that Nigeria is an arbitrary creation that joins many varied and antique regions, ethnicities, languages and traditions into one single nation, the colonial construct becomes, through the lenses of Chinua Achebe, an opportunity after the disadvantage, the very reason to stand up and make the vision happen. This is the matter of his narratives: to observe the new creature take life of its own, watch what appears to be on the move, to be seeking its own place in the concert of contemporary nations (Cf. William Butler Yeats's poem that give its name to the opening narrative, *Things Fall Apart*).

And, as Achebe narrates, the English language is also taking on a new life, finding new resonances, assuming other, novel, shapes and significance under the Southern skies of Africa.



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¹ *Eagle on Iroko: Selected Papers from Chinua Achebe Internat'l Symposium 1990*, ed. Edith Ihekweazu. Nsukka: Heinemann Nigeria, 1996

Nigeria in West-Africa, facing South America (Argentina & Brazil) A Map

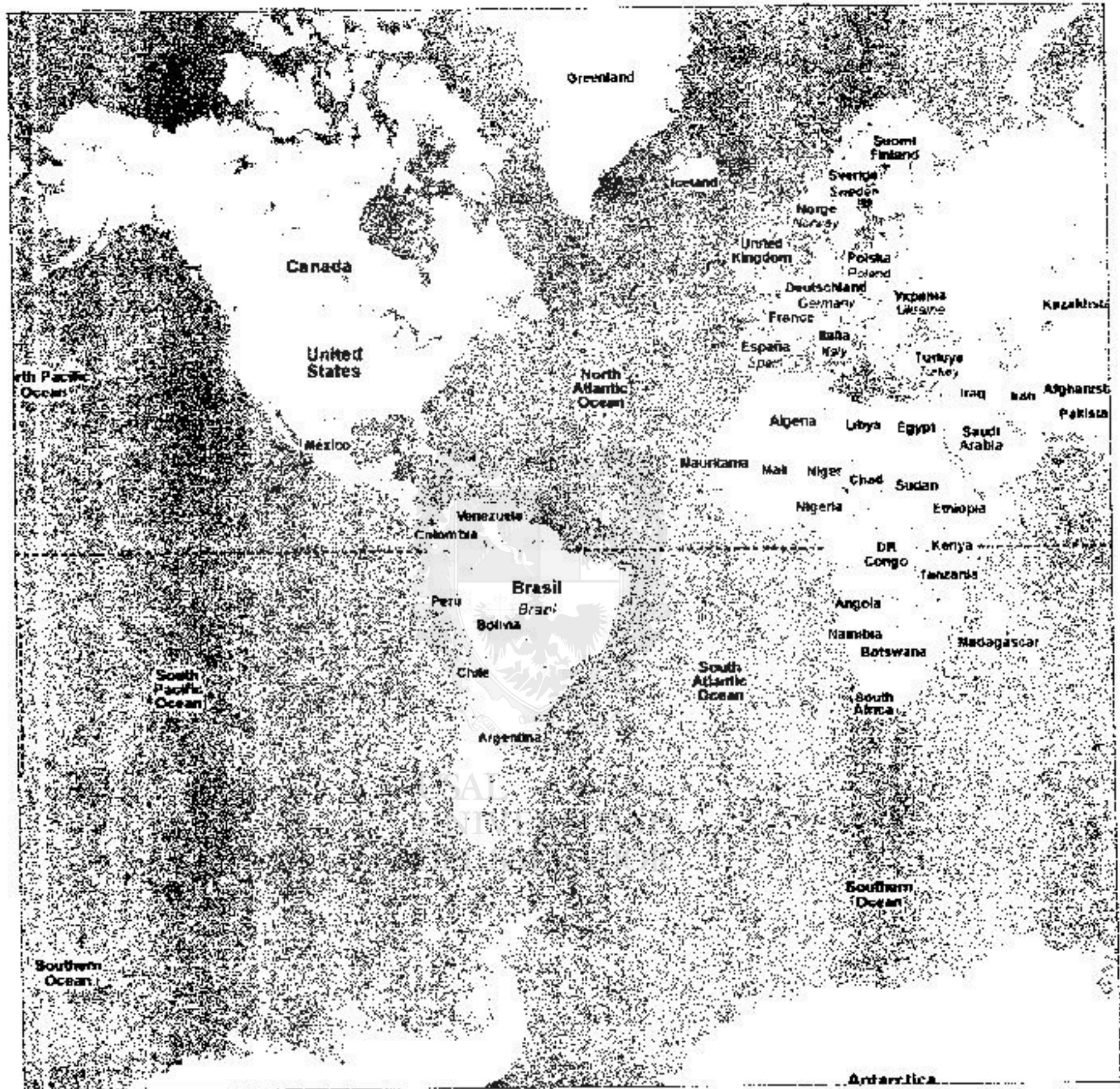


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Introduction

The post-colonial studies are perforce of a comparative nature. Since one of its basic concerns is the destruction and loss, retrieval or renewal of a society's identity, the impossibility of the existence of a 'Nigerian literature' within its field of study becomes apparent. The aspects that will predominantly come into focus in the texts we will be reading here are the acculturation of Christianity in Africa; narrativity as a driving force in the construction of identity; and the theme of exile (or the interplay of time, place and consciousness in the construction of a 'post-colonial' identity) with the figure of the *outsider* as its predominant metaphor.

Other debatable issues implied in the title of this work require some previous comment such as the question of terminology involved in the term 'post-colonial'; the question of the very existence of a contemporary 'African' literature; and the role of the English language in the eventuality of such an existence, including the vital issue of the position of the reader in such a context, taking it for granted that there is a readership for that literature.²

Post-colonial Literature(s)

Post-colonial is an ambiguous name in the field of theory. We may define it shortly as a set of reading practices of literatures in English produced by countries with a history of colonialism³. Or as the writing affected by the process of European imperial expansion during and after the colonial experience which expresses the tension with the colonial power and emphasizes the difference between the colony and its metropolitan centre. Etymologically considered, the term is innocent enough: it seems to point neutrally to a stage in the process of development of a colony, in its gradual political awakening, read as a succession of periods: the *pre-colonial* or self-determined period, the *colonial* period when the centre of power is displaced abroad; then the *post-colonial* stage when (ideally) freedom and self-determination are restored, power brought back home etc. But to describe the history of any nation in this way would imply that the most salient event in its existence consists of the act of domination by a foreign

² See: Achebe's discussion of this issue in his *The Novelist as a Teacher, Hopes & Impediments*, 40-46

³ The label covers also the literatures in Spanish, French, Dutch and Portuguese produced in the respective colonies

power. It alienates its history, a decision which, regardless of its duration, extent or traumatic effects, cannot be made into a plausible 'beginning'. Except perhaps for a history of settlers such as that of Australia or Argentina when natives are wiped out or ignored altogether. It is a theoretical inadmissibility for a conglomerate of nations which have always been there as is the case with the Africans. Obviously the colonial experience has changed many things forever; but this is not necessarily the framework within which writers who have a long history of pre-colonial story-telling and song wish to be read. It requires a denial of their roots, their heroes' oblivion, the burial of the ancestral wisdom and skills which legitimated them as an independent people in the first place. Moreover the word 'post-colonial'⁴ in such a chain becomes a synonym with a contemporary happy state of independence. In which case the object of such a study would preclude the *other* periods of linguistic production and would therefore be incomplete, inaccurate. And anyway it would be history, not literature, that we would be speaking of in such a manner. On the other hand, if such a study, regardless of chronological periodisation, were given a national identification, as we have previously suggested, say Nigerian Literature, as is customarily the case with the national European literatures, we would still be blundering for we would continue to view the Nigerian reality from an outsider's point of view, a eurocentric one, the perspective of the old master. We would then face the paradox of a former colony politically independent, yet nourishing a psychological and spiritual dependence on the old state of things as shown by its linguistic productions (historical, literary, legal, philosophical etc). These would be organised through myths, ideals and constructs belonging to the old dispensation. Another objection against the use of a national label is raised by the question of *homogeneity* or the attempt at smoothing out differences to allay the difficulties created by the existence of so many languages, religions, traditions and customs in one single country. Furthermore, in the apparent homogeneity of any national canon as famously challenged by Harold Bloom there are always names and texts that jar and create problems for the usual taxonomical method of study, and are forced into inimical frames or dropped altogether. This creates problems in the study of any literature; we

⁴ The very writing of the word: postcolonial, or post-colonial has been the object of controversy. The authors we follow write it with a hyphen and discuss the issue in some detail in chapter 6 of the 2002 edition of the text to which I refer the reader.

would thus be carrying over to the new field some unresolved problems of the old, to witness the case of the Irish writers that were traditionally studied as English Literature, George Bernard Shaw or Oscar Wilde to name but two well-known cases⁵.

Often the debates among post-colonial scholars revolve around the issue of which literatures or authors qualify for the 'post-colonial canon'. Australian and Canadian Literatures are treated as post-colonial not without objections. Many would refuse them the status on the grounds that their literature is created by European immigrants, and is therefore a literature of privilege rather than of *resistance*. According to this post-colonial paradigm only literature written by native peoples in Canada and Australia would truly qualify. Post-colonial theory appears sometimes under the umbrella name of Cultural Studies: an eclectic mix of literary theory and criticism which includes linguistics, politics, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and various feminist schools of thought. They all share a determination to deconstruct power relationships as they interact in disciplines such as art, literature, cinema etc. Not all post-colonial scholars are *literary* scholars, either. Post-colonial theory also means political science, history, sociology and related fields. To further complicate the picture, not all post-colonial writers agree with the usual ongoing critique of post-colonial scholars of the colonial experience. Indeed, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, after writing powerful indictments of the British in their country, turned to exposing the deeds of native-born dictators and corrupt officials within their independent homeland. Although post-colonial scholars would explain this corruption as a by-product of colonialism, neither author pursues the matter further than called for.⁶

The label is usually denied to American literature, although the American identity was construed against that of England, because now the USA comes to be viewed as the epitome of the contemporary neo-colonial nation, imposing its values, its economic and political interests on weaker countries.

⁵In the study of a text such as *St Joan* by GB Shaw it is useful to define the place of utterance as that of an outsider, the Catholic Colonial Irish, although Shaw himself came from Protestant stock who do not believe in saints. He persuadingly addresses a post-imperial Protestant English audience who had in older times burnt 'the witch' & requests them now to believe in 'saint' Joan (Shaw does not use 'Joan of Arc' or 'The Maiden of Lorraine' as possible titles for his text, like some other playwrights have, but *Saint Joan*, to hammer the issue home).

⁶Achebe will deal with that aspect pointedly in *No Longer at Ease* but after *Arrow of God* will drop it altogether.

epitome of the contemporary neo-colonial nation, imposing its values, its economic and political interests on weaker countries.

Although the post-colonial theory as we will be dealing with here usually explores the writings of the second part of the XX century, it could also be argued that everyone has been colonized at some time or other. Therefore *any* literature could be approached from this perspective, provided it was produced during the period of or referring to this specific area of experience, the colonial enterprise. Hence the choice of epigraph we will make for our next section, devoted to the language issue: the Spanish Main was facing the problem too of organizing the vast empire opened up for them by Christopher Columbus' travels of discovery.

The word *post-colonial* also creates difficulties on account of its blurred boundaries. For instance, South African writers Athol Fugard and (Nobel Prize) Nadine Gordimer are sometimes excluded from the post-colonial curriculum, in spite of their works being powerful exposures of apartheid and the fact that they have lived and worked in Africa far longer than, say, a Ben Okri⁷ because they belong in the white settlers' category. Again, some writers are neglected because they do not write in English but in their own native languages⁸ on the sensible ground that they have a long immemorial tradition of *Orature*⁹ which should not be arbitrarily linked to the British imperial episode. The likes of Ben Okri (Nigerian) and Benjamin Zephaniah (Caribbean-born) who live and write in England are usually classed as Black British Writing. The questions raised in this area of research run thus almost unendingly: what features in writing are to be considered typically post-colonial: author's place of birth? ancestry? length of stay abroad? subject-matter? These and similar topics provide the staple material for analysis and debate in this area of study.

Criticism levelled against this theoretical approach point out its failure to cut across linguistic boundaries: Ibero- American post-colonial studies, Francophone or Luso-African literatures, are usually neglected by those doing research in English departments. The very

⁷ Ben Okri (1961-) emigrated from Nigeria to England where he has lived and produced his major writing.

⁸ Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya) reverted to his native Gikuyu for his poetic works

⁹ Contemporary accepted form for Oral Literature

¹⁰ In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (1995) ed. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths & H. Tiffin. London: Routledge, 24-28

premise of post-colonial studies, i.e. the contention that the examining of these literatures gives voice to formerly silenced peoples, has had its validity challenged. In Gayatri Ch. Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*¹⁰ the author questions anyone who has achieved enough literacy and sophistication to produce a widely-read piece of fiction to have the authority to be considered a 'subaltern'. He/she should almost certainly, by that very fact, be disqualified from speaking for the people he or she is supposed to represent. Such a 'subaltern' group of Indian scholars had claimed the term to support their own analyses, but the nagging question raised by Spivak remains.

This situation is related to the questions of *essentialism* or 'universality of meaning' which has featured so largely in political and literary theory. Usually such terms are used negatively today. For example, essentialism works with stereotypes such as the one which depicts black people as 'good at sports' allowing thereby the implication that perhaps their intellectual performance is not so impressive. However, if we reject the word *post-colonial* on the grounds of its ambiguity or controversiality we are hard put to find a suitable replacement. The old 'Commonwealth Literature'¹¹ is both Eurocentric and outdated. Other suggestions such as *Literatures of the World in English* or *New Literatures in English*¹² leave out the non-English-speaking world or place too much emphasis on newness. They do not single these productions out in clearly enough fashion from national literatures such as American or English literatures: nothing in these names would exclude them. Therefore the specificity sought for in the name would be lost again. The ingenious creation of the term 'englishes' to apply to the varieties of English spoken in the emerging countries has proven successful in that both in its graphic (small case) and oral expression (the clearly-heard plural) it offers the distinction that is needed while avoiding the denigration implicit in the hitherto heard 'pidgin English' label or the inaccurate use of the word 'dialect'. No such a clearly-defined word has yet been found to replace 'post-colonial'.

'Important as it sounds, however, the problem of nomenclature is ultimately secondary, the motivation being everything', argues the Nigerian Nobel Prize Wole Soyinka in the preface to his *Myth, Literature & the African World* (1976).¹³ 'Today this[...] embraces the

¹¹ *Commonwealth Literature* (1973) William Walsh. Oxford : OUP

¹² *Literature of the World in English* (1974), ed. Bruce King. London: Routledge

¹³ Cambridge: CUP

apprehension of a culture whose reference points are taken from within the culture itself.' Hence the eclecticism of the discipline. The fact that concepts such as 'différence' 'resistance' 'diaspora' at work in the field come from different twentieth-century European theories has raised opposition, too. Our approach to the problem has been to avail ourselves of a coherent body of theoretical knowledge which has been favourably received in the academic field for some time now and is still an authoritative voice on the subject in order to explore the literary production of a single author in chronological sequence. Such a procedure offers the possibility of examining the tenets of the post-colonial theory at work in a restricted body of writing produced by a single source (author) so as to appreciate its potentialities for the study of other texts in different backgrounds, such as our own. Our purpose is that through the dissemination of this cultural perspective, in the study of the relationship between power and identity, we also examine our own possibilities for a material and spiritual survival/renewal in the contemporary globalised world.

'African' Literature

there was something...we tried to do and failed - that was to define 'African Literature' satisfactorily

says Chinua Achebe of the debates at the Makerere gathering of African Writers back in June 1952. Then the writer goes on to ask a series of questions by way of analysis,

Was it literature produced *in Africa or about Africa*? Could African Literature be on any subject, or must it have an African theme? Should it embrace the whole continent or South of the Sahara, or just *Black Africa*? And then the question of language. Should it be in indigenous African Language or should it include Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Afrikaans, etc? (p.55)¹⁴

In his characteristically direct manner, Achebe spells the terms of the situation, then proceeds to examine it from the angle of certain texts that work as touchstones for him, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*. These two novels he morally rejects as typical European examples of the denigration of the African character despite their literary values or 'African' subject-matter. Then he comes up with his own definitions of the subject: 'a national literature is one that takes the whole

¹⁴ The African Writer & the English Language, essay 8 from *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975). London: Heinemann

nation for its province and has a realised or potential audience throughout its territory....a literature that is written in the *national* language.' By setting it in contrast with another possible category of writing, 'ethnic literature' which, he maintains, is only available to one ethnic group within the larger one that is the nation, he establishes English as the only language that *could* work as the national vehicle of communication, the language which places all Nigerians on an equal footing in a communicative situation, without giving any native language or ethnia an undue superiority over the others. In his own words,

If you take Nigeria as an example, the national literature[...]is the literature written in English; and the ethnic literatures are in Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, Efic, Edo, Ijaw, etc. (56)

Typically, Achebe gives colonialism its due by admitting (quoting more loosely from the same text) that it gave 'hundreds of autonomous communities ranging in size from the vast Fulani Empire..in the North to tiny villages in the East a big political unit...a tongue, for sighing'(56). Such a bold statement, with its political implications, has to be supported vigorously as it strikes at one of the most cherished tenets of a certain post-colonialism which would reject all vestiges of the colonial power, as if it had never been. He does so by reminding readers that English is the language 'with which to talk to one another. There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language ...and still retain the facility for mutual communication'. For his own position on the subject he concludes,

Therefore those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecs... They are by-products of the same process that made the new nation states of Africa.(57)

To support it, Chinua Achebe mentions Gustavus Vassa, better known now as Olaudah Equiano¹⁵, an Eastern Ibo like himself who, in the year of the French Revolution, published in England (where he resided) his autobiography whereby he tried to contradict the 'lies and slander invented by some Europeans to justify the slave trade'. Equiano too wrote in an alien language a narrative about his native village that has become a quasi-historical document of African life in those days. Literature and language become thus inextricably linked by Achebe's argument: his equanimous position towards this politically 'hot' issue

¹⁵ *Equiano's Travels* (1789), ed. Paul Edwards (1967). Oxford: Heinemann, African Writers Series, 1966