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## POSTCOLONIALISM: A PRELIMINARY UNDERSTANDING

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*The word has two meaning with hyphen, post-colonial means the historical epoch when the former colonies became independent nations. In its unhyphenated form, postcolonialism is understood now as a critical tool that questions the forms of power and the way the knowledge is produced and practised within colonial discursive practices. This has become possible after Orientalism, one of the theoretical foundations for postcolonialism, identified the interplay of knowledge and power in the colonial discourses.*

*The presence and recognition of postcolonialism in Western academia is due to the favourable intellectual environment for the rise of resistance theories in 1980s. Unlike the African-American studies, ethnic-minorities studies, gender studies which were introduced into Western academics due to political preoccupations and theoretical presuppositions, postcolonialism constitutes an institutional reform from 'within'. Reflecting the multicultural mood of the period, these literary analyses and theorizations were irredeemably eclectic, hybridized, and cross-disciplinary in character and in execution. They borrowed critically and fused imaginatively from a variety of disciplines, says Sugirtharajah. Thus, postcolonialism emerged as an academic discipline in the Western academics. Alongside, Subaltern Studies emerged as a critical historical study of the colonial process within India but outside the academic institutional set up, though it was later on taken up by the academic scholars as a South Asian variety of postcolonialism.*

*In this article, I would like to examine postcolonialism as a political, social and cultural phenomena rather than abstract theory. Above all I argued that postcolonialism offers a political philosophy of activism that contests the current situation of extreme inequality, which is in a new way continues the anti-colonial struggle of the past.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Postcolonialism, Commonwealth Literature, Resistance Theories, Reading Strategy.*

## INTRODUCTION

As explained by Professor Ato Quayson FBA that “A good way to start any definition of postcolonial literature is to think about the origins of the term postcolonialism and how it has been used in literary criticism, from roughly the late 1980s to present times. The term is sometimes written with a hyphen, sometimes left unhyphenated, with the two forms used to designate the same areas of interest by different critics. The hyphenated version was first used by political scientists and economists to denote the period after colonialism, but from about the late seventies it was turned into a more wide-ranging culturalist analysis in the hands of literary critics and others. The unhyphenated version is conventionally used to distinguish it from the earlier iteration that referred only to specific time period and to indicate a tendency toward literary criticism and the analysis of various discourses at the intersection of race, gender and diaspora, among others.”<sup>1</sup> A relevant working definition for postcolonialism is that it involves a studied engagement with the experience of colonial past and present effects and subjugation of native culture and religious belief both at the general level of ex-colonial societies and at the level of more general global developments thought to be the after-effects of empire. Postcolonialism often also involves the discussion of experiences such as migration, slavery, suppression/resistance, difference, race, gender and place as well as responses to the discourses of elevated Oriental Europe such as history, philosophy, anthropology and linguistics. The term is as much about conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper, as about conditions coming after the historical end of colonialism. A growing concern among postcolonial critics has also been with racial minorities in the west, embracing Native and African Americans and other Asian natives in the US, British Asians and African Caribbeans in the UK and Aborigines in Australia and Canada, among others. Because of these features, postcolonialism allows for a wide range of applications, designating a constant interplay and slippage between the sense of a historical transition, a socio-cultural location and an epochal configuration<sup>2</sup>. Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* published on 1978 is considered as pivotal in the shaping of postcolonial studies. In *Orientalism*, Said argued for seeing a direct correlation between the knowledges that oriental scholars produced and how these were redeployed in the constitution of colonial rule.<sup>3</sup>

However it should be acknowledged, that whatever the developments were that led to the formation of the field of postcolonial studies, it has to be seen more in terms of a long process that has a historical continuity rather than a just by chance a series of events, coming from a variety of sources with the central impulses of this process, sometimes outside any concern with colonialism. These may be traced in a variety of directions, such as in the changing face of global politics with the emergence of newly independent states; in the wide-ranging re-

<sup>1</sup> Prof. Quayson Ato, “What is postcolonial literature”, The British Academy, as available in the internet on 2.1.2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, Columbia University press, 1978

evaluation begun in the 1980s of the exclusionary forms of western reason and in the perception of their complicity with imperial expansion and colonialist rule. According to J.C. Young “For now, what is important is that postcolonialism involves first of all the argument that the nations of the three non-western continents (Africa, Asia, Latin America) are largely in a situation of subordination to Europe and North America and in a position of economic inequality. Postcolonialism names a politics and philosophy of activism that contests that disparity, and so continues in a new way the anti-colonial struggles of the past. It asserts not just the right of African, Asian, and Latin American peoples to access resources and material well-being, but also the dynamic power of their cultures, cultures that are now intervening in and transforming the societies of the west.”<sup>4</sup>

Postcolonial Theories and literature represents all these conditions and comes from various sources and inspiration. It includes works such as Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children*, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Ingolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreams*, among many others. Shakespeare’s, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Tempest* have been taken as key texts for the application of postcolonial modes of analysis. This suggests that postcolonial literature is a broad term that encompasses literatures by people from the erstwhile colonial world, as well as from the various minority diasporas that live in the west. Postcolonialism has also been a term used to reinterpret western canonical literature from a variety of fresh and diverse perspectives.

Even though some literatures have colonial, racial experience but Postcolonial writings are not limited to this alone. Lot of non fiction writings and theories are now considered as Postcolonialism. Now Postcolonialism as a method, has been adapted by various discipline/knowledge apart from literature, like Anthropology, History, Geography, Philosophy, Linguistics and many other. Robert J. C Young explains that “Postcolonialism claims the right of all people on this earth to the same material and cultural well-being. The reality, though, is that the world today is a world of inequality, and much of the difference falls across the broad division between people of the west and those of the non-west. This division between the rest and the west was made fairly absolute in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the expansion of the European empires, as a result of which nine-tenths of the entire land surface of the globe was controlled by European, or European derived powers. Colonial and imperial rule was legitimized by anthropological theories which increasingly portrayed the peoples of the colonized world as inferior, childlike, or feminine, incapable of looking after themselves (despite having done so perfectly well for millennia) and requiring the paternal rule of the west for their own best interests (today they are deemed to require development).

<sup>44</sup> J. C. Young Robert, ‘Postcolonialism : A very Short Introduction’, Oxford University Press, 2003, p - 4

The basis of such anthropological theories was the concept of race. In simple terms, the west-non-west relation was thought of in terms of whites versus the non-white races. White culture was regarded (and remains) the basis for ideas of legitimate government, law, economics, science, language, music, art, literature – in a word, civilization.”<sup>5</sup>

‘Postcolonial theory ‘developed outside the western ideology as well as needs, developed geographically outside the west. It involves the transforming ideologies like developing the condition exploitation of various level and economic, educational /cultural poverty in which large section of the world’s population live out their daily lives, specially the people of the three continent (Africa, Asia, Latin America), what Robert Young named ‘*Tricontinental*’.

### COMMONWEALTH LITERATURE TO POSTCOLONIALISM

Historically, postcolonialism is traced back to ‘Commonwealth Literature’. It was a term that literary critics began to designate for the literatures that were produced in English by the people of the countries that were once under colonial rule. The term ‘Commonwealth literature’ suggested a vague shared literary inheritance among the once colonized countries. This literary activity emerged on the presumption that there is something common between the concerns and attributes of the colonizer and that of the colonized. Thus the commonwealth literature was assumed to be the sub-set of English literature and was evaluated for their aesthetical qualities and other literary standards fixed by the Western academia. However, the critics of Commonwealth literature paved the way for the postcolonial understanding. “If the study of Commonwealth literature was pursued in the philanthropic spirit of the first side of this paradox, the critical activity of postcolonialism was to concentrate more on the other, darker side of exploitation and dependence”<sup>6</sup>, says McLeod.

More clearly explained by a professor of Lagos University, “As a term in literary regional studies, Commonwealth literature is generally believed to refer to the literary products of the independent countries of Africa, Asia, the Caribbeans and North America which were once colonised by the United Kingdom. The works of writers from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, Malaysia and Singapore are therefore regarded as Commonwealth literature. This essay proposes to examine the themes, styles and patterns of the development of literatures from these Commonwealth nations. Some of the issues that will be discussed include the general characteristics of Commonwealth literature, the ways in which these common features have been affected by the different cultures and historical development of the individual nations in focus, and the ways in which the

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p – 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> McLeod John, “Beginning Postcolonialism”, Manchester University Press, Uk, 2010.

development of national literatures has affected the notion of a Commonwealth literature. This essay will, in essence, analyse the major themes and trends that distinguish Commonwealth Literature as displayed in a selection of countries. It will also point out some of the major literary artists from the above-mentioned countries whose works most exemplify these themes and trends. The term “Commonwealth literature” poses significant problems of definition. It has historical, geographic, political and linguistic connotations that simultaneously affirm and revise its status as a distinct body of literary work. The historical fact of colonization by the United Kingdom and the linguistic reality of English as mother tongue or official language do not automatically imply membership of either the Commonwealth as a political organisation or of the body of literary works known as Commonwealth literature. The United States is perhaps the most prominent example in this regard. The Republic of Ireland is another. There is also the ironic fact that the literature of the United Kingdom is not regarded as Commonwealth literature, even though its imperial past and language form the basis of the concept of Commonwealth literature. In spite of all this, however, the designation “Commonwealth literature” has, over time, become a convenient appellation for the literary output of most of the countries that were former colonies of the United Kingdom, and are thus to a large extent, linked by (i) a common experience of British colonialism, (ii) the use of English in contemporary life, and (iii) the influence of the British literary tradition. Unlike other literary categories, it is not completely defined by political ideology (such as Marxist literature), historical period (Elizabethan literature), geographical region (African literature) or prevailing literary trends (Symbolist literature). Commonwealth literature is, in many ways, a complex combination of all of these other categories, and this enables it to bridge the inevitable distinctions between writers from very different socio-cultural backgrounds. one which does not ignore the fact that “an African or an Indian or a Nigerian writer writes against a particular historical tradition and in a particular national context. In essence, Commonwealth literature demonstrates the inherent particular national context. connections between geography and history, and between theme and subject matter in a particularly resonant way”<sup>7</sup>.

With the increasing awareness that colonial practices are being replicated/imitated even after the end of formal colonialism, postcolonialism is now broadly understood as a critique of the totalising and universalising tendencies of Eurocentric and nationalist modes of cultural appropriations. In that sense, postcolonialism is widely used as a method of questioning the ‘given’, as a strategy of resistance and opposition, as an interventionist approach, as a critical hermeneutical tool and as a discursive practice.

## POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

<sup>7</sup> Olufunwa Omobokun Harry, “An Introduction to Commonwealth Literature”, as available in the internet, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263046794\\_An\\_Introduction\\_to\\_Commonwealth\\_Literature](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263046794_An_Introduction_to_Commonwealth_Literature).

Postcolonial theory is the body of work philosophical, theoretical written and recorded by all those who have tried to theorize how are the colonial identities formed, what is the relationship between colonizer and the colonized, how to think about colonial history, body of knowledge, how to teach global cultures correspondingly to different cultures etc, all of these is the body of theory which tries to articulate and theorize the postcolonial experience in the past, precolonial past and present, all these ideas together forms postcolonial theory. We study to understand how to think 19 – 20 century colonialism and the earlier mercantile colonialism. Postcolonial criticism in literary studies would then be any form of reading literary texts or the archive, or the governmental documents with those theoretical concepts in mind. The key concept in postcolonial studies is ‘postcolonial reading’. Postcolonial reading is a way of reading /rereading texts of metropolitan and colonial cultures to draw the attention of inescapable facts of colonization on literary production, anthropological accounts, historical records, administrative and scientific writings. Hence Postcolonial criticism is also a form of reading that looks a text produced by European authors during the colonial time and then challenges its traditional canonical readings. Postcolonial critics is a reading and a research method a type of textual research that literary critics use to interpret texts. “Postcolonial Rereading and textual analysis have 3 different forms. The first variety of the reading practice is about the rereading of the colonial texts which talks about colonial practices directly as well as latently, in order to know the colonizing strategies and representations. Influenced by the post-structuralists such as Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, the second form of analysis to re-read the colonial texts that were not merely literary in nature. In the third form of reading we find the application of critical theories to the situation of postcoloniality. Here we find the emergence of postcolonialists like Homi. K. Bhaba, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, Bill Ashcraft and most importantly Edward Said.”<sup>8</sup>

As explained in an article “Post-colonial literary criticism frequently focuses on relationships between colonizers and colonized people in literary texts. Post-colonial criticism also analyzes whether a text upholds or subverts colonial ideals. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word “colonialism” as a colonial system or principle involving the exploitation of weaker peoples by a larger power. Methods of colonialism may include the domination, subjugation, or enslavement of an indigenous population and their land; the exploitation and exportation of resources; or the creation of a settlement project. Post-colonial criticism is particularly important in the twenty-first century. As John Springhall observes in *Decolonization Since 1945*, approximately a third of the world’s population lived under colonial or imperial rule at the time that the Second World War broke out in 1939 (1). Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, authors of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), are three key figures who significantly oriented literary studies towards Post-colonial studies. Post-colonial theorists and

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<sup>8</sup> Mukherjee Gargi, ‘Postcolonial rereading/rereading as Decolonising Emancipatory Practice’, NAIRJC Journal Publication, Volume 2, July 2016.

literary authors also engaged these same issues in their theoretical and literary works in the 1950s and 1960s, however, especially as countries around the world gained independence from colonial powers. Gender, economics, race, and ideology are all subjects for consideration in post-colonial studies, so post-colonial criticism overlaps with some of the other critical schools of thought.”<sup>9</sup>

Further, colonial intervention is a historical fact, embedded as one of the layers of the consciousness of the people of the Third World. These colonial interventions still continue to play a vital role in the readings and the practices of the colonised masses. The ideological agenda of cultural hegemony does not evaporate at the stroke of the end of formal colonialism. They continue to sustain their existence in the post-colonial epoch too. Hence, the forms of power and knowledge discourses that made/makes possible to sustain such colonial practices need to be decolonised, if the former colonies are to be set free from colonising strategies/remains.

Postcolonial reading helped to detect the conscious and dormant elements of colonising powers in the reading of text, discourses and practices. By exposing the aspect of power in the construction of knowledge systems, postcolonialism attempts to neutralise such power relations. This sort of neutralization of power relations in the knowledge discourses is what we call as decolonisation. As a critical tool, it identifies various forms of colonising practices at the intersection of multiple structures and identities, mainly in the realm of culture. Criticism, as it is understood by postcolonialists, is always contextual; it is open to its own contradictions and shortcomings; it is constitutively built with resistance and opposition to all forms of tyranny, domination, abuse and hegemony; it is an undertaking of social commitment for changing the oppressive structures, which should not be reduced to the dogma.

## CONCLUSION

Giving importance to one theory in postcolonial studies forbids the varieties of colonial experiences, colonial subjugations, anti-colonial manoeuvres and discourses, geopolitical landscapes of colonialism, native struggles and so on. This needs to be kept in mind when one ventures into the theorisation of postcolonialism. Postcolonialism is a move away from the universalising metanarratives of colonial discursive practices. In this way, it gives importance to localised, historicised, contextualised and culture-specific discursive practices.

What is Postcolonialism if that is the question then I must conclude by quoting Robert young that “have you ever been the only person of your own colour or ethnicity in a large group of gathering? It has been said that there are two kinds of white people: those who have never found themselves in a situation where the majority of people

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<sup>9</sup> Mangione Eward Angela, ‘Post-Colonial Criticism’, as available in the internet, <https://writingcommons.org/section/research/research-methods/textual-methods/literary-criticism/post-colonial-criticism/>.

around them are not white, and those who have been the only white person in the room. At that moment, for the first time perhaps, they discover what it is really like for the other people in their society, and, metaphorically, for the rest of the world outside the west: to be from a minority, to live as the person who is always in the margins, to be the person who never qualifies as the norm, the person who is not authorized to speak. How can we find a way to talk about this? That is the first question which postcolonialism tries to answer.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> J. C. Young Robert, *Postcolonialism : A very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p – 1-2.