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## THE FUNCTION OF TITLES IN SOME POSTCOLONIAL LITERARY TEXTS IN ENGLISH

Giving a title to a literary work is a significant act and it implies a more complex and accurate process than simply assigning a name by which the text will be repeatedly referred to, or attaching a label that will distinguish it from other similar works. Titles are certainly intended to identify and individuate a work of art, but their purpose goes beyond its mere designation: the function of titles is to guide the interpretation of a text, to indicate how the literary work should be read and perceived. In underlining the hermeneutical purpose of titling, John Fisher observes that “titling permits discourse about artworks” (289). That is to say, titles allow the reader not only to identify and refer to works, but above all to talk about them in a way that affects both their meaning and our interpretation of them, our evaluation and our aesthetic experience. “The title points,” Fisher argues, “and, in pointing, forces and limits a range of interpretations” (293). It indicates how a work should be taken, it influences the approach and perspective of the reader by focusing his/her attention on certain aspects. In short, it affects the meaning of the literary work and, in the meanwhile, it excludes other interpretations of it. Starting from the premises that titles are integral parts and essential properties of artworks, Jerrold Levinson underlines the aesthetic potential of titles arguing that titles are “aesthetically relevant features of works of art” (33) because they have “a significant effect on the aesthetic face it (the work) presents” (29). As a matter of fact, a work of art with a certain title would become a semantically and aesthetically different object of art if it were given a different title. And so, as Wilsmore concludes, the literary work “possesses its title essentially in that it could not be the same literary work without it” (408), but it also possesses the essential aesthetic properties that are revealed by the title. Therefore, the title is also the means that allows a literary work to be appreciated because its aesthetic properties are perceived through it.

If we are to apply these criteria and observations on titlehood to postcolonial literature, we must be aware that the choice of a title to be given to a literary work and, as a consequence, of a key to its interpretation, does not only have an aesthetic impact but, above all, a political connotation. The title becomes a vector of certain postcolonial issues inherent in the text, and denounced by it, by means of which the author takes a specific position in relation to the ideology of imperialism and dominant modes of representation. In such a context, the aesthetic value of the postcolonial text is in the political message it transmits, and the title indeed contributes to strengthen or to focalize the meaning and resonance of this message. This does not mean that the aesthetic value is ‘sacrificed’ in most postcolonial literary works but, rather, that the poetic element coincides with the political message. Hence, it seems plausible that it is because of this overlapping of poetic/political, the poetic becoming political and viceversa, that postcolonial texts hardly ever employ what Levinson, in his classification, calls “referential titles” (or “neutral titles”), i.e. “merely the names of characters, objects, or places which figure prominently in the body of the work and are unsusceptible to any additional spotlighting” (34). A more recurrent tendency, instead, appears to be the use of (in Levinson’s words again) “underlining” (or “reinforcing titles”) and “focusing titles.” The former “add additional weight or stress to some theme or subject that is clearly part of core content” (34), the latter “select from among the main elements of core content one theme to stand as the leading one” (35). Both contribute to the interpretation of the work and guide the reader’s understanding of it. These categories of titles often include metaphorical titles drawing on the semantic field of representation and perception of colonial otherness. But as much frequent in postcolonial literature is the employment of “allusive titles,” which “refer indirectly to other works, other artists, historical events (...) and serve to connect a work to certain things outside it” (37). They create an

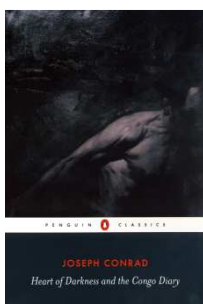
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intertextual net of connections (usually with canonical English works) which the author relates to with a mainly contrastive purpose.

Before getting to a closer observation of some representative titles of postcolonial literary texts, it is worth underlining the meaning in which the term “postcolonial” is here considered, that is in the acceptation given by Bill Aschroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin who apply the term to “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (1989, 2). This definition goes beyond a merely historical-chronological understanding of the postcolonial, intended as the period after the achievement of political independence of the colonies, to put emphasis instead on the idea of a *continuum* between the phase of political and economic subjugation and the following phase of independence. As the three Australian critics point out, there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the long process initiated by European imperial domination whose effects and consequences still persist today (1989, 2). The cultural subordination and hierarchical perception that characterized the relationship between the colonies and the metropolitan centre is still affecting ex-colonized countries that, in most cases, continue to be related to the centre and its imperial (or neo-imperial) power, although in the perspective of a necessity of change and recovery. This fluid meaning of the term postcolonial allows to focus the attention not only on the literary works written by ex-colonized writers after independence but also on those texts produced during colonialism by western writers and intellectuals who expressed opinions contrary to the dominant views, or who at least introduced a problematic approach to the Imperial value-system. In this light, a postcolonial perspective can be said to have been adopted even during colonialism in terms, as noted by John McLeod, of “resistance within the West” (2000, 48). I will start with this category of canonical texts, classics produced during the historical period of colonialism, in which latent or explicit criticism to imperialist ideology and hegemonic discourse is manifest. *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad and *A Passage to India* (1924) by E.M. Forster are good cases in point: two texts, written at a time when the assumptions of colonial discourse were at their apex, that, in spite of certain ambiguities<sup>2</sup>, may well be defined “postcolonial.”



In *Heart of Darkness* the metaphorical implications of the title are soon made evident. The novel is set in late nineteenth-century colonial Congo which, in spite of being named “Congo Free State,” had become in 1885 a personal possession of King Leopold II of Belgium, whose greed for the economic profit derived from rubber and ivory had brought to the brutal exploitation of forced labour, uncontrolled politics of horrors and atrocities, and a terror regime responsible for horrible crimes against humanity and genocide. This was a context Conrad knew all too well having himself being sent there in 1890 when he was working for a Belgian trading company and, just like Marlow, the narrative consciousness of Conrad’s novel, he had sailed a steamboat up the Congo river to reach a trading station which was situated in the very heart of the colonial place, in the heart of Africa, in the heart of darkness. And yet, with this title, Conrad implies that the “heart of darkness” is not only referred to the Congo and, metonymically, to the whole dark, black Africa, but more aptly to the corrupted, diseased nature of Europe and to the degeneracy of colonialism. And in order to

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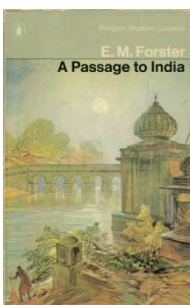
<sup>2</sup> *Heart of Darkness*, in particular, has been the object of critical debates. What has been disputed is Conrad’s ambivalent position on colonial discourses, mainly, whether the novel questions and dissents from the colonial project or perpetuates colonialist views. The most notable and controversial denunciation has come from the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe who accused Conrad’s novel of late-Victorian racism due to its derogatory representation of the African place, allegedly depicted as “the other world,” a primordial antithesis to civilization, and of African people as savage and inhuman. See Achebe (1988).



emphasize this, he decides for a title that shifts the attention of the reader from the western protagonist to the colonial place: the title of the novel, indeed, is not “Marlow” or “Kurtz” (as one might expect from a colonial novel meant to celebrate the European hero), on the contrary it focuses the attention on the place of darkness, apparently Africa, apparently epitomized in an “orientalist” (in the words of Edward Said) metaphor of absence of light, reason, civilization. Nevertheless, it soon becomes evident in the novel that this perception of the African place is deceptive because the events narrated by Marlow overturn the binary division constructed by the Empire, according to which Africa (and generally, the East as opposed to the West) is assumed to be backward, uncivilized and degenerate, and they mine the idea of superiority of the West and of Western characters who, in the course of the narrative, do not embody at all the stereotypes of colonial discourses depicting them as evolved, civilized and enlightened. Also the oxymoron in the title, associating the word “heart,” as a symbol of throbbing life, with the word “darkness,” on the contrary a symbol of death and gloomy stillness, seems to underline the irreconcilable assumptions of colonial stereotypes. The darkness belongs to the European trading company, to its disorganization and inadequacy, and to its men paradoxically depicted in the stereotypes typically assigned to the colonized: static, childlike, eccentric, irrational, and violent. It is the darkness of a boasted progress that does not exist, it is the impenetrable darkness of Kurtz’s soul, “hollow at the core” (Conrad 1991, 92), it is the “lightless region of subtle horrors” (93) Marlow is confronted with when he witnesses the brutal and exterminating folly of colonialism.

All this considered, besides having a metaphorical meaning, the title “Heart of Darkness” also belongs to Levinson’s category of “undermining (or opposing) titles” (35) whose function is to “oppose the work’s provisional statement with a statement tending in a contrary direction” (35). The title therefore becomes ironic because it makes use of colonial discourse in order to move in an opposite direction: the heart of darkness is not in Africa, it is not the uncivilized core of the colonial place, but it is the darkness brought along by colonialism itself, it is the horror of atrocities committed by the West in the name of profit and greed. And it is the reading of the title in this key that makes this novel postcolonial, in the sense that it challenges and reverses imperial ideology and its polarities by showing its hypocrisy and substantial inadequacy.

These observations on the title “Heart of Darkness” are made even more evident in the comparison with the title of another work by Conrad set in colonial Congo, *An Outpost of Progress*, a novella written three years before *Heart of Darkness*, which is considered as an early draft of the novel. Again, an “undermining” and ironical title introducing a colonial context in which the corruption of the alleged European civilization and the ineptitude of western people are predominant: instead of a supposed progress, the effects of colonialism are a productive, moral and mental failure. So the meaning of the term “progress,” which is recurrent in colonial rhetorics and is associated in the title to the remote position of the outpost, is undermined in its stereotypical connection with an alleged western superiority and ironically comes to denote exactly the opposite: again the regression, weakness, incapability of the West.



A second classic I am going to consider, whose metaphorical title, belonging to the category Levinson classifies as “undermining” or “opposing,” opens up to various interpretations, is E.M Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924). The title, which is also an “allusive” one, intertextually refers to the poem by the American writer Walt Whitman, *Passage to India*, written in 1871 to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal. To Whitman, the poet of the American dream of freedom and democracy, the “passage” symbolizes a technological wonder that has brought together the West and the East, a modern achievement of engineering that has



succeeded in dominating the geographical distance separating Europe from Asia, thus fulfilling Columbus's dream, and that of all the explorers after him, of tying the two worlds. The poem takes in the final part a more mystical-religious direction expressing the author's wish that this union might bring to a material and spiritual fusion, and give back to mankind the innocence and purity of the lost Paradise.

Forster's novel, on the other hand, does not share anything with Whitman's celebratory intent and with his almost euphoric optimism, which is overturned by the English writer in presenting the two communities living in India during the domination of the British Raj, native Indians and Anglo-Indians (the colonized and the colonizers), as irreconcilably separated, both materially and spiritually: the latter barricaded into their upraised, tidy and prosperous Civil Station, protected by insurmountable walls and gates, the former "drowned and left rotting" (Forster 31) in the mud and rubbish infesting the lower part of the city. The imperial context in which the action of the novel takes place is hierarchically divided into dominators and dominated, civilizers and uncivilized, East and West. The two worlds do not understand each other, they do not even communicate with each other, except for giving orders and obeying; the only notable exceptions, like the characters of Fielding, Mrs Moore and Aziz, are unable, in spite of their efforts, to establish long-lasting relationships. Nothing of Whitman's fusion remains, none of his dreams of becoming brothers and sisters, of "races, neighbors to marry and be given in marriage" (Whitman 1960). Forster's title, therefore, refers to Whitman, but intentionally contrasts his message by laying emphasis on a colonial passage that is the cause of separation rather than union, of hatred rather than harmony, of exploitation rather than interchange.

In addition to this, by using the word "passage," Forster enters the semantic field of travel, of physical movement from one place to another, which is a typical condition of colonialism in that it implies the colonizer's journey from his home country to the colonial place. Therefore the novel's title entails the colonial issue of centrifugal movement assuming the existence of a centre and of a periphery: the centre of the Empire (i.e. England) his characters depart from and the periphery, the margins of the Empire (i.e. the colonies, India in this case) they arrive at. Nevertheless, it has to be underlined, Forster does not choose for his title the terms "journey" or "voyage" or "travel," ostensibly more suitable to the colonial idea of discovery and conquest, in fact the word "passage" puts emphasis on the movement *through*, rather than *to*, a place and on the changes and transformations that the experience of passing through, rather than going and settling in, a different place involve. The passage, to put it in other words, is not a bare geographical movement, it is a spiritual, cultural, and emotional participation, that implies a metamorphosis of the identities of those who are actively engaged in this passage (whether they are in the position of colonizers or colonized). For Adela, Mrs Moore, Aziz or Fielding, it is a passage through a cave of reciprocal misunderstandings, colonial fears and personal anxieties; a passage through the colonial issues of rape, insanity and confrontation with otherness and its irreconcilability. By passing through the orientalist stereotypes forged by the Imperial background, and through their consequences, they reconfigure their colonial identities and re-think the colonial experience from a perspective that is postcolonial in its being a challenge to colonial ways of knowing and representing. What is interesting to notice, in this regard, is that Forster adds the indefinite article "a" to Whitman's original title: Whitman's passage to India becomes "a" passage for Forster, just one of the many viable ones and, although definitely different from Whitman's optimistic interpretation, it is given without the assumption of an absolute certainty. Other passages can be conceived of, other experiences represented, other meanings rendered: Forster's relativism is itself a challenge to imperial hegemonic knowledge.

If the two above-mentioned novels contain seeds of postcolonial criticism even within a colonial context, the fruits of a more specific postcolonial approach are to be seen in the works produced by writers living in, or coming from, countries with a history of colonization and "concerned with the workings and legacy of colonialism in either the past or the present" (McLeod 2000, 33). Literary works written in the period of political de-colonization, or in the process of gaining independence, from British rule whose main intent, quoting Kenyan critic and novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, is that of "decolonising the mind"<sup>3</sup>. Literary works

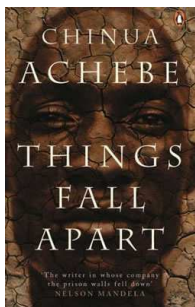
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<sup>3</sup> See Ngugi wa Thiong'o's foundational text, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), on the way in which language influences how people perceive themselves and their



availing themselves of the theories of colonial discourses that were produced between the 1950s and 1980s by critics like Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri C. Spivak, focusing on different modes of perception, representation and internalization of a sense of colonial otherness, used as colonial weapons, as fundamental instruments of submission and justification of the submission of colonized people to the imperial yoke.

In the wake of what these theories denounce and question about colonial ideology and discourse, postcolonial authors write from a subaltern position, from the periphery of the Empire, in response to the centre with the aim of redeeming themselves and their own culture from a condition of marginalization and privation: this is what, in postcolonial terms, is known as “writing back to the centre”<sup>4</sup>. It is the Empire that writes back, challenges colonial power and questions, overturns the way in which the margins were perceived and represented during the years of colonization.



I will refer in particular to three novels belonging to three diverse postcolonial contexts. The first one, belonging to the African, more specifically Nigerian, context, is *Things Fall Apart* written by Chinua Achebe in 1958. The title is again metaphorical and its meaning of “collapsing,” “crumbling,” “going to pieces” is referred to the consequences brought about by colonialism on the Igbo society and culture depicted in the novel. Achebe wants to give the reader, both European and African, a realistic picture of a compact, well-organized pre-colonial world, in order to show how the irruption of British colonialism made indeed “things fall apart.” It caused centennial cultures and traditions to collapse, and gave rise to a context of internal conflicts and clashes between different ethnical and religious groups (in line with the colonial logic of *divide et impera*) whose dramatic consequences are still evident today. A great part of the novel is devoted to the detailed description of the complex and deep-rooted political, social, economic, religious and juridical systems of this Igbo community, which represents Achebe’s alternative (or “alter-native”) version writing back to the colonial and orientalist representations of a primitive, backward, uncivilized Africa incapable of self-government. Nevertheless, in spite of the realistic asset of the novel, the title is not “neutral,” it is referred neither to the Igbo society nor to the protagonist Okonkwo, who radically embodies the values and dis-values of this world, but to the consequences of colonization, to the total disruption caused by western invasion. Actually, the description of the arrival of the white man is dealt with in a very short, final, part of the novel and, with a typical postcolonial strategy, the narrative importance Achebe devotes to it is quite unsubstantial: in this way the perception of alterity is reversed and the white man is marginalized and reduced to mere Otherness. Most of the narration, and the title itself, instead, are focused on what was there before the arrival of colonialism, before crumbling at the hands of the Europeans: as Obierika has to acknowledge in the final part of the novel, “(the white man) has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (Achebe 2009, 100).

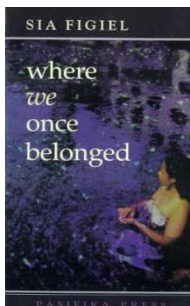
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culture. In a colonial context in particular the imposed language of the colonizer (the language of the Empire) makes the colonized support the colonialist values it reflects. Hence the need to decolonise the mind by rejecting English and, with it, the colonial values it articulates.

<sup>4</sup> The expression, that has now become pivotal in postcolonial studies, has been canonized in the title of a foundational text of postcolonial theory edited by B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), which, in its turn, draws on the title of an article by S. Rushdie, “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance” published in *The Times* in 1982 and concerning the need to decolonize English language.



Just like Forster's *A Passage to India*, the title of this novel is as well "allusive" and intertextual, being taken from a verse of a poem by Irish writer W.B. Yeats, called *The Second Coming* (1919), where the poet evokes an apocalyptic vision of the world that is about to collapse into anarchy because human race has lost its innocence. The disintegration of the Yeatsian world (a theme that was certainly influenced by the pessimistic climate of the aftermath of World War I, and by the internal conflicts for independence that were afflicting Ireland at the time) is expressed in a central verse of the poem: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; /Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." But, if in Yeats "things fall apart" is the fearful prophecy of what is expected to be, in Achebe the same words in the title become a gloomy denunciation of what has already been, the condemnation of colonial disruption. Moreover, if in Yeats the focus is Europe and its two-thousand-year-old tradition of Judeo-Christian civilization that is losing its grip on the world, causing anarchy and collapse through the coming of a frightening anti-Christ, Achebe instead shifts the centre of his postcolonial perspective to the small Igbo village of Umofia, the periphery that, in a reversal of Yeats's Eurocentric standpoint, is itself "the centre that cannot hold," the world that has collapsed into the anarchy caused by western colonialism and Christian evangelism. The poetics of Achebe's title, therefore, is to be identified in its political meaning, in the questioning of western values, embodied in a European poem, that are turned into dis-values when they are imposed on a world to which they do not belong and to whose disruption they contribute.

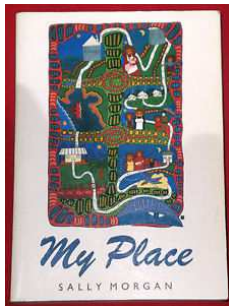


This latter issue of 'belonging' and 'displacement', of being 'dis-rooted' from one's own culture and having another, alien and irreconcilable one imposed upon, is certainly a recurrent theme in postcolonial literature and it is also at the basis of the title's meaning of another novel I will address: *Where We Once Belonged* (1996) by Samoan writer Sia Figiel. The title is again metaphorical and poetical and, as for *Things Fall Apart*, it focuses on pre-colonial past and on a condition that seems to be lost forever, on the impossibility of going back to the past. As already noticed for the above-mentioned novel, this is also a text in which the postcolonial process of writing back is made evident by the author through the detailed reconstruction of the traditions and customs of a pre-contact society, corrupted after the invasion of the Europeans by the colonial imposition of other, alien, cultural values. In the case of Samoa, converted to Christianity by the pervading proselytism of the London Missionary Society, colonized by Germany first and by New Zealand later, repeatedly claimed by Britain and allured by the capitalistic consumerism of the USA, the loss and disruption mainly regard the rich cultural heritage made of myths, legends, ancient traditions, and above all, based on a strong sense of communalism that once gave its people a participated sense of belonging.

On this point, Figiel's title is closely connected to the Samoan oral cultural background as it reminds of a text written to be read aloud in front of a community of people. As a matter of fact, it recalls the structure of colloquial language (the syntactical construction of the sentence appearing incomplete) and employs the narrative devices of storytelling (or, in Figiel's words, of *su'ifefilo*) with the alliteration of the first three words ("where we once") and the use of the adverb "once" drawing on the form of the fairy tale (the "once upon a time" beginning). In addition to this, the title, through the use of the plural pronoun "we," besides giving centrality to colonial subjecthood (from the margins of western accounts to the centre of Samoan narratives), conjures up the idea of a collective dimension, and it also gives prominence to the sense of belonging shared by a compact community. "Where" people in Malaefou belong to is not specified and the title unfolds many possibilities: a place, a culture, a family, a religion, but also an age, childhood as a prelapsarian state of innocence that metaphorically represents Samoa itself before the loss of innocence with the advent of colonialism.



But, although the title apparently provides the reader with an interpretative key of the text, the meaning of the novel is to be thoroughly understood only in the end when the protagonist, Alofa, caught up in a phase of passage from early adolescence to young adulthood, feels for the first time the need to get out of the group, to tear the protective layer supplied by the community in which she was born and raised, and around which she has always organized her life. Alofa realizes it is time for her to break this shell in order to face life on her own. She needs to find a vital space of her own to search her individuality and fully form her identity, that will no longer be an identity determined by the group, by the community, but must be expressed by a grown-up, individual self, shaped on the values of the community but ready to walk on his/her own. As a matter of fact, the very last sentence of the novel portrays Alofa walking back to her village, alone for the first time: "I am 'I' in its totality – 'I' without 'we' (...) I began walking (...) towards the new gathering place where 'we' once belonged" (Figiel 239). This sentence, celebrating the return to the place of belonging with a newly-gained perception of the self, brings the reader back to the title and contributes to disambiguate it. The title, that seemed to be centred only on the longing and loss of a pre-contact world, reveals to be actually referred to the loss of an overbearing collective dimension as a necessary step towards adulthood and responsibility. In this case the hermeneutic function of the title is overturned: it is not the title that, in Levinson's "disambiguating" category, serves "to fix or endorse one perceptual reading rather than another, thus giving the work a more determinate content" (36), but the reverse, it is the narration that provides a clue to the interpretation of the title. One would be tempted to read this as a postcolonial strategy to subvert the structure of the western novel, a way to write, or better talk, back to the centre.



The postcolonial key concepts of 'place' and 'displacement', and the fundamental role they play in the formative process of identity, are also at the basis of another novel whose title I am going to deal with: *My Place* (1987) by the Indigenous Australian writer Sally Morgan. The title strongly claims the author's sense of belonging to a place, intended as belonging to a culture and to the values and traditions connected and giving shape to it. A sense of belonging that, as already noticed for other novels in different colonial contexts, is destroyed in Aboriginal Australia by the Europeans' invasion of the continent at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The seizing of the land by the British crown, in the name of the legal fiction of *terra nullius*, is the first step towards the displacement of Indigenous Australians. Clashes with British settlers and massacres on the frontiers precipitate this process of dispossession, which culminates in the policies of protection and assimilation (that led to the now infamous phenomenon of the "stolen generations") adopted by the white Australian government throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, causing in various ways a severe cultural disruption. Seen in this light, the concept of place becomes in Australian literature a trope of difference and ambivalence; it is the place that keeps colonized and colonizers separated, determining a condition of privation and brutal dislocation for the former, and a condition of exile and violent re-location for the latter. But place is also a semantic field that acquires a different meaning to both communities. In Aboriginal societies, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin notice, the concept of place does not coincide with the western idea of a measurable portion of space (often an object of contention), nor does it indicate a tangible site within a precise topographic system, on the contrary, it represents "a location of one's own dreaming, an extension of one's own being" (2007, 163), that is to say a series of natural elements men and women identify with in their walk of life and growth (what is indeed called "dreaming") that are given a precise meaning not only for the individual and his formation of identity, but also for the relationships between different groups. Hence, the fundamentally different approach from the colonial and western one to the idea of owning a place: for Indigenous Australians one does not own the land but, rather, he is 'owned by it', the land is a nurturing



mother that gives life and protection and one belongs to it. On the other hand, the concept of land as property, as a political, economic and legal place, imposed by western perception and colonial rule, disrupts the Aboriginal approach and contributes to displace Indigenous Australian people, dispossessing them of their land. Thus, the term “place” suggests and implies much more than mere location or piece of land, in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s words again, the place is “a discourse in process” (2007, 164) that is continually constructed and de-constructed by means of appropriation and expropriation.

Getting back to Morgan’s text, the title “My Place” appears, in the light of what has been said, misleading, both in the use of the singular possessive adjective “my” and in the use of the term “place” that takes on the above-mentioned meanings, and whose real significance can be appreciated only after reading the text. As it has been observed for *Where We Once Belonged*, the relation between title and text in the process of interpretation is reversed, being the reading of the text that specifies (or “disambiguates”) the title and not the title that unlocks the work’s meaning. Here the place is not, or at least it is not only, Australia, even though the claim of a land that has been ‘stolen’ from the Indigenous people is implicit (and as much implicit is the reference also to the political background and the long struggles of Aboriginal people for the return of sacred lands and the recognition of land rights). But the place in this title is most importantly the discovery, acceptance and recovery of Aboriginal identity by Morgan, whose Aboriginality was denied and kept hidden to her and recovered only in the age of adolescence, hence the use of the possessive “my.” But at the same time it becomes evident that the process of identification with Aboriginality goes beyond the narrator’s family history, because the traumatic experience of the loss of identity as an effect of colonization affects many Aboriginal people: those ‘stolen’ from their original families and educated in western institutions (like Arthur and Gladys Corunna in *My Place*), and those who have internalized a sense of their self as ‘other’ and inferior as a consequence of the psychological violence of colonialism and (like Daisy Corunna) reject their Aboriginal identity to put on a Fanonian “white mask.” So, it is clear that the term “my” in the title can be read as “our” (as the incorporation of first person’s testimonies within the narrator’s story proves) and that the title itself, that appeared to lay claim to the appropriation of a place (in dissonance with the perception and interpretation of the concept of place for Aboriginal people), is in fact a claim to the appropriation and recognition of an identity, that goes beyond a merely genetic understanding of Aboriginality. In view of this, the title also takes on a politicized connotation in expressing Aboriginal resistance and denunciation of dispossession.

Another way in which postcolonial “writing back” finds expression is through the response given by postcolonial authors to the English canon by re-writing literary classics, in a process of artistic and literary decolonization, from a different standpoint, either by presenting facts from the perspective of characters who in the source-text are marginalized or subdued, or by providing a completely revised version of the story narrated in the classic, through a postcolonial device known as “counter-discourse”<sup>5</sup>. The aim of these writers is to subvert a hierarchical order that is taken for granted, to interrogate assumptions of colonial discourses in canonical texts, and to dismantle the narrative strategies through which imperial ideology is disseminated, but also to fill in the gaps in the official version of colonial history or to unbury the hidden stories of colonial past that, being stories of violence, abuse, injustice, could not, and would not, be told in an Empire that presented itself as a bearer of civilization and progress. Re-writing, therefore, has the function of mining/destabilizing the privileged position of the canonical text by appropriating dominant European discourses but, as Helen Tiffin asserts, “it is not simply ‘writing back’ to an English canonical text, but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continues to operate” (101).

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<sup>5</sup> The term, coined by Richard Terdiman, to define the theory and practice of symbolic resistance in 19<sup>th</sup> century French literature, has been adopted by postcolonial critics “to describe the complex ways in which challenges to a dominant or established discourse (specifically those of the imperial centre) might be mounted from the periphery” (Ashcroft et al. 2007, 50).





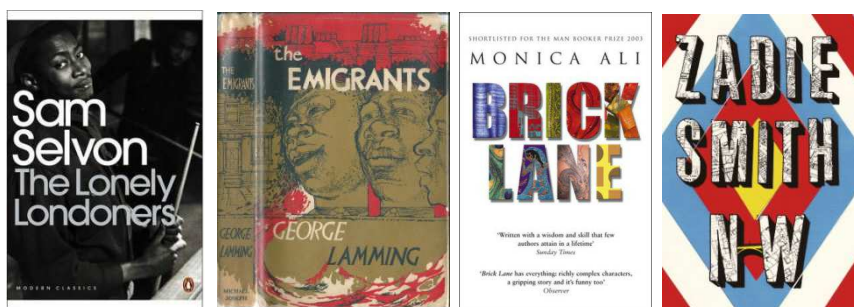
Among the innumerable works (and titles) that might be mentioned as exemplificative of postcolonial re-writing, I will briefly focus on a novel by white South African J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (1986), a postcolonial re-writing of Daniel Defoe's eighteenth-century classic, *Robinson Crusoe* (1717). Coetzee re-invents Defoe's story, dismantling the power relations between characters: he introduces a female character (and a female counter-perspective), Susan Barton, who is not even contemplated in the source-text, and depicts a Robinson (named Crusoe) that is completely different from the one created by Defoe, a passive, almost lethargic character who disappears from the narration soon after the beginning because he dies on the ship that from the desert island would bring him back to civilization. But the narrative focus of the South African novel, and the main object of Coetzee's re-writing, is Friday, presented as an ex-slave whose tongue has been cut off and, for this reason, he cannot (and does not want to) tell his own story. Another character, that is introduced anew by Coetzee, and who gives the title to the novel, is Foe, a writer (behind whom one might easily discern the historical Daniel Defoe) in whose hands Susan, back to England, puts the story of the short period the three of them spent shipwrecked on the island, so that he might write it down and publish it. The problem is that Foe does not find the story exciting enough to raise the interest of the reading public (nothing really happens on the island, unlike Robinson's adventurous life narrated by Defoe) and he would like to enrich it with invented details but, as Susan does not accept it, her story remains unwritten. It is a highly cryptic novel whose meanings are at traits (especially in the finale) difficult to grasp, but certain aspects typical of postcolonial re-writing are easily identifiable: the denunciation of the oppressive role of the colonizer (embodied by Foe) who wants to impose his own (counterfeit) version of the story, the deceptive function of writing and the need, on the author's side, to interrogate himself on how (and whether) history can be objectively written. But also, the metaphorical meaning of Friday's lost tongue representing the condition of silence the colonized is forced into, because his own version of history is never given, nor heard, and at the same time epitomizing his unwillingness to tell his own story by adapting it to imposed western modes.

Of course, not all of these aspects are immediately identifiable in the title of the novel, but they are in a sense evoked by it. To begin with, even though the title refers to the name of one of the protagonists, it cannot be regarded as a "neutral" or "referential" one, first of all because this character, Foe, is not *the* protagonist but his presence is vicarious to somebody else's story; more logical it would have been had the title featured Susan or, better, Friday. And, secondly, because considering the implied meaning of this name ("enemy"), one cannot regard it as "insusceptible to any additional spotlighting" (Levinson, 34), as in the already mentioned definition of neutral titles given by Levinson. So, one can conclude that "Foe" is a highly and purposely destabilizing title, and an ironical one, because apparently it gives prominence to a male, white, western character with a (more or less) successful social position and leaves out, instead, those who, in relation to a typical colonial classification based on "race, class and gender," are kept on the margins: the African slave, the colonist with no ambitions and social status, the woman. But the irony stands on the fact that the whole novel, and the postcolonial message it conveys, gives these characters, marginalized by history, a central fictional position; Coetzee betrays the reader's assumptions based on the title because Foe is not given the expected centrality, whilst Susan and Friday are. Also worthy of consideration is the pun with the name "Foe," not only for the identification of the colonial writer, who holds the knowledge and the power to transmit it through writing, with the enemy, but also for the manifest reference to Defoe (a representative symbol of canonical English literature), although with the omission of the prefix "De" (that Defoe himself had added to his name to claim inexistent aristocratic origins). The result is a postcolonial challenge to colonial ways of knowing and criticism of colonial representations and values, and what is made evident is that re-



writing does not only imply telling a story from a different perspective or filling in the gaps of colonial history but, above all, it entails a critical and continually ongoing dialogue with the colonial text, a process in which the reader has an active role because he can determine the meaning of the text, but also of the title.

A further category of titles I want to conclude with is referred to works written by “migrant” and “diaspora writers,” that is, writers who have migrated to England from countries with a history of colonialism, and second-generation descendants from migrant families. In these works the theme of diaspora and of its consequences on the perception of identity and belonging is, as one may imagine, predominant and it is in particular the relationship with the ‘home country’ (intended both as the old country they or their parents left and the new ‘host country’ in which most of them were born) that comes to the fore. The long process of migration, that since the end of World War II has brought thousands of people from the colonies (or ex-colonies) to the centre of the Empire, in London, has radically altered the ethnic, cultural and linguistic background of the city, and the literary works produced since the 1950s by writers who have personally been part of this process of change reflect all the expectations, disappointments, struggles, privations, achievements of people living in a displaced condition and having to forge a new concept of home.



By briefly going through the titles of some of these works, one can get an idea of how this concept of home is shaped, moulded and transformed in the generational passage from a situation of migrancy to one of belonging. If, as McLeod underlines, the concept of home “can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world” (2000, 210), the titles of the first generation of migrant writers (also known as “Windrush generation”) denote a “dis-orientation” in the sense of home they transmit. Titles like *The Emigrants* (1954) by Barbadian George Lamming or *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) by Trinidadian Sam Selvon prove that what had been envisaged as a voyage ‘back’ to the Mother country, an idea instilled by colonial education, revealed itself instead as exile, impossibility to belong and loss. If Lamming’s “reinforcing” title evokes a sense of itinerant and displaced identity, Selvon’s title expresses a condition of isolation and dismay, accompanied to the oxymoronic self-assertion of a citizenship that is no more than a legal status.<sup>6</sup> But, if first-generation “black British writers” tend to focalize their titles (and their works) on the fragmentation, discontinuity and sense of displacement induced by migration, the tendency with second-generation writers appears instead to transmit the idea of appropriation of the country (or of the city, being their novels mainly set in London), that is no more the imaginary place their parents had dreamt of before arriving, and had felt betrayed by once there, but it is a multicultural and hybridized place, whose diverse neighbourhoods, as McLeod points out, “are known primarily in terms of the ‘overseas’ populations they have nurtured (...) (and give) an indication of the patterns and histories of settlement” (2004, 4) at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Titles like *Brick Lane* (2003) by Anglo-Bangladeshi Monika Ali and *NW* (2012) by Anglo-Jamaican Zadie Smith, for example, emphasise a sense of territory, the appropriation of the city and the knowledge of its internal divisions from an insider’s (no more an outsider’s) perspective. The East End street that has become the heart of the Bangladeshi community in London, featuring in Ali’s title, and North-West London, epitomized in the letters of the postal code that constitute Smith’s title, talk of a “now thoroughly de-centred capital city” (Brooker 89), of an agglomerate of different and unequal geographical,

<sup>6</sup> With the 1948 *British Nationality Act* British nationality was redefined and citizenship rights were extended to all Commonwealth subjects, also to encourage people from the colonies to migrate to England and help as labour force to reconstruct the country after the war. But the legal status did not actually correspond to a real integration and acceptance in the British society.



social, ethnic microcosms, of worlds apart, each one with its own centre. It is not difficult to perceive in these titles a postcolonial debunking of the colonial dichotomy centre/periphery: London, once the centre of the Empire, has now grown into the periphery of itself.

Ali and Smith, among others, do not deny or forget the difficulties of integration, the struggles and frustrations that still exist even in this multicultural and multifarious London, but the place they depict is a place that belongs to their characters and to which they belong. It is 'home country', although, to conclude with McLeod, "the transformations wrought by the experience of migrancy make impossible the recovery of a plenitudinous sense of home. Reflections of home seize it in pieces only; a sense of displacement always remains" (2000, 211).

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