

Post-colonialism

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Lecture 5.

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Historical Overview:

Without colonialism there would be no post-colonialism. Colonialism is about the dominance of a strong nation over another weaker one. Colonialism happens when a strong nation sees that its material interest and affluence require that it expand outside its borders. Colonialism is the acquisition of the colonialist, by brute force, of extra markets, extra resources of raw material and manpower from the colonies. The colonialist, while committing these atrocities against the natives and territories of the colonies, convinces himself that he stands on high moral grounds. His basic assumptions in defense of his actions are:

1. The colonized are savages in need of education and rehabilitation
2. The culture of the colonized is not up to the standard of the colonizer, and it's the moral duty of the colonizer to do something about polishing it.
3. The colonized nation is unable to manage and run itself properly, and thus it needs the wisdom and expertise of the colonizer.
4. The colonized nation embraces a set of religious beliefs incongruent and incompatible with those of the colonizer, and consequently, it is God's given duty of the colonizer to bring those stray people to the right path.
5. The colonized people pose dangerous threat to themselves and to the civilized world if left alone; and thus it is in the interest of the civilized world to bring those people under control.

As a result of this the white Europeans ventured adventurously into the so-called underdeveloped countries in Africa and Asia and dominated a lot of geographical spaces there. They subjugated the natives, imposed their will at large on them. They eroded the natives' cultures and languages, plundered the natives' wealth and established their orders based on settlers' supremacy.

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The Effect of Colonialism

Oppression is a basic ingredient of colonialism. There is no denying it that oppression dehumanizes both the oppressor and the oppressed. Thus in the thickness of colonialism, national movements, and most of them were radical and violent in their approaches, emerged to encounter the aggression of colonialism.

The natives after some period of submission, and due to the changes in world ideologies and political climate realized that the settlers are mere drones living off the blood and labor of the native without awarding him his dues. The native realized that his hopes and aspirations would remain stifled under the rule of the colonizer. Thus the native resorted to violence to shake the colonizer off his shoulder; and eventually he did.

There are so many views on the effects of colonialism. These views depend on the political and ideological position of those who disseminate them. Some claim that in spite of the ugly face of colonialism, it did a lot of good to the colonized. It brought to the colonized a new vision of life, mainly western and advanced. It fostered a strong sense of national unity. It brought industrialization and modern economy to the colonies; and above all it advanced cultural life

where it occurred. Implicit in these claims is the colonizers' high moral grounds mentioned above. On the other hand, there is the view that colonialism is pure oppression, immoral, evil, and nothing more than a form of a Neo-slavery. As a result, no possible good can come out of such evil, and it should be combated with sheer force. This radical view not only denies any positive effect of colonialism, but also incriminates those so-called apologists for colonialism.

Some of the results and effects colonialism can be put in the following terms:

1. The total or partial erosion of the colonized culture
2. The mediation of the identity and subjectivity of the colonized
3. The total rejection by some elements among the colonized of everything western as a form of reaction and protest against the colonizer.
4. The categorization of the world into ranks, such as first world, second world, the West and the rest with all the subsequent stereotyping and prototyping that follows.
5. The emergence of different forms of fundamentalism that aim at purifying their local cultures from the residues of the colonial past
6. The emergence of bourgeoisie classes in the colonies, modeling themselves after their masters, who endeavor to maintain their status quo by getting closer to Western culture
7. The emergence of societies with a lot of contradictions and split loyalties.

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Post-colonialism

In essence, what post-colonialism, as a movement, does is to expose to both the colonizer and ex-colonized the falsity or validity of their assumptions. The pioneers of Post-colonialism like Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha among others, concerned themselves with the social and cultural effect of colonization. They regarded the way in which the west paved its passage to the orient and the rest of the world as based on unconfounded truths. They asserted in their discourses that no culture is better or worse than other culture and consequently they nullified the logic of the colonialists.

In their readings of colonial and post-colonial literature and other forms of art, post-colonial critics relied heavily on other available literary theories. They manipulated Marxism, new historicism, Psychoanalysis, and deconstruction to serve their purposes.

The Assumptions of Post-colonialism

While defending its position against colonialism and imperialism, post-colonialism in literature and the arts assumes the following:

- Cultural relativism. This means that the colonialists' defilement of culture is socially, morally and politically incorrect.
- The absurdity of colonial language and discourses. A careful study of recent colonial narratives like *Passage to India* and *Heart of Darkness* suggest that the colonialist is always rendered short of expression to comprehend and fathom his colonial experience.
- Ambivalence towards authority. This ambivalence is born out of the struggle and conflict between native and settler with the outcome of the settler's disposal. This victory over the settler leads the native to question all forms of authority.
- Colonial alienation. Colonialism leads to the alienation of the native in his own land. This is described as a traumatic experience that erodes the individual's identity.

Tips for a Case Study

Passage to India, Robinson Crusoe, Round the World in Eighty Days

If you have to read any of the above narratives from colonialist and post-colonialist perspectives you have to focus on some of the following thematic elements available in the texts.

1. Defilement of the culture of the other and the supremacy of the culture of the settler. In the three books above, it is clearly observed that the narratives approve of the colonialist's undermining of the natives' culture. In *Passage to India*, and in *Round the world in 80 Days*, the colonialists chuckle at the Indian cultural habits of intimacy, privacy, hospitality; and outlaw other cultural practices like burning alive a wife with her dead husband. In *Robinson Crusoe*, the culture of the other is no more than barbaric, chaotic and anti-religious. Thus, from a post-colonial perspective, the narrative becomes biased, elitist and politically incorrect. You can expand your point by grounding it in studies about culture, identity and history.

2. Colonial alienation. The narratives above offer good examples on how the settler marginalizes the native and makes him feel so insignificant in his own land; thus alienating him from himself and his culture. Friday, in *Robinson Crusoe*, is no longer at home with himself after his encounter with Robinson Crusoe. Friday is neither Crusoe's friend nor his equal. He is his slave. He accepts this role, most likely, not because he likes it, but rather because he is unable to go back to his own previous self. This loss and confusion is attributed to the negative effect of colonialism on the individual. The same goes for Dr Aziz and his cohorts in *Passage to India*. They feel alienated from themselves and their societies because they are barely tolerated by their colonialist peers, and are envied and despised by their countrymen for their intimacy with the colonialist.

3. Exploitation and misuse of power. In most colonial narratives there are instances that expose the cruelty of the settler and the exploitation of the native, the colony and their resources. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe enslaves Friday, uses his manpower in advancing his own cause. He teaches him English, and deliberately denies the fact that Friday speaks a language. He never attempts to inquire about Friday's language, instead he makes fun of his newly acquired English. Above all he stigmatizes him by imposing a new religion on him without giving him any choice. The ultimate cruelty of the settler materializes when Crusoe sells Friday as a slave to the captain of the ship who delivered them out of the island.

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Conclusion

There is much to post-colonial literature than reading colonialist narratives only. Generations of writers and intellectuals who are born under and after colonialism write inspiringly about the struggle for independence. They write about the conflicting interests of the natives under and after colonialism. Other writers direct their attention to the conflict between the natives and the newly appointed regimes that supplanted the colonialists. Many others write about fossilized social habits and customs in need of rehabilitation or replacement. Some writers exhibit a high level of animosity to the colonialist and their agents; others are less aggressive in their representation of the colonial past, and the postcolonial present.

Test

The literary market is saturated with all sorts of vocalities on colonial and postcolonial instances waiting for you to read and discuss. Here are few names to consider: Daniel Defoe, Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, Rudyard Kipling, Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Nagib Mahfouz, Nawal Sadawi, Sahar Khalifeh, etc. I suggest you pick a couple of colonial/postcolonial narratives and observe for yourself how the narrative proceeds in the light of the following sample questions:

- How do these narratives treat their subjects?
- Track down the process of identity growth or degeneration in the characters of the narratives. Point out the causes of such growth or degeneration.
- What are the main themes or messages?
- What cultural elements are being examined, and from whose perspective?
- Are there stereotypes presented in the narratives? What are they? How are they presented? For example are the local inhabitants seen as savages, cannibals, polygamous, dirty, violent, irrational, etc.?
- How are the colonialists and their cohorts presented in the narratives? Are they tolerant, oppressive, violent, charitable, cute, white, brave, religious, hypocrites, etc?
- Are the narratives apologetic, angry, and incriminating?
- Do the narratives depict natives versus settlers, vice versa? How?
- Are there intellectual, levelheaded characters in the narratives? Who are they and whom do they serve? What is their class and orientation?
- What binary oppositions can you find in the narratives and what do they serve?
- Are the narratives, in your opinion, biased, levelheaded, objective and neutral in representation? Why?

You may add your own questions, too.