

“Postcolonial Literature”: Problems with the Term

“Postcolonial Literature” is a hot commodity these days. On the one hand, writers like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy are best-selling authors; and on the other hand, no college English department worth its salt wants to be without a scholar who can knowledgeably discourse about postcolonial theory.

But there seems to be a great deal of uncertainty as to just what the term denotes. Many of the debates among postcolonial scholars center on which national literatures or authors can be justifiably included in the postcolonial canon. Much of the discussion among postcolonial scholars involves criticisms of the term “postcolonial” itself. In addition, it is seldom mentioned but quite striking that very few actual authors of the literature under discussion embrace and use the term to label their own writing.

It should be acknowledged that postcolonial theory functions as a subdivision within the even more misleadingly named field of “cultural studies”: the whole body of generally leftist radical literary theory and criticism, which includes Marxist, Gramscian, Foucauldian, and various feminist schools of thought, among others. What all of these schools of thought have in common is a determination to analyze unjust power relationships as manifested in cultural products like literature (and film, art, etc.). Practitioners generally consider themselves politically engaged and committed to some variety or other of liberation process.

It is also important to understand that not all postcolonial scholars are literary scholars. Postcolonial theory is applied to political science, to history, and to other related fields. People who call themselves postcolonial scholars generally see themselves as part of a large (if poorly defined and disorganized) movement to expose and struggle against the influence of large, rich nations (mostly European, plus the U.S.) on poorer nations (mostly in the southern hemisphere). Taken literally, the term “postcolonial literature” would seem to label literature written by people living in countries formerly colonized by other nations. This is undoubtedly, what the term originally meant, but there are many problems with this definition.

First, literal colonization is not the exclusive object of postcolonial study. Lenin’s classic analysis of imperialism led to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony” which distinguishes between literal political dominance and dominance through ideas and culture (what many critics of American influence call the “Coca-Colonization” of the world). Sixties thinkers developed the concept of neo-imperialism to label relationships like that between the U.S. and many Latin American countries which, while nominally independent, had economies dominated by American business interests, often backed up by American military forces. The term “banana republic” was originally a sarcastic label for such subjugated countries, ruled more by the influence of the United Fruit Corporation than by their own indigenous governments.

Second, among the works commonly studied under this label are novels like Claude McKay’s *Banjo* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, which were written while the nations in question (Jamaica and Nigeria) were still colonies. Some scholars attempt to solve this problem by arguing that the term should denote works written after colonization, not only those created after independence; but also that would be “post colonization” literature. Few people understand the term in this sense outside a small circle of scholars working in the field.

Third, some critics argue that the term misleadingly implies that colonialism is over when in fact most of the nations involved are still culturally and economically subordinated to the rich industrial states through various forms of neo-colonialism even though they are technically independent.

Fourth, it can be argued that this way of defining a whole era is Eurocentric, that it singles out the colonial experience as the most important fact about the countries involved. Surely that experience has had many powerful influences; but

this is not necessarily the framework within which writers from—say—India, who have a long history of precolonial literature, wish to be viewed.

For instance, R. K. Narayan—one of the most popular and widely read of modern Indian writers—displays a remarkable indifference to the historical experience of colonialism, a fact which results in his being almost entirely ignored by postcolonial scholars. V. S. Naipaul is so fierce a critic of the postcolonial world despite his origins as a descendant of Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad that he is more often cited as an opponent than as an ally in the postcolonial struggle.

In fact, it is not uncommon for citizens of “postcolonial” countries to accuse Americans and Europeans of practicing a form of neocolonialism themselves in viewing their history through this particular lens. Postcolonial criticism could be compared to the tendency of Hollywood films set in such countries to focus on the problems of Americans and Europeans within those societies while marginalizing the views of their native peoples.

Fifth, many “postcolonial” authors do not share the general orientation of postcolonial scholars toward engaging in an ongoing critique of colonialism. Nigerian writers Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, for instance, after writing powerful indictments of the British in their country, turned to exposing the deeds of native-born dictators and corrupt officials within their independent homeland. Although postcolonial scholars would explain this corruption as a by-product of colonialism, such authors commonly have little interest in pursuing this train of thought.

Although there has been sporadic agitation in some African quarters for reparations for the slavery era, most writers of fiction, drama, and poetry see little point in continually rehashing the past to solve today’s problems. It is striking how little modern fiction from formerly colonized nations highlights the colonial past. Non-fiction writers often point out that Hindu-Muslim conflicts in South Asia are in part the heritage of attempts by the British administration in India to play the two groups of against each other (not to mention the special role assigned to the Sikhs in the British army); yet Indian fiction about these conflicts rarely points to such colonial causes. A good example is Kushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956) which deals directly with the partition of India from an almost exclusively Indian perspective.

Indeed, “postcolonial” writers often move to England or North America (because they have been exiled, or because they find a more receptive audience there, or simply in search of a more comfortable mode of living) and even sometimes—like Soyinka—call upon the governments of these “neocolonialist” nations to come to the aid of freedom movements seeking to overthrow native tyrants.

Sixth, “postcolonialism” as a term lends itself to very broad use. Australians and Canadians sometimes claim to live in postcolonial societies, but many would refuse them the label because their literature is dominated by European immigrants, and is therefore a literature of privilege rather than of protest. According to the usual postcolonial paradigm only literature written by native peoples in Canada and Australia would truly qualify.

Similarly, the label is usually denied to U.S. literature, though America’s identity was formed in contradistinction to that of England, because the U.S. is usually viewed as the very epitome of a modern neo-colonial nation, imposing its values, economic pressures, and political interests on a wide range of weaker countries.

The Irish are often put forward as an instance of a postcolonial European people, and Irish ones for that reason have inspired indeed many African writers. Yet some of the more nationalist ones (like Yeats) tended toward distressingly conservative—even reactionary—politics, and James Joyce had the utmost contempt for Irish nationalism. It is not clear how many Irish authors would have accepted the term if they had known of it.

Although postcolonial theory generally confines itself to the past half-century, it can be argued that everyone has been colonized at some time or other. Five thousand years ago, Sumer started the process by uniting formerly independent city-states, and Narmer similarly subjugated formerly independent Upper and Lower Egypt. Rushdie likes to point out that England itself is a postcolonial nation, having been conquered by Romans and Normans, among others.

Not only is the term “postcolonial” exceedingly fuzzy, it can also be argued that it is also often ineffective. A good deal of postcolonial debate has to do with rival claims to victimhood, with each side claiming the sympathies of right-thinking people because of their past sufferings. The conflicts between Bosnians and Serbs, Palestinians and Jews, Turks and Greeks, Hindu and Muslim Indians, and Catholic and Protestant Irish illustrate the problems with using historical suffering as justification for a political program. It is quite true that Europeans and Americans often arrogantly dismiss their own roles in creating the political messes of postcolonial nations around the world; but it is unclear how accusations against them promote the welfare of those nations. In addition, when they are made to feel guilty, countries—like individuals—are as likely to behave badly as they are to behave generously.

It may make American and European scholars feel better to disassociate themselves from the crimes of their ancestors (which are admittedly, enormously bloody and oppressive, and should be acknowledged and studied—see resources below), but people struggling for freedom in oppressed nations are more likely to draw inspiration from the quintessentially European Enlightenment concept of rights under natural law than they are to turn to postcolonial theory. Similarly, European capitalist market theory is far more attractive to most people struggling against poverty in these nations than are the varieties of socialism propounded by postcolonial theoreticians.

“Postcolonial” is also a troublesome term because it draws some very arbitrary lines. South African writers Athol Fugard and Nadine Gordimer are often excluded from postcolonial courses, although their works were powerful protests against apartheid and they have lived and worked far more in Africa than, say, Buchi Emicheta, who emigrated to England as a very young woman and has done all of her writing there—because they are white. A host of fine Indian writers is neglected simply because they do not write in English on the sensible grounds that India has a millennia-long tradition of writing, which should not be arbitrarily linked to the British imperial episode.

Of those who write in English, Anita Desai is included, though she is half-German. Ngugi wa Thiong’o is included even though he now writes primarily in Gikuyu. Bharati Mukherjee specifically rejects the label “Indian-American,” though she is an immigrant from India, and Rushdie prefers to be thought of as a sort of multinational hybrid (though he has, on occasion, used the label “postcolonial” in his own writing). Hanif Kureishi is more English than Pakistani in his outlook, and many Caribbean-born writers living in England are now classed as “Black British.” What determines when you are too acculturated to be counted as postcolonial: where you were born? How long you have lived abroad. Your subject matter? These and similar questions are the object of constant debate.

In fact, postcolonial theoretician Homi Bhabha developed the term “hybridity” to capture the sense that many writers have of belonging to *both* cultures. More and more writers, like Rushdie, reject the older paradigm of “exile” which was meaningful to earlier generations of emigrants in favor of accepting their blend of cultures as a positive synthesis. This celebration of cultural blending considerably blurs the boundaries laid down by postcolonial theory.

In practice, postcolonial literary studies are often sharply divided along linguistic lines in a way, which simply reinforces Eurocentric attitudes. Latin American postcolonial studies are seldom explored by those laboring in English departments. Francophone African literature is generally neglected by Anglophone African scholars. Because of these failures to cut across linguistic boundaries, the roles of England and France are exaggerated over those of the colonized regions.

It can even be asked whether the entire premise of postcolonial studies is valid: that examining these literatures can give voice to formerly suppressed peoples. This is the question asked by Gayatri Spivak in her famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Using Antonio Gramsci’s arcane label for oppressed people, she points out that anyone who has achieved enough literacy and sophistication to produce a widely read piece of fiction is almost certainly by that very fact disqualified from speaking for the people he or she is supposed to represent. The “Subaltern Group” of Indian scholars has tried to claim the term to support their own analyses (a similar project exists among Latin American scholars), but the nagging question raised by Spivak remains.

It is notable that whenever writers from the postcolonial world like Soyinka, Derek Walcott, or Rushdie receive wide recognition they are denounced as unrepresentative and inferior to other, more obscure but more “legitimate” spokespeople.

This phenomenon is related to the question of “essentialism” which features so largely in contemporary political and literary theory. Usually the term is used negatively, to describe stereotypical ideas of—to take as an example my own ancestors—the Irish as drunken, irresponsible louts. However, protest movements built on self-esteem resort to essentialism in a positive sense, as in the many varieties of “black pride” movements which have emerged at various times, with the earliest perhaps being the concept of “négritude” developed by Caribbean and African writers living in Paris in the 1930s and 40s. However, each new attempt to create a positive group identity tends to be seen by at least some members of the group as restrictive, as a new form of oppressive essentialism.

Faced with the dilemma of wanting to make positive claims for certain ethnic groups or nationalities while simultaneously acknowledging individualism, some critics have put forward the concept of “strategic essentialism” in which one can speak in rather simplified forms of group identity for the purposes of struggle while debating within the group the finer shades of difference.

There are two major problems with this strategy, however. First, there are always dissenters within each group who speak out against the new corporate identity, and they are especially likely to be taken seriously by the very audiences targeted by strategic essentialism. Second, white conservatives have caught on to this strategy: they routinely denounce affirmative action, for instance, by quoting Martin Luther King, as if his only goal was “color blindness” rather than real economic and social equality. They snipe, fairly effectively, at any group, which puts forward corporate claims for any ethnic group by calling them racist. Strategic essentialism envisions a world in which internal debates among oppressed people can be sealed off from public debates with oppressors. Such a world does not exist.

Similarly, “strategic postcolonialism” is likely to be a self-defeating strategy, since most writers on the subject publicly and endlessly debate the problems associated with the term. In addition, the label is too fuzzy to serve as a useful tool for long in any exchange of polemics. It lacks the sharp edge necessary to make it serve as a useful weapon.

However, those of us unwilling to adopt the label “postcolonial” are hard put to find an appropriate term for what we study. The old “Commonwealth literature” is obviously too confining and outdated as well as being extremely Eurocentric. “Anglophone literature” excludes the many rich literatures of Africa, for instance, written in European languages other than English, and taken in the literal sense, it does not distinguish between mainstream British and American writing and the material under discussion. “New literature written in English” (or “englishes” as some say) puts too much emphasis on newness (McKay is hardly *new*) and again excludes the non-English-speaking world. “Third-world” makes no sense since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist “second world.” “Literature of developing nations” buys into an economic paradigm that most “postcolonial” scholars reject.

The more it is examined, the more the postcolonial sphere crumbles. Though Jamaican, Nigerian, and Indian writers have much to say to each other, it is not clear that they should be lumped together. We continue to use the term “postcolonial” as a *pis aller*, and to argue about it until something better comes along.

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