

Lecture 1: Postcolonial Theory

Learning Goals and Objectives:

- To understand both colonizer and colonized.
- To understand the operations – politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically- of colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies.
- Investigating power relations in various contexts.
- Analyzing the emergent forms of postcolonial identity after the departure of the colonizers.
- To explore the ways in which multiple forms of oppression—for example, classism, sexism, and racism—can combine in the daily experience of members of political minorities; the ways in which members of these groups have overcome these kinds of oppressive forces and worked together to build better lives for themselves and their communities; and the ways in which such struggles are represented in literature.

Introduction

Although postcolonial criticism did not become a major force in literary studies until the early 1990s, the cultural analysis of colonialism on which it is based has played an important role in anti-colonial political movements around the world, and it took its place as a field of intellectual inquiry when colonial regimes began to fall apart after WWII. Postcolonial criticism is both a subject and a theoretical framework within the field of literary studies. From the initial moment of colonial contact to the present, postcolonial criticism examines literature produced by societies that arose in response to colonial dominance. The colonizers themselves wrote some of this literature. Much more of it was written by colonial and formerly colonized peoples, and is still being written. Postcolonial criticism can refer to any examination of a postcolonial literary work, independent of the theoretical paradigm employed.

However, as a theoretical framework, postcolonial criticism aims to comprehend the dynamics of colonialist and anti-colonialist ideologies on a political, social, cultural, and psychological level. For example, most postcolonial critique examines the ideological forces that, on the one hand, pushed colonized peoples to embrace colonizers' ideas and, on the other hand, encouraged colonized peoples to fight their oppressors, a struggle that dates back to colonialism itself. And, as we'll see, because colonialist and anti-colonialist beliefs may be found in any literary piece, we don't need to classify a work as postcolonial to be able to evaluate it with postcolonial criticism.

The term "postcolonial literature" refers to works written by members of colonized or formerly colonized populations, such as Jamaica Kincaid's (*Antigua, West Indies*), Chinua Achebe's (*Nigeria*), and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (*Kenya*) fiction, as well as works written by members of the colonizing (white) culture in colonized or formerly colonized nations, such as South Africa's Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, and J. M. Coetzee. Considering that the primary goal of postcolonial concepts is to help us comprehend the complex experiences of being colonized by a culture other than our own and resisting that colonization, we can use them to analyze the works of any author—regardless of their time and place of birth—who we believe can help us comprehend those experiences.

I. Basic Concepts

1. Colonialist ideology

It is founded on the colonizers' sense in their own superiority over the colonized, who were often the indigenous inhabitants of the regions they settled in or occupied. The colonizers were civilized, while the colonized were savages, according to colonialist ideology. The colonizers believed that because their technology was more advanced, their entire culture was also more advanced, so they ignored or swept aside the religions, customs, and codes of behavior of the peoples they subjugated, often forbidding them from speaking their own language or teaching it to their children. In schools established up for that purpose, children in colonized countries were taught the colonizers' language, customs, and beliefs. Although military colonialism is mostly a thing of the past, cultural colonization, also known as cultural imperialism, has taken hold in a number of countries around the globe. As observed in parts of the Philippines, Japan, and Mexico, American styles, films, music, sports, fast food, and consumerism have engulfed or reduced other countries' cultural practices to tourist attractions.

Othering

The practice of othering is one of the most visible manifestations of imperialist ideology: seeing those who are different as lower, as less than human. The colonizers, for example, considered themselves as the epitome of what a human being should be, the correct "self," but the peoples they conquered were different, "other," and so inferior, subhuman.

The world is divided into "them"—the civilized, moral, and intelligent—and "us"—the "savages," the immoral, and the uneducated. The term "savage" is frequently associated with evil (the demonic other). However, the "savage" is frequently thought to have a "primitive" beauty or nobility that comes from being close to nature (the exotic other). However, the "savage" is othered in both cases and hence is not regarded entirely human.

Within the United States, African American men, for example, are frequently considered as demonic others who could "turn violent" without warning. Beautiful Asian American women, for example, are sometimes considered as exotic other Americans.

Eurocentrism is the term used nowadays to describe the attitude of using European culture as the benchmark against which all other civilizations are measured. The long-standing philosophy of so-called universalism is a prominent example of Eurocentrism in literary studies.

All literature was appraised in terms of its "universality" by British, European, and later American cultural standard-bearers: to be deemed a great work, a literary piece had to feature "universal" characters and themes. Whether or not a text's characters and topics were regarded "universal" was determined by how closely they mirrored those found in European literature. As a result, it was assumed that European ideas, values, and experience were universal, i.e., the gold standard for all of humanity. The term "New World," a country that was "new" only to Europeans, is an example of Eurocentric vocabulary. Similar examples of Eurocentric language can be found in terms like First World, Second World, Third World, and Fourth World, which refer to (1) Britain, Europe, and the United States; (2) white populations in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and southern Africa (and, for some theorists, the former Soviet bloc); (3) technologically developing nations like India and those in Africa, Central and South America, and Southeast Asia; and (4) indigenous peoples (and, for some theorists, nonindigenous populations who have the status of racial minorities in First World countries, such as African Americans). Despite the fact that these four "worlds" are now routinely referred to, and we'll use these phrases in this chapter, we should be cognizant of their Eurocentric implications. Only if history begins with Europe and is organized around European colonial conquests does such terminology make sense. It dismisses the reality of older worlds like Greece, Egypt, Africa, the Middle East, China, and the Americas, and instead emphasizes European military conquest as the principal means of organizing world history.

Orientalism

It is a form of Eurocentric othering, as defined by Edward Said, that has occurred in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Its goal is to give Western countries a good national identity, in contrast to Eastern countries, on which the West projects all the negative features it doesn't want to accept exist among its own people. Thus, the Chinese or Arabs, or whatever Asian or Middle Eastern group is politically appropriate, are characterized as harsh, clever, evil, cunning, dishonest, and prone to sexual promiscuity and perversion, among other characteristics. (Consider the nasty, deceptive Arab merchant in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, who is rescued from prison by the young DeLacey, a European, whom the Arab later betrays.) People in the West consider themselves as kind, straightforward, good, upright, honest, and moral, in contrast to the fictitious "oriental" they've manufactured. In short, the "oriental" is a creation of the West, which has been able to positively identify itself and justify every military or economic aggression it has found advantageous.

2. Subaltern

Colonialist ideology inevitably establishes a social hierarchy—a social status system—in which members of the colonial culture occupy the highest rungs. Subalterns are those who live at the bottom of the imperialist social ladder, regardless of color, class, gender, religion,

ethnicity, or any other cultural element that makes them inferior. As a result, the term "subaltern" can be used to describe anyone at the bottom of a society's social hierarchy. Members of the colonial culture treat subalterns as second-class citizens who are denied equal chances to improve their lives as well as equal legal protection. Individuals who are marginalized by racism, classism, sexism, and/or religious prejudice are examples of subalterns (such as anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, or the pathological fear and loathing of Muslims). The homeless of any race, Native Americans, and economically disadvantaged individuals of color are among the most obvious examples of subalterns in the United States.

The Colonial Subject

Since there is so much pressure on subalterns to believe they are inferior, it's no surprise that many of them do. Whether the dominant culture in question is that of a foreign power or that of their own country, subalterns who internalize, or "buy into," the colonialist belief that those who are different from a society's dominant culture are inferior are called colonial subjects—they have a colonized consciousness. Women who believe they are naturally less intellectual or capable than their male counterparts; persons of any non-white race who believe their race makes them less attractive, intelligent, or worthy than their white counterparts are examples of the latter.

Without being a colonial subject, one can be oppressed by colonialist ideology economically, politically, and socially as long as one is aware that colonialism is unfair and that individuals who belong to the dominant culture are not intrinsically superior. In other words, only when one's consciousness is colonized does one become a colonial subject. Mimicry is common among colonial subjects, and they often feel unwelcoming.

2.1 Mimicry

Mimicry is the imitation of a subaltern imitating the dominant culture's attire, speech, conduct, or way of life. Mimicry isn't meant to insult the dominant culture's members. It demonstrates, on the contrary, a subaltern's desire to be a part of that culture. Mimicry is thus the product of colonized consciousness, of believing one is inferior since one does not belong to the prevailing culture. During Britain's rule over India, for example, some Indians copied British clothing, haircuts, and other characteristics in order to be considered "as good as" their British rulers. Similarly, in the United States, working- and middle-class people buy purchases that jeopardize their financial security in order to resemble the upper-class inhabitants of their own country, whom they believe superior to themselves. If, on the other hand, one imitates members of the dominant culture without believing that one's own culture is inferior—for example, to keep one's job—then one is not engaging in postcolonial mimicry. Regrettably, mimicking frequently involves dehumanizing individuals of one's own society. To put it another way, in order to feel like you belong to or have the acceptance of the dominant culture, you adopt its prejudices towards members of your own culture.

2.2 Unhomeliness

Unhomeliness happens when persons who do not belong to the dominant culture and have dismissed their own culture as inferior feel they have no solid cultural identity—no real home in any society. As a result of having a colonial consciousness, unhomeliness is also a byproduct. Homeless is not the same as being unhoused. Unhomeliness is an emotional state in which people do not feel at ease in their own houses because they are not at ease in any culture and, as a result, do not feel at ease in themselves. Individuals who feel torn between the culture into which they were born and the culture in which they live as adults, for example, may feel unhomely. Because he doesn't feel he fits in either environment, a person born into poverty who has grown wealthy may feel uncomfortable both with his wealthy acquaintances and with his parents, whom he is now ashamed of.

Individuals who grew up in working-class ethnic minority communities—for example, Asian American, African American, or Chicano communities—but now live in a suburban community dominated by upper-class or upwardly mobile middle-class white people of Western European ancestry may have similar experiences of being unhomed.

3. Anticolonialist Resistance

The struggle to liberate one's territory and/or culture from colonial dominance can take various forms. Anticolonialist resistance can take the form of armed raids, sabotage, rescuing those wrongfully imprisoned by the colonialist state, attempting to enlist the backing of neutral foreign powers, or raising international awareness of colonialism injustices. Anticolonialist resistance can, of course, take the shape of an organized, military uprising against a colonialist state, as happened in Cuba in 1959 when Fidel Castro's followers removed US-backed Fulgencio Batista. It can also take the shape of organized, nonviolent opposition to colonial oppression, such as what happened in India in 1947 when Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi's supporters overthrew the British. Even when political resistance is nearly impossible due to the enormous forces of imperialist oppression, anticolonialist resistance can take place on a psychological level. That is, even when colonized peoples have been entirely subjugated to a foreign power over many generations and have lost access to their own language and cultural heritage, many oppressed people manage to retain their minds free of colonialist ideology that tells them they are inferior. This type of anticolonialist resistance, which occurs solely on a psychic level and may be referred to as psychological resistance, is possibly the most essential, as it is unlikely that other forms of resistance would ever emerge without it.

Postcolonial Criticism and Literature

Most postcolonial critics interpret postcolonial literature in terms of a number of overlapping concerns, regardless of where they situate themselves in terms of the postcolonial difficulties we've been examining. These include, for example, the following popular subjects, which demonstrate postcolonial criticism's acknowledgment of the strong relationship between psychology and ideology, or, more precisely, individual identity and cultural views:

1. the native people's initial encounter with the colonizers and the disruption of indigenous culture;

2. the journey of the European outsider through an unfamiliar wilderness with a native guide;
3. othering (the colonizers' treatment of members of the indigenous culture as less than fully human) and colonial oppression in all its forms;
4. mimicry (the attempt of the colonized to feel that they belong – to feel that they are not inferior – by imitating the dress, behavior, speech, and lifestyle of the colonizers);
5. exile (the experience of being an “outsider” in one’s own land or a foreign wanderer in Europe);
6. post-independence exuberance followed by disillusionment;
7. cultural difference (the ways in which race, class, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity);
8. the struggle for individual and collective cultural identity and the related themes of alienation, unhomeliness (feeling that one has no cultural “home,” or sense of cultural belonging), double consciousness (feeling torn between the social and psychological demands of two antagonistic cultures), and hybridity (experiencing one’s cultural identity as a hybrid of two or more cultures, which feeling is generally considered a positive alternative to unhomeliness);
9. double colonization, or the experience of postcolonial women under the dual subjugation of colonialist and patriarchal ideologies;
10. the role of the natural environment, and the loss thereof, in the culture and experience of postcolonial peoples;
11. the need for continuity with a precolonial past and self-definition of the political future;
12. the ways in which a literary text is itself colonialist or anti-colonialist.

This is the last issue on our list that has to be discussed. Regardless of the topic or issues on which they focus, most postcolonial critics examine how a literary text is colonialist or anticolonialist, that is, how the book promotes or opposes colonialism's oppressive worldview. In the most basic terms, a literature can perpetuate colonialist ideology through good portrayals of colonizers, negative portrayals of the colonized, or uncritical representations of the colonized's benefits from colonialism. Similarly, writings can fight imperialist ideology by depicting colonizer atrocities, colonized suffering, or the negative impacts of colonialism on the colonized.

II. Some Questions Postcolonial Critics Ask about Literary Texts

The following questions are intended to summarize postcolonial literary perspectives. Regardless of the topics addressed, most postcolonial analyses will pay some attention to whether the text is imperialist, anticolonialist, or a mix of the two, or ideologically contradictory.

1. How does the literary text, explicitly or allegorically, represent various aspects of colonial oppression? Special attention is often given to those areas where political and cultural oppression overlap, as it does, for example, in the colonizers' control of language, communication, and knowledge in colonized countries.
2. What does the text reveal about the problematics of postcolonial identity, including the relationship between personal and cultural identity and such issues as double consciousness and hybridity?
3. What does the text reveal about the politics and/or psychology of anti-colonialist resistance? For example, what does the text suggest about the ideological, political, social, economic, or psychological forces that promote or inhibit resistance? How does the text suggest that resistance can be achieved and sustained by an individual or a group?
4. What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference – the ways in which race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combine to form individual identity – in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live? Othering might be one area of analysis here.
5. How does the text respond to or comment on the characters, topics, or assumptions of a canonized (colonialist) work? Following Helen Tiffin's lead, examine how the postcolonial text reshapes our previous interpretations of a canonical text.
6. Are there meaningful similarities among the literatures of different postcolonial populations? One might compare, for example, the literatures of native peoples from different countries whose land was invaded by colonizers, the literatures of white settler colonies in different countries, or the literatures of different populations in the African diaspora. Or one might compare literary works from all three of these categories in order to investigate, for example, if the experience of colonization creates some common elements of cultural identity that outweigh differences in race and nationality.
7. How does the text represent relationships between the characters it portrays –for example, culturally dominant characters, subalterns, and cultural outsiders –and the land these characters inhabit? Does the natural setting change over time and, if so, what is the cause? Does the narrator's attitude toward the natural setting, or the attitude of any character toward the natural setting, change over time? What kinds of relationships between human beings and nature does the text seem to promote?
8. How does a literary text in the Western canon reinforce or undermine colonialist ideology through its representation of colonization and/or its inappropriate silence about colonized peoples? Does the text teach us anything about colonialist or anticolonialist ideology through its illustration of any of the postcolonial concepts we've discussed?

Practice: analyze Rudyard Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden* (1899)