

Empire and Me: Personal Recollections of Imperialism in Reality and Imagination

16th to 18th June 2010

Speakers

Diran Adebayo, novelist and cultural critic

Jake Arnott, writer

Dr Margaret Busby OBE, author

Meira Chand, Swiss / Indian author

Michelle de Kretser, Australian novelist

Jan Dalley, Arts Editor, *Financial Times*

Professor Sanjukta Dasgupta, Dean, Faculty of Arts, Calcutta University

Dr Ian Duffield, Honorary Research Fellow, University of Edinburgh

Cameron Duodu, journalist, newspaper editor and writer

Nuruddin Farah, writer

Dr Jack Mapanje, writer, editor and Visiting Professor, York St John University

Professor Daniel Massa, Department of English, University of Malta, poet and literary critic

Professor Susheila Nasta, Department of Modern Literature, Open University, and Founding
Editor of *Wasafiri*,

Jacob Ross, writer, editor and lecturer

Professor Harish Trivedi, Department of English, University of Delhi

Professor Dennis Walder, Director, Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies, Open
University

Marina Warner, writer and Professor, Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies,
University of Essex

Kaye Whiteman, writer, journalist and editor

Summary Report

This colloquium provided a rare opportunity for writers, journalists, critics and academics from around the Commonwealth to reflect on what the British Empire means to them personally. Speakers shared their life stories, gave us readings from their works, and offered reflections on the nature of empire and post-imperialism. More than 60 years after the end of the British Empire, its influence on individuals can still be profound, with many speakers saying it shapes and drives their creativity as writers today. For the purposes of brevity, this report deals mainly with the theoretical perspectives that were offered on the nature of imperialism, post-colonialism and writing. It was exciting and productive to think about imperial history in terms of literature, as emphasis was put on the possibilities for creating new understandings of our past, the future and even an individual's own sense of identity and purpose.

Re-writing history

'In order to become educated we had to unlearn what we had been taught.' Conference speakers explored the idea that history is normally written by the powerful, and this is a flawed approach

morally, and in terms of accuracy. Empire building is partly an exercise in myth making, and this needs to be recognised by those who tell the stories of history.

Several speakers said we must keep sight of the brutality, often racist, needed to create an empire. Empires are always created on ambition, territorial greed, desire for profit or national grandeur, and terror. The brutality of acquiring an empire is often obscured by the idea of a civilising mission. Yet any benefits of empire are a bi-product, not a justification. As one speaker quipped 'The trouble with the English is they do not know their history because most of it happened overseas.'

Those who are the colonisers may believe their own interpretation of events to be the only truth. Two moments in history, 200 years apart, illustrate this point. Servants of the East India Company in Bengal in the mid-18C did not consider themselves colonists. And in the 1950s those British and Americans who administered oil in Iran did not consider themselves colonists. Both groups of people were devoted only to getting resources and making a profit. They had no interest in owning or administering territory, and were not concerned with ideological expansion. For these reasons they did not believe themselves to be imperial powers. Since the attacks of 9/11, and the invasion of Iraq, Americans have suddenly come to realise they have long been operating in an imperial manner. The idea of America as an imperial power was once shocking, now has become established.

It was thought that colonisers were also involved in a process of denial in a personal way. Power is instinctive, and on this level Victorians knew that sexual repression is a means to power. A lot of repressed sexual and emotional energy went into empire building. The empire man is a sort of infantile creature, a complicated and ambiguous figure, possessed of tremendous energy but undeveloped. Becoming colonisers did not allow the English to grow up. Men such as Cecil Rhodes, Kitchener, T E Lawrence and Baden Powell, may not have admitted homosexuality to themselves, but they knew they were not heterosexual. Their identities were not secure.

It is also true that even while imperialists have a belief in the permanence of their empire, it is often weakening and declining. Empires tend to over stretch themselves in wanting to be bigger and bigger. Kipling's great poem 'Recessional' was written in the past tense about the end of the British Empire, yet he produced it for the 1897 Jubilee, at the height of empire.

A Caribbean writer said that at school he was fortunate to be taught by an historian who had earned the country's first PhD, and was regarded as a national treasure. Our speaker was given an essay project and he began it by writing 'When the Amerindians discovered Christopher Columbus on their shore'. For this he got thrown out of the class. He learnt that to be educated he had to perform mental gymnastics, to live with the paradox of seeing the world in a binary way. He realised that for some Caribbean intellectuals 'it was snowing in the cane fields' while he could only believe that 'the cane was bitter'.

Another speaker said that when he learnt in school about British imperialists whose efforts brought freedom, education, knowledge and so on, he was not taught about those who built the empire more literally, the criminals, illiterate, uneducated, down trodden, those who were coerced into the service of empire. What view of empire did these silent witnesses have?

There is a need to complicate the stories of history, to bring in the voices of those who were subjugated. The use of memoirs was highlighted as a way to find a more nuanced version of history. Mulk Raj Anand, for example, one of the pioneers of the Indian novel in English, wrote from personal experience of the Bloomsbury group in a manner that was both critical of, and collaborative with, its main figures. He was part of a network of intellectual Indians in Bloomsbury who met, debated and published their own work. Yet it was not easy for such writers to be recognised by the more famous English authors in the Bloomsbury group. While E M Forster is

responsible for the publication of Anand's first novel, it had already been rejected many times, and would probably never have been published but for Forster's intervention.

English Literature

The great works of English literature were so readily absorbed and adopted throughout the empire they can be seen as an aspect of imperialism. One speaker from India described how at her school pupils submitted to an uncritical absorption of colonial culture. They wanted to grow primroses and lilies, rather than native flowers. The works of Shakespeare became part of the way they understood and spoke about the world. As Edward Said has pointed out, in being taught English literature children come to believe in the inherent superiority of the British race.

Another speaker noted that Britain did not produce much great fiction which dealt with the empire directly. EM Forster and Rudyard Kipling were exceptions, but they wrote on the margins. In the early 1990s, it was suggested, writers sometimes felt intimidated writing about other countries, for fear of getting it wrong. Their other concern was ethical – was a writer continuing to be imperialistic by annexing territory, imaginatively, in a book? If you have more attributed authority, such as coloniser over colonised, or even man in relation to woman, you have to be very careful about occupying realms, in your novels, to which you are not entitled. It was also noted that it is hard to write about emotive issues, such as empires, without stumbling across prejudices, as it is difficult for a white writer to be accepted as neutral on some subjects. Despite these reservations there seemed to be a general feeling at the colloquium that it is the role, the potential, of literature to be at the vanguard of thinking about imperialism. The imperial cringe has been sufficiently explored and has opened up different possibilities of response.

One writer suggested that imagination precedes the act; you must imagine the world you want to live in; writing is a way of imagining a more honest, just and merciful society. It was pointed out that no Arab country is part of the Commonwealth, and there is often great hostility in these countries towards Britain, yet this is not the same with countries such as Lebanon and Syria, colonised by the French. Our long history of mistakes and bumbles in this region can't be altered now, but we can seek to change the future. Studying the Arabian Nights in detail reveals strong and deep links with Western imaginative literature, so despite the apparent clash of civilisations, we have been learning from each other for a long while.

Other writers suggested that writing is a way, their way, of dealing with tension and conflict. Empires mix things up, languages, cuisines, cultures, and they produce new kinds of people. Novels can explore what is out of place and time, the hybrids and the outcasts.

English Language

English, the national language, became a means of imperialism, yet now, as one speaker put it, 'the empire writes back in all font sizes.' As English absorbs new words – the Revised Oxford English Dictionary includes 700 Indian words – it transforms itself into a global, non-imperial language.

For some, English is even seen as the language of liberation. Where there is internal colonisation within Africa, English may only be spoken by a minority, while still being an important official language. In India English may not be the mother tongue of 26 states, but it is the 'other tongue', used, abused and improved by a body of writers.

Yet the dominance of English is regrettable too. Africans and Caribbeans need to tell their stories, but they are often compelled to do so in a language that is not their own. This weakens the strength and impact of their writing, and indigenous non-English speakers cannot experience the stories of their homelands.

English chauffeurs the vehicle of global language, but does this make it a friend or foe? On the positive side, English allows access to the internet, yet its links to the publishing industry mean local publishing in native languages, especially for new writers, is becoming more difficult. It was said that Caribbean writers were forced to come to England because they could not make a living in their own country, where there was only one publishing house, and not everyone was literate. In India, by contrast, many authors cater for a local and regional market, and are in a constant tussle with English language writers. Those who write in their mother tongue usually have a larger readership, as their books are not as expensive as those who have an eye to the global market.

After the Empire, and Me

Empires can weaken a sense of dignity and self-worth. In India there was a street named after a Mr K Sangupta. The sign for the road read 'Mr K Sangupta BA (Leeds) Fail', the suggestion being that someone who had failed to get a degree in England was better, more worthy of remembering, than a native who had a degree from their own country.

Exposure to English literature led one writer to feel ashamed of the broken language he used to find his place in the world, his crude upbringing and lack of culture. Language is so closely tied up with ideas of oneself a devalued way of speaking undermines a sense of self-worth. Reading African, Latin American and Caribbean writing since the 1950s, our speaker felt writers have had a kind of mission for indigenous people to discover their dignity and worth through literature. Another writer said that when empires fall they create both bastards and sons. The sons were white folk in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, while the bastards were Indians and Africans who might claim to be part of British cultural heritage and still be rejected by the mother country. Those of mixed race were also often outcasts. Yet it was suggested people can recover their dignity and humanity through reading. Books can strengthen a sense of self-worth.

Another speaker told the story of Major Seth Anthony, the first black officer in the British Army. After his training the Governor made a special plea for the other officers to accept him, but at many stages in his career Anthony had to overcome and dispel prejudice. It was a remarkable achievement for a black man to earn the right to lead a platoon of white soldiers. How did he achieve the self-confidence to do so?

One speaker said his writing can be seen as a plea to 'de-centre' empire. A lot of ethnic minority writing in Britain still puts the empire at the centre, and the popularity of books such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* suggests this is what is needed to be published. The majority of the population seems to like such writing, as it affirms the wish to be at the centre, to feel that English culture is still influential. Yet empire does not have to be the definitive factor, and this speaker said he was more interested in exploring and describing his own experience of what it is to be a first generation Brit growing up in a largely individualistic society with influences coming from many different traditions.

Several other speakers said they were envious of the ability to ignore the British Empire. One commented that she was 'tired of history, it has been going on a long time, long after the flag has been lowered. So here I am, the product of empires, haunted by history'. Another saw herself as a 'bastard' of the west, displaced from any heritage or tradition.

Another speaker suggested that the Commonwealth served as a cushion, allowing the British to believe their empire had not really ended.

Report compiled by Sandra Robinson
Associate Director, Cumberland Lodge
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