

The Postcolonial Literary Theory

Introduction:

The Postcolonial literary criticism is an approach to literature that focuses on the study of literary texts produced in countries and cultures that were subject to European colonial powers. It can also refer to the analysis of texts written about colonized places and people by writers of the colonizing culture. Postcolonial literature and criticism arose both during and after the struggles of many nations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and elsewhere for independence from colonial rule.

Major Postcolonial Texts :

The year **1950** saw the publication of seminal texts of postcolonialism: **Aimé Césaire**'s *Discours sur le colonialisme*, and **Frantz Fanon**'s *Black Skin, White Masks*. And in **1958 Chinua Achebe** published his novel *Things Fall Apart*. According to the critic **Robert Young**, the “founding moment” of postcolonial theory was the journal the *Tricontinental*, launched by **the Havan Tricontinental** of 1966, which “initiated the first global alliance of the peoples of the three continents [Africa, Asia, Latin America] against imperialism”. **Edward Said**'s landmark work *Orientalism* appeared in **1978**.

The term ‘postcolonialism’ :

Robert Young sees postcolonialism as continuing to derive its inspiration from the anti-colonial struggles of the colonial era. **Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin** also use the term postcolonial in a comprehensive sense, “to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day,” on account of the “**continuity of preoccupations**” between the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Aims of Postcolonial theory:

Postcolonial criticism, Young argues, has embraced a number of aims: most fundamentally, to reexamine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized; to determine the economic, political, and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized peoples and the colonizing powers; to analyze the process of decolonization; and above all, to participate in the goals of political liberation, which includes equal access to material resources, the contestation of forms of domination, and the articulation of political and cultural identities.

“Internal colonization”:

Postcolonial discourse potentially embraces, and is intimately linked with, a broad range of dialogues within the colonizing powers, addressing various forms of “**internal colonization**” as treated by **minority studies** of various kinds such as **African-American, Native American, Latin American, and Asian American**. All of these discourses have challenged the main streams of Western philosophy, literature, and ideology. This challenge is revealed in the questioning and reevaluation of the literary and cultural canon in Western institutions, through what is called “**multiculturalism.**”

Multicultural literature:

Multicultural literature is defined as writing in English about North American ethnic, cultural and religious minority groups. It signifies texts carrying in one way or another images of migrant experiences. Minority groups want to have a voice through developing a unique artistic style as a defense mechanism in opposition to the dominant culture.

Key concepts in postcolonial theory :

APPROPRIATION:

A term used to describe the ways in which post-colonial societies take over those aspects of the imperial culture – language, forms of writing, film, theatre, even modes of thought and argument such as rationalism, logic and analysis – that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities. This process is sometimes used to describe the strategy by which the dominant imperial power incorporates as its own the territory or culture that it surveys and invades. However, post-colonial theory focuses instead on an exploration of the ways in which the dominated or colonized culture can use the tools of the dominant discourse to resist its political or cultural control.

DISLOCATION:

A term for both the occasion of displacement that occurs as a result of imperial occupation and the experiences associated with this event. The phenomenon may be a result of transportation from one country to another by slavery or imprisonment, by invasion and settlement, a consequence of willing or unwilling movement from a known to an unknown location. Besides the geographical dislocation, postcolonial subjects can also endure a cultural dislocation. They are metaphorically dislocated, placed into a hierarchy that sets their culture aside and ignores its institutions and values in favor of the values and practices of the colonizing culture.

ETHNICITY:

It is a term that has been used increasingly since the 1960s to account for human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, social patterns and ancestry, rather than the discredited generalizations of **race** with its assumption of a humanity divided into fixed, genetically determined biological types. Ethnicity refers to the fusion of many traits that belong to the nature of any ethnic group: a composite of shared values, beliefs, norms, tastes, behaviors, experiences, consciousness of kind, memories and loyalties.

HYBRIDITY :

The term ‘hybridity’ has been most recently associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, whose analysis of colonizer/colonized relations stresses their interdependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivities. Bhabha contends that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the ‘Third Space of enunciation’. Hybridity has frequently been used in post-colonial discourse to mean simply cross-cultural ‘exchange’. This use of the term has been widely criticized. The criticism of the term stems from the perception of theories which believe that mutuality *necessarily* downplay opposition, and increase continuing post-colonial dependence.

LIMINALITY:

The importance of the liminal for post-colonial theory is precisely its usefulness for describing an ‘in-between’ space in which cultural change may occur: the **transcultural** space in which strategies for

personal or communal self-hood may be elaborated, a region in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange between different states. For instance, the colonized subject may dwell in the liminal space between **colonial discourse** and the assumption of a new 'noncolonial' identity. But such identification is never simply a movement from one identity to another; it is a constant process of engagement, and **appropriation**.

THE OTHER:

In general terms, the 'other' is anyone who is separate from one's self. The existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world. The colonized subject is characterized as 'other' through discourses such as **primitivism** and **cannibalism**, as a means of establishing the **binary** separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view. It refers to the colonized others who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre.

Cultural identity:

is the sense of belonging towards a culture. This belonging can be justified with the shared set of companionship, principles or beliefs of living. Basically, it can be considered as owning the culture and its various boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, and gender. And **owning the culture** means that the person embraces all the traditions that have been passed down throughout history. The cultural identity reveals the person's heritage, as well as help identify with others who have the same traditions or similar belief structures.

Important Figures in Postcolonial Theory

Frantz Fanon (1925–1961):

Fanon is the leading figure of the first generation of Postcolonial theorists. Born on the French island colony of Martinique, Fanon fought against Nazism in France where he subsequently trained as a psychiatrist. His origins and his experience in both Martinique and France exposed him to the issues of racism and colonialism.

***Black Skin, White Masks* :**

Peau noire, masques blancs (1952), translated as *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) explores the psychological effects of racism and colonialism. The book touches on anti-Black racism and how it forms, then deforms, the subjectivity of white and Black people both, is crucial for understanding the multiple levels of colonial subjugation and the terms of its overcoming.

Quotes: Black Skin, White Masks

“The neurotic structure of an individual is simply the elaboration, the formation, the eruption within the ego, of conflictual clusters arising in part out of the environment and in part out of the purely personal way in which that individual reacts to these influences”.

“The black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level”.

Frantz Fanon: Algeria

In 1954, while Fanon was working as a psychiatrist in Algeria he edited the National Liberation Front's newspaper and remained involved in the revolution until his death in 1961. Fanon produced a number of writings connected with Algerian and African revolution; his most comprehensive and influential work was *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961), translated as *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963).

The Wretched of the Earth:

This now classic text analyzed the conditions and requirements for effective anti-colonial revolution from a Marxist perspective, modified somewhat to accommodate conditions specific to colonized nations. In an important chapter called “**On National Culture**”, Fanon addresses the important connections between the struggle for freedom and the various elements of culture, including literature and the arts. Colonialism, says Fanon, entirely disrupts the cultural life of a conquered people.

“In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why a Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue”.

“literature of combat”:

It is only when national consciousness reaches a certain stage of maturity that we can speak of a national literature, a literature which takes up and explores themes that are nationalist. This literature, says Fanon, is a “literature of combat” because “it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation,” and “molds the national consciousness. Hence, literature is not merely a superstructural effect of economic struggle: it is instrumental in shaping the nation's conscious articulation of its own identity and the values at stake in that struggle.

Edward Said (1935–2004):

Said is a literary and cultural theorist, born in Jerusalem, Palestine. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is his most celebrated and debated work. It reflects concerns of the second wave of Postcolonial Studies.

‘Orientalism’:

It designates first the 4000-year history of and cultural relations between Europe and Asia; second the scientific discipline producing specialists in Oriental languages and culture from the early nineteenth century; and third the long-term images, stereotypes and general ideology about ‘the Orient’ as the ‘Other’, constructed by generations of Western scholars.

The Orient :

It is a production of Western discourse, a means of self-definition of Western culture as well as of justifying imperial domination of Oriental peoples. Said attempts to examine the stereotypes and distortions through which Islam and the East have been consumed. These stereotypes include: Islam as a heretical imitation of Christianity, Islam as a culture incapable of innovation.

America vs The Arab World

- Said suggests that the electronic postmodern world reinforces dehumanized portrayals of the Arabs, a tendency both aggravated by the Arab–Israeli conflict and intensely felt by Said himself as a Palestinian.

- “It is quite common to hear high officials in Washington and elsewhere speak of changing the map of the Middle East, as if ancient societies and myriad peoples can be shaken up like so many peanuts in a jar.”

Homi K. Bhabha (b. 1949):

He is an Indian English scholar and critical theorist. He is one of the most important figures in contemporary postcolonial studies and has developed a number of the field's neologisms and key concepts, such as hybridity, mimicry, difference, and ambivalence.

‘hybridity’ :

Homi Bhabha extends certain tenets of poststructuralism into discourses about colonialism, nationality, and culture. These tenets include a challenging of the notion of fixed identity, and the undermining of binary oppositions. The notion of “hybridity” is central to Bhabha’s work in challenging notions of identity, culture, and nation as coherent and unified entities that exhibit a linear historical development. The concept is embodied in Bhabha’s own life (as in the lives of many intellectuals from colonial nations who have been raised in Western institutions): born in Bombay, India, he was educated both in his native country and at Oxford University; he subsequently taught at universities in England and America.

“The Commitment to Theory”:

In his important essay “**The Commitment to Theory**” (1989), Bhabha attempts to respond to recent charges that literary and cultural theory (including deconstruction, Lacanianism, and the various tendencies of poststructuralism) suffers from a defect: it is inscribed within, and complicit with, a Eurocentric and imperialist discourse; and, as such, it is detached from the real concerns, the “historical exigencies and tragedies” of third world peoples.

The Location of Culture:

Of special interest to him is the way in which subjugated races **mimic** their subjugators. These ideas are explored especially in the volume *The Location of Culture* (1994). There are examples of such ‘**mimics**’ in several well known works of literature which trace the relations between the British and the Indians: in the works of Rudyard Kipling, such as *Kim*, and in E M Forster’s *A Passage to India*. The HYBRID subject is the subject of a discourse of mimicry, forced to speak from multiple, typically antagonistic locations.