

## Introduction to Postcolonial Studies

The field of Postcolonial Studies has been gaining prominence since the 1970s. Some would date its rise in the Western academy from the publication of Edward Said's influential critique of Western constructions of the Orient in his 1978 book, *Orientalism*. The growing currency within the academy of the term "postcolonial" (sometimes hyphenated) was consolidated by the appearance in 1989 of *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. Since then, the use of cognate terms "Commonwealth" and "Third World" that were used to describe the literature of Europe's former colonies has become rarer. Although there is considerable debate over the precise parameters of the field and the definition of the term "postcolonial," in a very general sense, it is the study of the interactions between European nations and the societies they colonized in the modern period. The European empire is said to have held sway over more than 85% of the rest of the globe by the time of the First World War, having consolidated its control over several centuries. The sheer extent and duration of the European empire and its disintegration after the Second World War have led to widespread interest in postcolonial literature and criticism in our own times.

The list of former colonies of European powers is a long one. They are divided into settler (eg. Australia, Canada) and non-settler countries (India, Jamaica, Nigeria, Senegal, Sri Lanka). Countries such as South Africa and Zimbabwe which were partially settled by colonial populations complicate even this simple division between settler and non-settler. The widely divergent experiences of these countries suggest that "postcolonial" is a very loose term. In strictly definitional terms, for instance, the United States might also be described as a postcolonial country, but it is not perceived as such because of its position of power in world politics in the present, its displacement of native American populations, and its annexation of other parts of the world in what may be seen as a form of colonization. For that matter, other settler countries such as Canada and Australia are sometimes omitted from the category "postcolonial" because of their relatively shorter struggle for independence, their loyalist tendencies toward the mother country which colonized them, and the absence of problems of racism or of the imposition of a foreign language. It could, however, be argued that the relationship between these countries to the mother country is often one of margin to center, making their experience relevant to a better understanding of colonialism.

The debate surrounding the status of settler countries as postcolonial suggests that issues in Postcolonial Studies often transcend the boundaries of strict definition. In a literal sense, "postcolonial" is that which has been preceded by colonization. The second college edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines it as "of, relating to, or being the time following the establishment of independence in a colony." In practice, however, the term is used much more loosely. While the denotative definition suggests otherwise,

it is not only the period after the departure of the imperial powers that concerns those in the field, but that before independence as well.

**post·co·lo·ni·al** (pōst'kə-lō'nē-əl) *adj.* Of, relating to, or being the time following the establishment of independence in a colony: *postcolonial economics.*

The formation of the colony through various mechanisms of control and the various stages in the development of anti-colonial nationalism interest many scholars in the field. By extension, sometimes temporal considerations give way to spatial ones (i.e. in an interest in the postcolony as a geographical space with a history prior or even external to the experience of colonization rather than in the postcolonial as a particular period) in that the cultural productions and social formations of the colony long before colonization are used to better understand the experience of colonization. Moreover, the "postcolonial" sometimes includes countries that have yet to achieve independence, or people in First World countries who are minorities, or even independent colonies that now contend with "neocolonial" forms of subjugation through expanding capitalism and globalization. In all of these senses, the "postcolonial," rather than indicating only a specific and materially historical event, seems to describe the second half of the twentieth-century in general as a period in the aftermath of the heyday of colonialism. Even more generically, the

"postcolonial" is used to signify a position against imperialism and Eurocentrism. Western ways of knowledge production and dissemination in the past and present then become objects of study for those seeking alternative means of expression. As the foregoing discussion suggests, the term thus yokes a diverse range of experiences, cultures, and problems; the resultant confusion is perhaps predictable.

The expansiveness of the "postcolonial" has given rise to lively debates. Even as some deplore its imprecision and lack of historical and material particularity, others argue that most former colonies are far from free of colonial influence or domination and so cannot be postcolonial in any genuine sense. In other words, the overhasty celebration of independence masks the march of neocolonialism in the guise of modernization and development in an age of increasing globalization and transnationalism; meanwhile, there are colonized countries that are still under foreign control. The emphasis on colonizer/colonized relations, moreover, obscures the operation of internal oppression within the colonies. Still others berate the tendency in the Western academy to be more receptive to postcolonial literature and theory that is compatible with postmodern formulations of hybridity, syncretization, and pastiche while ignoring the critical realism of writers more interested in the specifics of social and racial oppression. The lionization of diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, for instance, might be seen as a privileging of the transnational, migrant sensibility at the expense of more local struggles in the postcolony. Further, the rise of Postcolonial Studies at a time of growing transnational movements of capital, labor, and culture is viewed by some with suspicion in that it is

thought to deflect attention away from the material realities of exploitation both in the First and the Third World.

## Major Issues

Despite the reservations and debates, research in Postcolonial Studies is growing because postcolonial critique allows for a wide-ranging investigation into power relations in various contexts. The formation of empire, the impact of colonization on postcolonial history, economy, science, and culture, the cultural productions of colonized societies, feminism and postcolonialism, agency for marginalized people, and the state of the postcolony in contemporary economic and cultural contexts are some broad topics in the field.

The following questions suggest some of the major issues in the field:

How did the experience of colonization affect those who were colonized while also influencing the colonizers? How were colonial powers able to gain control over so large a portion of the non-Western world? What traces have been left by colonial education, science and technology in postcolonial societies? How do these traces affect decisions about development and modernization in postcolonies? What were the forms of resistance against colonial control? How did colonial education and language influence the culture and identity of the colonized? How did Western science, technology, and medicine change existing knowledge systems? What are the emergent forms of postcolonial identity after the departure of the colonizers? To what extent has decolonization (a reconstruction free from colonial influence) been possible? Are Western formulations of postcolonialism overemphasizing hybridity at the expense of material realities? Should decolonization proceed through an aggressive return to the precolonial past (related topic: Essentialism)? How do gender, race, and class function in colonial and postcolonial discourse? Are new forms of imperialism replacing colonization and how?

Along with these questions, there are some more that are particularly pertinent to postcolonial literature: Should the writer use a colonial language to reach a wider audience or return to a native language more relevant to groups in the postcolony? Which writers should be included in the postcolonial canon? How can texts in translation from non-colonial languages enrich our understanding of postcolonial issues? Has the preponderance of the postcolonial novel led to a neglect of other genres?

## Major Figures

Some of the best known names in Postcolonial literature and theory are those of Chinua

Achebe, Homi Bhabha, Buchi Emecheta, Frantz Fanon, Jamaica Kincaid, Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. A more comprehensive although by no means exhaustive list follows.

**LITERATURE:** Chinua Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo, Peter Abrahams, Ayi Kwei Armah, Aime Cesaire, John Pepper Clark, Michelle Cliff, Jill Ker Conway, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Anita Desai, Assia Djebar, Marguerite Duras, Buchi Emecheta, Nuruddin Farah, Amitav Ghosh, Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, Merle Hodge, C.L.R. James, Ben Jelloun, Farida Karodia, Jamaica Kincaid, Hanif Kureishi, George Lamming, Dambudzo Marechera, Rohinton Mistry, Ezekiel Mphahlele, V. S. Naipaul, Taslima Nasrin, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Flora Nwapa, Grace Ogot, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Gabriel Okara, Ben Okri, Michael Ondaatje, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Allan Sealy, Shyam Selvadurai, Leopold Senghor, Vikram Seth, Bapsi Sidhwa, Wole Soyinka, Sara Suleri, M.G.Vassanji, Derek Walcott, etc.

**FILM:** Shyam Benegal, Gurinder Chadha, Claire Denis, Shekhar Kapoor, Srinivas Krishna, Farida Ben Lyazid, Ken Loach, Deepa Mehta, Ketan Mehta, Mira Nair, Peter Ormrod, Horace Ove, Pratibha Parmar, Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ousmane Sembene, etc.

**THEORY:** Aijaz Ahmad, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Bill Ashcroft, Homi Bhabha, Amilcar Cabral, Partha Chatterjee, Rey Chow, Frantz Fanon, Gareth Griffiths, Ranajit Guha, Bob Hodge, Abdul JanMohamed, Ania Loomba, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Vijay Mishra, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Arun Mukherjee, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Benita Parry, Edward Said, Kumkum Sangari, Jenny Sharpe, Stephen Slemon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Aruna Srivastava, Sara Suleri, Gauri Viswanathan, Helen Tiffin, etc.

## **Postcolonialism**

Literally, postcolonialism refers to the period following the decline of colonialism, e.g., the end or lessening of domination by European empires. Although the term postcolonialism generally refers to the period after colonialism, the distinction is not always made. In its use as a critical approach, postcolonialism refers to "a collection of theoretical and critical strategies used to examine the culture (literature, politics, history, and so forth) of former colonies of the European empires, and their relation to the rest of the world" (Makaryk 155 - see General Resources below). Among the many challenges facing postcolonial writers are the attempt both to resurrect their culture and to combat preconceptions about their culture. Edward Said, for example, uses the word Orientalism to describe the discourse about the East constructed by the West. Major figures include Edward Said (sah-

EED), Homi Bhabha (bah-bah), Frantz Fanon (fah-NAWN), Gayatri Spivak, Chinua Achebe (ah-CHAY-bay) , Wole Soyinka, Salman Rushdie, Jamaica Kincaid, and Buchi Emecheta.

**Key Terms:**

**Alterity** - "lack of identification with some part of one's personality or one's community, differentness, otherness"

**Diaspora** (di-ASP-er-ah- "is used (without capitalization) to refer to any people or ethnic population forced or induced to leave their traditional ethnic homelands, being dispersed throughout other parts of the world, and the ensuing developments in their dispersal and culture" (Wikipedia).

**Eurocentrism** - "the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing emphasis on European (and, generally, Western) concerns, culture and values at the expense of those of other cultures. It is an instance of ethnocentrism, perhaps especially relevant because of its alignment with current and past real power structures in the world" (Dictionary.LaborLawTalk.com)

**Hybridity** - "an important concept in post-colonial theory, referring to the integration (or, mingling) of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and the colonized cultures ("integration" may be too orderly a word to represent the variety of stratagems, desperate or cunning or good-willed, by which people adapt themselves to the necessities and the opportunities of more or less oppressive or invasive cultural impositions, live into alien cultural patterns through their own structures of understanding, thus producing something familiar but new). The assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, the cross-fertilization of cultures, can be seen as positive, enriching, and dynamic, as well as as oppressive" (from Dr. John Lye - see General Literary Theory Websites below).

**Imperialism** - "the policy of extending the control or authority over foreign entities as a means of acquisition and/or maintenance of empires, either through direct territorial control or through indirect methods of exerting control on the politics and/or economy of other countries. The term is used by some to describe the policy of a country in maintaining colonies and dominance over distant lands, regardless of whether the country calls itself an empire" (Dictionary.LaborLawTalk.com).

## Some Issues in Postcolonial Theory

Post-colonial theory deals with the reading and writing of literature written in previously or currently colonized countries, or literature written in colonizing countries which deals with colonization or colonized peoples. It focuses particularly on

1. the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities, and inscribes the inferiority, of the colonized people
2. on literature by colonized peoples which attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that past's inevitable otherness.

It can also deal with the way in which literature in colonizing countries appropriates the language, images, scenes, traditions and so forth of colonized countries.

This page addresses some of the complexities of the post-colonial situation, in terms of the writing and reading situation of the colonized people, and of the colonizing people.

## The literature(s) of the colonized

● Postcolonial theory is built in large part around the concept of **otherness**. There are however problems with or complexities to the concept of otherness, for instance:

1. otherness includes doubleness, both identity and difference, so that every other, every different than and excluded by is dialectically created and includes the values and meaning of the colonizing culture even as it rejects its power to define;
2. the Western concept of the oriental is based, as Abdul JanMohamed argues, on the Manichean allegory (seeing the world as divided into mutually excluding opposites): if the west is ordered, rational, masculine, good, then the orient is chaotic, irrational, feminine, evil. Simply to reverse this polarizing is to be complicit in its totalizing and identity-destroying power (all is reduced to a set of dichotomies, black or white, etc.);
3. colonized peoples are highly diverse in their nature and in their traditions, and as beings in cultures they are both constructed and changing, so that while they may be 'other' from the colonizers, they are also different one from another and from their own pasts, and should not be totalized or essentialized -- through such concepts as a black consciousness, Indian soul, aboriginal culture and so forth. This totalization and essentialization is often a form of nostalgia which has its inspiration more in the thought of the colonizers than of the colonized, and it serves give the colonizer a sense of the unity of his culture while mystifying that of others; as John Frow remarks, it is a making of a mythical One out of many...
4. the colonized peoples will also be other than their pasts, which can be reclaimed but never reconstituted, and so must be revisited and realized in partial, fragmented ways. You can't go home again.

● Postcolonial theory is also built around the concept of resistance, of resistance as subversion, or opposition, or mimicry -- but with the haunting problem that resistance always inscribes the resisted into the texture of the resisting: it is a two-edged sword. As well, the concept of resistance carries with it or can carry with it ideas about human freedom, liberty, identity, individuality, etc., which ideas may not have been held, or held in the same way, in the colonized culture's view of humankind.

● On a simple political/cultural level, there are problems with the fact that to produce a literature which helps to reconstitute the identity of the colonized one may have to function in at the very least the means of production of the colonizers -- the writing, publishing, advertising and production of books, for instance. These may well require a

centralized economic and cultural system which is ultimately either a western import or a hybrid form, uniting local conceptions with western conceptions.

● The concept of producing a national or cultural literature is in most cases a concept foreign to the traditions of the colonized peoples, who (a) had no literature as it is conceived in the western traditions or in fact no literature or writing at all, and/or b) did not see art as having the same function as constructing and defining cultural identity, and/or c) were, like the peoples of the West Indies, transported into a wholly different geographical/political/economic/cultural world. (India, a partial exception, had a longestablished tradition of letters; on the other hand it was a highly balkanized sub-continent with little if any common identity and with many divergent sub-cultures). It is always a changed, a reclaimed but hybrid identity, which is created or called forth by the colonizeds' attempts to constitute and represent identity.

● The very concepts of nationality and identity may be difficult to conceive or convey in the cultural traditions of colonized peoples.

● There are complexities and perplexities around the difficulty of conceiving how a colonized country can reclaim or reconstitute its identity in a language that is now but was not its own language, and genres which are now but were not the genres of the colonized. One result is that the literature may be written in the style of speech of the inhabitants of a particular colonized people or area, which language use does not read like Standard English and in which literature the standard literary allusions and common metaphors and symbols may be inappropriate and/or may be replaced by allusions and tropes which are alien to British culture and usage. It can become very difficult then for others to recognize or respect the work as literature (which concept may not itself have relevance -- see next point).

● There other are times when the violation of the aesthetic norms of western literature is inevitable,

1. as colonized writers search to encounter their culture's ancient yet transformed heritage, and
2. as they attempt to deal with problems of social order and meaning so pressing that the normal aesthetic transformations of western high literature are not relevant, make no sense.

The idea that good or high literature may be irrelevant and misplaced at a point in a culture's history, and therefore for a particular cultural usage not be good literature at all, is difficult for us who are raised in the culture which strong aesthetic ideals to accept.

● The development (development itself may be an entirely western concept) of hybrid and reclaimed cultures in colonized countries is uneven, disparate, and might defy those

notions of order and common sense which may be central not only to western thinking but to literary forms and traditions produced through western thought.

●The term 'hybrid' used above refers to the concept of **hybridity**, an important concept in post-colonial theory, referring to the integration (or, mingling) of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and the colonized cultures ("integration" may be too orderly a word to represent the variety of stratagems, desperate or cunning or good-willed, by which people adapt themselves to the necessities and the opportunities of more or less oppressive or invasive cultural impositions, live into alien cultural patterns through their own structures of understanding, thus producing something familiar but new). The assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, the cross-fertilization of cultures, can be seen as positive, enriching, and dynamic, as well as as oppressive. "Hybridity" is also a useful concept for helping to break down the false sense that colonized cultures -- or colonizing cultures for that matter -- are monolithic, or have essential, unchanging features.

●The representation of these uneven and often hybrid, polyglot, multivalent cultural sites (reclaimed or discovered colonized cultures searching for identity and meaning in a complex and partially alien past) may not look very much like the representations of bourgeois culture in western art, ideologically shaped as western art is to represent its own truths (that is, guiding fictions) about itself.

●To quote Homi Bhabha on the complex issue of representation and meaning from his article in Greenblatt and Gun's *Redrawing the Boundaries*,

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the middle passage of slaver and indenture, the voyage out of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. Culture is translational because such spatial histories of displacement -- now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of global media technologies -- make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, a rather complex issue. It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences -- literature, art, music, ritual, life, death -- and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation -- migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation -- makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The natural(ized), unifying discourse of nation, peoples, or authentic folk tradition, those embedded myths of cultures particularity, cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition.



## **The literature(s) of the colonists:**

In addition to the post-colonial literature of the colonized, there exists as well the postcolonial literature of the colonizers.

● As people of British heritage moved into new landscapes, established new founding national myths, and struggled to define their own national literature against the force and tradition of the British tradition, they themselves, although of British or European heritage, ultimately encountered the originating traditions as Other, a tradition and a writing to define oneself against (or, which amounts to the same thing, to equal or surpass). Every colony had an emerging literature which was an imitation of but differed from the central British tradition, which articulated in local terms the myths and experience of a new culture, and which expressed that new culture as, to an extent, divergent from and even opposed to the culture of the "home", or colonizing, nation.

● The colonizers largely inhabited countries which absorbed the peoples of a number of other heritages and cultures (through immigration, migration, the forced mingling of differing local cultures, etc.), and in doing so often adapted to use the myths, symbols and definitions of various traditions. In this way as well the literature of the hitherto colonizers becomes 'post-colonial'. (It is curiously the case that British literature itself has been colonized by colonial/postcolonial writers writing in Britain out of colonial experiences and a colonial past.)

● In this regard a salient difference between colonialist literature (literature written by colonizers, in the colonized country, on the model of the "home" country and often for the home country as an audience) and post-colonial literature, is that colonialist literature is an attempt to replicate, continue, equal, the original tradition, to write in accord with British standards; postcolonial literature is often (but not inevitably) self-consciously a literature of otherness and resistance, and is written out of the specific local experience.

<<http://faculty.ksu.edu.sa/Nugali/English%20461/Postcolonialism.pdf>>