

An Introduction to Post-Colonialism, Post-colonial Theory and Post-colonial Literature

Where does it come from?

Post-colonial literature comes from Britain's former colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and India. Many post-colonial writers write in English and focus on common themes such as the struggle for independence, emigration, national identity, allegiance and childhood.

What is Post-colonial theory?

Postcolonial theory is a literary theory or critical approach that deals with literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their peoples as its subject matter. The theory is based around concepts of otherness and resistance.

Postcolonial theory became part of the critical toolbox in the 1970s, and many practitioners credit Edward Said's book *Orientalism* as being the founding work.

Typically, the proponents of the theory examine the ways in which writers from colonized countries attempt to articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonizers. They also examine ways in which the literature of the colonial powers is used to justify colonialism through the perpetuation of images of the colonized as inferior. However, attempts at coming up with a single definition of postcolonial theory have proved controversial, and some writers have strongly critiqued the whole concept.

Some Issues in Postcolonial Theory:

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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 the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities, and inscribes the inferiority, of the colonized people 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: 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; the western concept of the oriental is based, as Abdul Jan Mohamed 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.); 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... 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 long-established 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 colonizers' attempts to constitute and represent identity. (hybridity = mixing of cultures; ex. double consciousness – one goes to an American University and gets educated then returns to native land only to find that he/she cannot identify with the culture anymore)

- 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, as colonized writers search to encounter their culture's ancient yet transformed heritage, and 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 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 (cultures who have been spread forth = Egyptians move to Jersey-they are not Americans but they cannot go back to Egypt. they are no Egyptian-Americans. This links to hybridity which is usually a positive answer to differences) 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.

Major Post-colonial Theorists:

Homi K. Bhabha "The Commitment to Theory"

Edward W. Said *Orientalism*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Words To Know:

Hybridity:

1. [...] 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.
2. The mixing of cultures; ex. double consciousness – one goes to an American University and gets educated then returns to native land only to find that he/she cannot identify with the culture anymore

Diaspora:

1. The dispersion of Jews outside of Israel from the sixth century B.C., when they were exiled to Babylonia, until the present time.
2. often **diaspora** The body of Jews or Jewish communities outside Palestine or modern Israel.
3. **diaspora** **a.** A dispersion of a people from their original homeland. **b.** The community formed by such a people: "*the glutinous dish known throughout the [West African] diaspora as ... fufu*" (Jonell Nash).
4. **diaspora** A dispersion of an originally homogeneous entity, such as a language or culture: "*the diaspora of English into several mutually incomprehensible languages*" (Randolph Quirk).