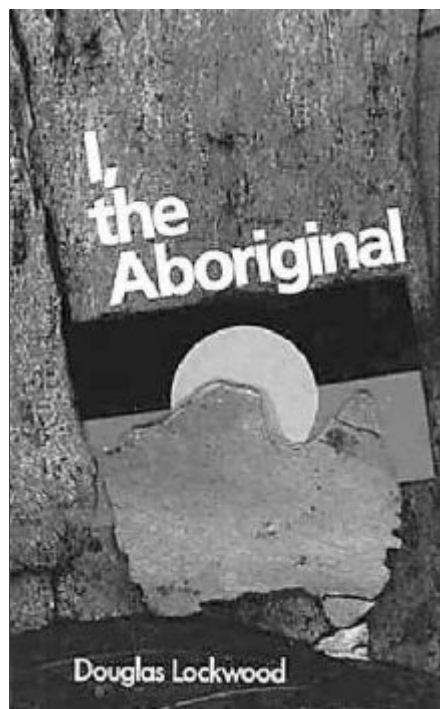


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Bridge over rubble waters

Why do 'postcolonial' writers anchor their experience, and their writing, to an encounter with the West? There are other stories that need to be told, feels TABISH KHAIR.



A BOOK was published in Australia in 1962. It was called **I, The Aboriginal** and it purported to be the autobiography of an Australian aborigine, Wadjiri-Wadjiri (who also went by the compulsory Christian name of Phillip Roberts). But Wadjiri-Wadjiri was not identified as the author of the book. The "author" was one Douglas Lockwood, a white Australian, who had written down the account supposedly narrated to him by Wadjiri-Wadjiri.

1962 is a bit late in the annals of literary colonialism, but in general this tendency to assume the voice of the native, to speak for the native, to reduce the local to the status of a mere "native informant" was common throughout the colonial 18th and 19th Centuries. Europeans and their descendants chronicled and mapped and recorded and narrated, even though very often the actual trekking and notching and pegging and speaking was done by the "native". Very often the native did not even make it to the level of a second-hand autobiographer, if there can be any such thing, as Wadjiri-Wadjiri did. The native disappeared in a paragraph or two of the colonial report, a phenomenon illustrated by the ending of Chinua Achebe's novel, **Things Fall Apart**, where the colonial administrator reduces the complex local tragedy in front of his eyes to a title and a paragraph of colonial logic.

Writing back

It was partly in this context that Salman Rushdie proclaimed with characteristic exuberance in the 1980s that the empire had started writing back. Well, actually it had started writing back as long ago as the 18th Century, if not earlier, as is evident from this translation of an extract from a Latin poem written by Francis Williams, the descendant of Black slaves in the Caribbean: "Accept this, uttered with much soot from a mouth that wishes to sing; not from the skin but from the heart comes its strength. Established by a mighty hand (God the creator gave the same soul to all his creatures, without exception), virtue itself, like wisdom, is devoid of colour. There is no colour in an honourable mind, none in art..." Around the same time, we had our own Dean Mahomet, from Patna to be exact, who wrote the first book in English by an Indian in order "to describe the manners of my countrymen, who, I am proud to think, have still more the innocence of our ancestors, than some of the boasting philosophers of Europe."

Problematic postcolonial

Even if we confine ourselves to languages introduced during colonisation, the ranks of people who, in different ways, "wrote back" to the empire grows by leaps and bounds throughout the 19th Century until, in the 1930s and 40s, India (to take just one example) experienced a veritable flowering of English language fiction: R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, G.V. Desani, the list goes on and on. Still, Rushdie had a point when he noted the fact of the empire writing back in the 1980s, for the phenomenon had not been noticed vividly enough by many critics in the past. And it was a phenomenon: the natives were speaking for themselves. No longer did a Wadjiri-Wadjiri need a Douglas Lockwood to speak; no longer could a Douglas Lockwood place words in the mouth of a Wadjiri-Wadjiri.



And yet, perhaps not all has changed, or not everywhere. Anyone who goes and takes a look at the internationally successful "postcolonial" authors displayed in the bookshops of Europe or the United States would notice that most of them tend to tell stories that involve Europe and America. It might be a novel about an Indian woman negotiating her identity in Dallas: evidently, in the weaker versions of these generic narratives, "identity" is something that is stamped on Asians and Africans while passing the passport control counters of the West. It evidently does not pre-exist contact with the West. Similarly, one can have a historical dimension: an Indian working out his identity and fortune through the pathways of the Raj. One can have the cosmopolitan aspect: various hybrid characters who happen to be mixes of

the European and non-European, and not of, say, the Punjabi and the Tamil.

There are so many Indian English novels now in which the love angle is always with someone from France or the U.S. and not with someone from Nepal or Japan. There are too many novels in which the protagonist emigrates to England or Canada and not to Dubai or Cape Town. True, these "Indo-West" stories have to be told — and all of us writing in English probably need to get a novel or two along those lines out of our systems — but surely there are other stories waiting to be told too?

The bridge to 'success'

It appears that international publishing success, more often than not, requires the postcolonial writer to trek heavily over the bridge of Europe and America. Such a trek is not invalid, for Europe is stamped as much on the pant(aloon)s we wear to work as on the *pau(roti)* we eat for breakfast. And the brilliant writer can use this trek to make us see, sometimes for the first time, the muddy waters that ebb under this bridge. I have no wish to take Europe or even America out of our lives — provided it could even be done. But I do feel that we have a number of other stories to tell. I also feel that the European colonial experience was by no means such a heavy presence in many families, as it is being made out to be. In my family, for example, the British were just a brick of a larger mosaic that included various other pre-colonial and para-colonial tiles, and that has since come to include post-colonial tiles that have little or nothing to do with Europe or America.

Finally, I wonder why we need to give Europeans and Americans the satisfaction of hearing their histories and stories recounted over and over again. Sometimes, alas, not even with much variation. And if we want to do so, why not go whole hog and at least do something like what Vikram Seth did in **The Golden Gate**: gatecrash their realities, instead of simply stapling our stories to their histories?

Our stories

Don't Europeans and Americans have thousands of storytellers of their own? Yes, they do: even Rushdie's landmark **Midnight's Children** was published in the wake of a wave of Raj nostalgia in the U.K. that included the success of Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*. And, more crucially, don't we have other stories to tell? Yes, we do, and there are writers telling some of them too. But their numbers need to increase. Critical awareness needs to be created in order to give such novels a more visible place on international and national bookshelves. Otherwise, there might not be that much difference between letting "Douglas Lockwood" tell us our stories, and telling "Douglas Lockwood" various versions of his stories as our stories.

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