



Lecture 02

Postcolonial Literature

I. What is Postcolonialism?

According to Pramod K. Nayar (2016), postcolonialism is a theoretical-philosophical reaction to the state of post coloniality which provides critics, writers, and theorists from the former colonies with the needed tools to analyse the new political and social conditions caused by colonialism. As a field of study, postcolonialism addresses the coloniser/colonised relationship with a focus on the colonised experience. The term often covers non-Western regions and former colonies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and their demands for equality and freedom.

Postcolonialism vs. Post-colonialism

The prefix 'post' in post-colonialism refers to the period that comes *after colonialism*, therefore, it is used to discuss the historical period after colonial domination of the former colonies.

In postcolonialism, 'post' means '*anti.*' Postcolonial studies attempt to challenge earlier colonial narratives and misconceptions that situates colonised communities as inferior, non-human, and lesser than the Euro-American white subject and culture.

II. What is Postcolonial Literature?

Postcolonial literature (Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, etc) refers to literary texts produced from cultures influenced by colonialism and imperialism. On the one hand, postcolonial writings are anticolonial as they provide an image of the experiences colonised populations went through and revive traditional cultures as a way of self-identification. On the other, they can also aim to about new cultures and the conflict between tradition and modernisation, especially in narratives about immigration. Two of the main characteristics of postcolonial literature are writing back and self-representation.

1. Writing Back

Writers from the (former) colonies used their literary texts to correct the false claims and counter-narrate the myths spread by colonial powers on the inferiority of the colonised. As a reaction, writers used the coloniser's language (English, French, Spanish...) coated with local expressions, vernacular terms, and different structures that only exist in African, Caribbean, or Asian local languages. In so doing, African and Asian writers challenged one of the main values of colonialism that is the European language. Often this form of writing is addressed to the centre, i.e., the coloniser/Euro-American community to prove that colonised regions have their own culture, history, and identity.

🔔 Mixing vernacular and local (African, Asian...) languages with European languages often results in a new language as to facilitate the communication between the two groups. The mixture of these two languages results in what is known as *pidgin*, a language that abandons most of the grammatical structures of the two original languages to avoid confusion. When pidgin develops into a mother tongue and then into a first language for later generations, it becomes known as *creole*. Unlike pidgin, creole develops its own grammatical structures.

2. Self-Representation

Through their writings, intellectuals from the (former) colonies aspired to represent themselves, to write their own stories. Narrating the consequences of colonialism on their communities is a main topic as the colonised subject is usually silenced and marginalised in the colonial discourse. Self-representation is one of the main characteristics of artistic movements like Harlem Renaissance and Negritude.

III. Themes

1. Self vs. Other

As explained under self-representation above, the image of the colonised in Western/colonial literature is often marginalised, silenced, and Othered. Otherness is always positioned in opposition to the Self. In postcolonial writings, the Self is the white man, the coloniser, and the oppressor. In other words, the Self is the subject that exists at the centre, who has access to power and authority that allow them to dominate the Other (i.e., colonised, oppressed subject). The Other, on the other hand, has a different

racial, ethnic, or cultural belonging to the Self. The character of the Other is usually powerless, does not have a voice or history, therefore, does not have an identity. Postcolonial writers use this theme to portray the position and struggles of their own people under colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism. Self-Other binarism or conflict is usually represented through coloniser-colonised, master-slave, superior-inferior, civilised-savage relationships and so on.

2. Identity

To be at the centre of their narrative, postcolonial subjects had to separate and free themselves from the coloniser's dominating authority. To do so, they need to reshape their independent sense of being in the world, their identity. This new identity is presented against what the coloniser used to define them with—inferiority, illiteracy, lack of history.... Due to this, postcolonial writers go back to their traditions, pre-colonial folktales, and heritage of cultural values to show their differences from and to the Euro-American subject. Moreover, forming a separate identity from that of the coloniser sets the first steps towards the colonised/oppressed ability to achieve freedom and self-determination.

3. Hybridity

In his essay 'Named for Victoria' (1975), the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe describes the life of his people under colonialism as the "crossroads of cultures" (p. 98). Achebe explains how, as a child, he went to church and read the Bible while he witnessed his uncle praying and offering food for idols. This clash of cultures (colonial and African/traditional) resulted in a hybrid generation, a generation that belongs to two conflicting contexts. Critics like **Homi Bhabha** consider being positioned between two cultures, in-between cultures as he describes it, as empowering, for it allows the writer to criticise Western cultures as both an insider and an outsider at the same time.

IV. Main Figures: Frantz Fanon (1925-1961)

Frantz Fanon was a psychiatrist and a writer from Martinique. Fanon was raised under the French colonial rule where he was taught that his people are French and that those of the West Indies are superior to Africans. After WWII, Fanon moved to France to continue his studies in medicine and psychiatry. In France, Fanon started to understand his position as a Black person. Even though he was taught that he is French in his home country, in France, Frenchness equalled whiteness. This experience with racism led Fanon to write his highly critical work *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952, *Black Skin, White Masks*)

where he uses psychology and sociology to understand how colonialism and racial discrimination influence the colonised subject. In his work, Fanon addresses the Self-Other relationship and the confusion colonised subjects experience in their attempt to be accepted into the white man's culture. Fanon is considered to be one of the first psychiatrists who used their Western education to understand colonialism and racial oppression from the Black subject's point of view.

In addition to his works in psychiatry, Fanon was also actively involved in politics. This is clear from his works such as *A Dying Colonialism* (1959) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1962). His political writings are more direct in his criticism of colonial institutions as he argues that the only way for colonialism and oppression to end is through a violent revolution. Fanon's involvement in anti-colonial arguments was not only in his written works for he joined the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) in 1954 and held a number of diplomatic positions representing Algeria in African and international occasions. Through his involvement in the Algerian revolution and African politics in general, Fanon aspired to build a free united Africa.

V. Discussion

* Are We Post(-)colonial Subjects?

Even though post-colonialism as a term is used to refer to the end of colonialism, African writers and critics argue that the former colonies are not in the post-colonial period yet. True that colonialism and racial oppression has come to an end during the 1960s, but it does not mean that oppression against Black people is something of the past. In a conference discussion, the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo states: "Ask any village woman how postcolonial her life is. [Colonialism] has not been 'posted' anywhere at all" (Osundare, 2002, p. 41). In her statement, Aidoo reflects on how despite independence, African nations and peoples are still struggling politically and economically. The impact of colonialism and how it destroyed stable communities and economies is still evident until nowadays. While colonialism—in the old meaning of the term (i.e. direct)—no longer exist, as the contemporary period it has been replaced by other forms of oppression that maintains the same power structure: centre-margin, powerful-powerless, metropolitan-periphery regions. These new forms of domination are represented through systems like **neo-colonialism** and **globalisation** (terms to be discussed in the coming lectures).

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