



“Postcolonial Literature: Its Importance And Modern-Day Relevance”

Dharmesh kumar Sunilbhai Patel^{1*}

^{1*} Assistant Professor, English Institute: L.D. College of Engineering, Ahmedabad-15

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial literature, a significant and influential literary movement, examines the aftermath of colonialism and its enduring impacts on former colonies. At the outset, this paper provides an introduction to postcolonial literature, highlighting its importance and relevance in modern-day society. The term 'Postcolonialism' is explored, tracing its origins and development as a field of study. This paper critically presents various representative authors, including Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Michael Ondaatje, Frantz Fanon, Derek Walcott, and J. M. Coetzee, alongside notable female writers such as Jamaica Kincaid, Isabel Allende, and Eavan Boland.

The discussion delves into some of the most renowned works within the postcolonial literary movement, critically examining their postcolonial elements. Prominent literary works such as "Things Fall Apart," "Midnight's Children," "Disgrace," "The English Patient," "Ceremony," "A Small Place," and "Decolonizing the Mind" are analyzed for their thematic content and stylistic approaches. Common motifs and themes, including 'Identity,' 'Language,' and 'Racism,' are explored in depth, along with unique settings, narrative points of view, and distinct narrative styles.

The political and contextual reflections inherent in postcolonial literature are also examined, showcasing how these works critique and respond to colonial histories and their legacies. The paper concludes with a comprehensive review of the literature, drawing conclusions about the enduring significance and modern-day relevance of postcolonial literature. This analysis underscores the movement's role in addressing cultural dominance, racial discrimination, and the quest for identity, while highlighting its continued importance in understanding contemporary global dynamics.

Keywords: Postcolonial literature, colonialism, identity, language, racism, cultural dominance, postcolonial themes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'Postcolonialism' broadly refers to how race, ethnicity, culture, and human identity are represented in the contemporary era, particularly following the independence of many colonized nations. It is intricately linked with imperialism from the onset of colonization up to the 21st century. The term 'imperialism' originates from the Latin word 'imperium,' which encompasses various meanings such as power, authority, command, dominion, realm, and empire (Habib 737). Postcolonialism explores the dynamics between the 'coloniser' and the 'colonised.' Historically, much of the world was dominated by European powers, with the British Empire notably encompassing over a quarter of the earth's territory, meaning that one in four people was a subject of Queen Victoria.

Postcolonial literature and art are produced in countries like India, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Senegal, and Australia following their independence. Edward Said's influential work, "Orientalism," critiques Western portrayals of Eastern cultures and is a key text in Postcolonial Studies. Countries like Canada and Australia, often termed as 'settler' nations, are part of the British Commonwealth of Nations. Renowned postcolonial authors, such as Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Michael Ondaatje, Frantz Fanon, Derek Walcott, J.M. Coetzee, Jamaica Kincaid, Isabel Allende, and Eavan Boland, frequently explore the relationships between colonisers and the

colonised in their works, including "Things Fall Apart" (1958), "Midnight's Children" (1981), "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1980), "Disgrace" (1999), and "The English Patient" (1992).



<https://study.com/academy/lesson/post-colonialism-in-literature-definition-theory-examples.html>

1.1 Historical Context

Postcolonial literature emerged in response to the extensive period of European colonialism, which began in the late 15th century and continued through the mid-20th century. During this time, European powers such as Britain, France, Spain, and Portugal established vast empires that spanned Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific. These colonial enterprises were driven by economic exploitation, political domination, and cultural superiority. Colonizers imposed their languages, cultures, and systems of governance on the colonized, often erasing or marginalizing indigenous traditions and identities. The decolonization process, which gained momentum after World War II, led to the independence of many former colonies. This period saw the rise of postcolonial literature, as writers from newly independent nations began to reflect on their histories, assert their cultural identities, and critique the lingering effects of colonial rule (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007). The transition from colonial rule to independence was marked by significant social, political, and economic upheaval. Many postcolonial writers focused on the challenges faced by their nations as they navigated the complexities of sovereignty and self-determination. The literature produced during this time often explored themes of identity, resistance, and the reassertion of indigenous cultures. For instance, Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" (1958) examines the impact of British colonialism on Igbo society in Nigeria, while Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" (1981) intertwines personal and national histories to depict the tumultuous partition of India. These works, among others, highlighted the resilience and creativity of postcolonial societies and underscored the need to reclaim and reinterpret histories that had been distorted or suppressed by colonial narratives (Loomba, 2005). Postcolonial literature thus became a vital means of cultural expression and political commentary, providing a voice to those who had been historically marginalized and oppressed.

2. THE PROLIFERATION OF POSTCOLONIALISM

The decline of the British Empire post-World War II was a pivotal factor in shaping global politics in the latter half of the 20th century. Britain relinquished most of its colonies in regions such as Africa, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Pacific, Southeast Asia, and the Far East, including the Persian Gulf. By the 17th century, Britain had established control over parts of North America, Canada, the Caribbean Islands, and had engaged in the slave trade from Africa while developing markets in India. Despite this, Britain perceived its imperial expansion as a moral duty, with figures like Rudyard Kipling referring to this as the 'white man's burden' of civilizing supposedly incapable self-governing populations.

In response to colonization, countries such as India, Pakistan, Ireland, Kenya, and Nigeria began producing literature that reflected their experiences during and after colonial rule. Frantz Fanon's seminal work, "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961), provided a theoretical foundation for future postcolonial studies, arguing that a new world could only emerge through a violent revolution led by African farmers. His book "Black Skin, White Masks" (1952) draws on his personal experiences to explore the psychological effects of colonization on both the colonised and the coloniser, foreshadowing themes later explored in Said's "Orientalism."

Edward Said's "Orientalism" critiques the Western depiction of the East as irrational, anti-Western, primitive, and deceitful. According to Said, Orientalism is an ideology driven by the colonizers' desire to understand their subjects to better control them. Said argues, "To write about the Arab Oriental world...is to write with the authority of a nation...with the unquestioning certainty of absolute truth backed by absolute force." Another prominent postcolonial theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose work centers on the intersections of gender and ethnicity in postcolonial subjects, views her role as that of a postcolonial critic. Homi Bhabha, in his exploration of 'cultural difference,' uses what he calls 'the language metaphor,' describing cultures in semiotic terms as systems that function and assign value similarly to language systems (Gilbert, 124). Bhabha's theories delve into 'Hybridity' and 'Ambivalence' to construct national and cultural identities. "Hybridity, perhaps the key concept throughout Bhabha's career, depends upon the presumption of its opposite for its force" (Gilbert, 128). In his influential books "Nation and Narration" (1990) and "The Location of Culture" (1994), Bhabha employs psychoanalysis and semiotics to examine the 'spaces' created by dominant social structures in the works of authors like Morrison and Gordimer.



<https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/colonialism-postcolonialism>

3. PROMINENT POSTCOLONIAL AUTHORS

Key figures in postcolonial literature include Chinua Achebe, J. M. Coetzee, Frantz Fanon, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Li-Young Lee, Derek Walcott, Jamaica Kincaid, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. These writers, despite their diverse backgrounds and nationalities, have significantly shaped postcolonial theory. Chinua Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart" (1958) explores the tensions between the indigenous Igbo community and Christian colonizers in Nigeria. Achebe, who spent over three decades teaching in Nigerian and American universities, also wrote notable non-fiction, including the essay collection "Home and Exile" (2000). He received the Man Booker International Prize in 2007. J. M. Coetzee, an apartheid-era writer from South Africa, is known for his anti-imperialist stance. His novel "The Life and Times of Michael K," set in Cape Town, won the Booker Prize, and his novel "Disgrace" (1999) earned him a second Booker Prize. Coetzee was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003.

Frantz Fanon, a significant postcolonial writer, focused on the psychological impact of colonization and racism. His seminal work, "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961), critiqued colonial power and advocated for revolutionary action. Fanon influenced many thinkers, including Homi Bhabha, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Edward Said. Said, concerned with how European-controlled knowledge reinforces power and marginalizes native perspectives, explored these themes extensively.

Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan-born novelist, critic, and poet, is best known for his Booker Prize-winning novel "The English Patient," which depicts the interactions of characters from various nationalities during the final days of WWII. Salman Rushdie, an Indian postcolonial writer, gained international acclaim with his Booker Prize-winning novel "Midnight's Children," which intertwines Indian history with personal narratives from 1910 to 1976. Rushdie's controversial novel "The Satanic Verses" was banned and sparked worldwide protests, resulting in a 'fatwa' being issued against him. In his works, Rushdie frequently explores the intersections of history, religion, culture, and identity.

4. CENTRAL IDEAS IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

Postcolonial literature is characterized by several recurring motifs and themes, including 'cultural dominance,' 'racism,' 'quest for identity,' 'racial discrimination,' 'inequality,' and 'hybridity.' These themes often reflect the complex interactions between colonizers and the colonized. European colonizers frequently emphasized racial superiority to justify their dominance, with apartheid in South Africa being a prominent example. Notable discriminatory laws included 'The Group Areas Act,' 'Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act,' 'Immorality Act,' 'The Population Registration Act,' 'Bantu Authorities Act,' and 'The Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act,' all of which restricted and marginalized the colonized populations. Authors like Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee illustrated in their works how apartheid devastated South Africa emotionally, morally, and economically.

Language also played a crucial role in the control and subjugation of colonized people, as colonizers often imposed their language on their subjects. Postcolonial writers address these issues by blending local languages with the colonizers' languages, creating a hybrid form that highlights the fractured identity of the colonized.

4.1 Reflections of Postcolonialism

Postcolonial literature reflects various theories and concepts, examining both colonial texts and literature produced after colonialism. Prominent theorists such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Frantz Fanon, and Homi Bhabha have connected postcolonial literature with fields like history, politics, philosophy, and literary traditions, emphasizing its relevance in contemporary society. These theorists often hail from postcolonial countries: Edward Said from Palestine, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak from India, and Frantz Fanon from Martinique, a French colony. Their works explore the experiences of colonization and the transformations brought about by independence on individuals and nations.

Filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair, and Shyam Benegal have also contributed to postcolonial discourse through their films, depicting colonial and postcolonial struggles. Music in postcolonial countries, such as Ravi Shankar's fusion of classical Indian music with Western sounds, also reflects cultural identity and values. The Negritude movement, which emphasizes a shared cultural affinity among black Africans, is another example, with poets like Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire contributing significantly to its literature, particularly in works like "Return to My Native Land."

5. THEMES AND MOTIFS

Postcolonial literature often revolves around the quest for identity, as it seeks to reclaim and reconstruct the self that has been fragmented by colonial rule. Writers explore the complex layers of identity shaped by the colonial encounter, including the intersections of race, ethnicity, culture, and nationality. For instance, Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" (1958) illustrates the struggle of the Igbo people to maintain their cultural identity in the face of British colonialism and Christian missionary efforts (Achebe, 1958). Similarly, Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" (1981) delves into the multifaceted identities of individuals born at the moment of India's independence, highlighting the personal and national search for meaning and self-definition (Rushdie, 1981). These narratives underscore the disruption caused by colonialism and the subsequent efforts to piece together a coherent sense of self in a postcolonial world. The process of identity formation in postcolonial literature often involves a critical examination of history, tradition, and modernity, reflecting the ongoing tension between the past and the present.

5.1 Language

Language plays a crucial role in postcolonial literature, serving as both a tool of oppression and a means of resistance. Colonial powers often imposed their languages on the colonized, marginalizing native languages and cultures. This imposition of language was a key strategy for exerting control and assimilating colonized populations into the colonizer's worldview. However, postcolonial writers frequently subvert this linguistic dominance by blending colonial languages with indigenous languages, creating hybrid forms of expression that challenge and redefine cultural boundaries. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in his seminal work "Decolonising the Mind" (1986), argues for the reclamation of native languages as a form of cultural and psychological liberation (Thiong'o, 1986). This linguistic hybridity is also evident in the works of writers like Derek Walcott, who skillfully combines English with Caribbean dialects to reflect the rich, multifaceted identities of postcolonial societies (Walcott, 1990). By doing so, postcolonial literature not only resists the erasure of indigenous cultures but also affirms the dynamic and evolving nature of cultural identity.

5.2 Racism and Cultural Dominance

Postcolonial literature provides a powerful critique of racism and cultural dominance, exposing the systemic inequalities and prejudices inherent in colonial ideologies. Writers often depict the dehumanizing effects of colonial rule on both the colonized and the colonizers. Frantz Fanon's "Black Skin, White Masks" (1952) explores the psychological impact of racism on black individuals, revealing how colonialism instills a sense of inferiority and self-hatred (Fanon, 1952). Similarly, J. M. Coetzee's "Disgrace" (1999) portrays the lingering

racial tensions and moral complexities in post-apartheid South Africa, highlighting the enduring legacy of colonial attitudes (Coetzee, 1999). These works challenge readers to confront the pervasive and insidious nature of racism, advocating for a more just and equitable society. Through their narratives, postcolonial authors reveal the ongoing struggle against cultural dominance and the need for genuine recognition and respect for diverse cultural identities.

5.3 Hybridity

The concept of hybridity is central to postcolonial studies, encapsulating the blending and merging of cultures that result from the colonial encounter. Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity emphasizes the creation of new cultural forms and identities that arise from the interactions between colonizers and the colonized (Bhabha, 1994). This hybridization process challenges rigid notions of purity and authenticity, instead highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural identities. In literary works, hybridity is often depicted through characters who navigate multiple cultural influences and negotiate their identities in a space of cultural in-betweenness. Michael Ondaatje's *"The English Patient"* (1992) exemplifies this theme, portraying characters of diverse backgrounds whose lives intersect and intertwine during World War II, creating a tapestry of hybrid identities (Ondaatje, 1992). By embracing hybridity, postcolonial literature celebrates the richness of cultural diversity and the possibilities of transcending binary oppositions, fostering a more inclusive understanding of identity and belonging.

6.CONCLUSION

Postcolonial literature addresses the framing of identities, the politics of rewriting, translations, and the relationship between nation and nationalism. It is a dominant form of literature with broad appeal, connecting many former colonies such as those in Africa, Australasia, the Caribbean, Ireland, Latin America, and South Africa.

This literary genre deals with various concepts, including cultural, political, geographical, psychological, and post-structural themes. Major colonial empires, such as the British, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, are often examined in postcolonial literature, which provides insights into the experiences and perspectives of both colonizers and the colonized in terms of education, politics, geography, culture, and customs.

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