
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Postcolonialism: Literary Applications of a Decolonizing Tool

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonialism revolves around studying the effects of colonialism on cultures and discloses how European nations controlled "Third World" cultures and how the latter resisted cunning encroachments. It endeavors to decolonize postcolonial states from the political conditions to the cultural ones, as it contests the contemporary legacies of historical colonialism so as to break the present imbalances of power. Postcolonialism also seeks to criticize contemporary colonial ways by seeking powerful substantial change in postcolonial nations while celebrating the lost history of resistance as well. The purpose of this research study is to define postcolonialism and show how postcolonial literary theory is applied to examine texts produced by both the colonized and the colonizing forces. Also, it endeavors to contribute to the body of postcolonial literature and celebrate the lost cultural heritage of the colonized. To meet this end, this research investigation adopts an exploratory research design and uses searching and screening tools to examine, analyze and synthesize relevant first and secondary sources. The findings indicated that postcolonial literary theories, in their multidimensional and multidisciplinary nature, have proven practically useful in scrutinizing western literature, celebrating literary works by the colonized subaltern through giving voice to the tamed, stifled, and disdained intellectuals whose works disclose the truth behind the civilizing mission of colonialism which was nothing but a series of ideas and practices used to legitimize the establishment of overseas colonies to subject people. The results of this research study are significant in the way that they would not only enrich and further advance the existing canon of postcolonial literature but would also raise awareness of everyone investigating the power dynamics of the colonizer and the colonized. In this respect, it is therefore hoped that our dissertation deepens greater understanding and inspires respect, honor, and rehabilitation for the colonized.

KEYWORDS

Postcolonialism, orientalism, decolonization, literary theory.

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1. Introduction

Postcolonialism is an intellectual movement with the purpose of deciphering western literature and disclosing its colonizing forces disguised in noble intentions. Intellectuals have always grappled with defining postcolonialism, and some have used its theories to study its effects on the cultures and societies of the colonized and how the west has conquered and controlled the non-west. In this sense, its mission endeavors to write back to the western literature in order to criticize their ideas and practices along with celebrating the buried rich heritage of the colonized. This humbling investigation attempts to define postcolonialism and to show how its applications: first, reveal the hidden hideous premises which bring about division and defamation about the colonized cultures and lands; second, celebrate and bring back honor to the once subaltern.

The postcolonial, as its prefix refers to, stands for whatever comes after the colonial or colonizing condition, but it is not posted to imperialism; it, therefore, does not come after the establishment of a system of unequal power dynamics that extends to many physical, political and psychological domains. The system of domination and subordination continues to be a topical issue. Both

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imperialism and colonialism revolve around the subjugation of certain people by another group (Young, 2016). But it is imperialism that constitutes more of a global political system, taking over many domains and structures through the establishment of ex-colonial powers as the higher and more developed nations and the postcolonial lands as the least powerful ones (Young). Despite the evolution of their interpretation, colonialism and imperialism have come to hold the same reference. Young defines these critical labels as “forms of subjugation of one people by another.” (Young, p.15); while both colonialism and imperialism are used interchangeably, the former reference still stands as the most comprehensive understanding of colonial domination. Young defines imperialism as “the exercise of power either through direct conquest or (latterly) through the political and economic influence that effectively amounts to a similar form of domination” involving “the practice of power through facilitating institutions and ideologies” (Young, p.27).

2. Literature review

Postcolonialism revolves around the effects of colonization, but the early postcolonial critics, like Said and Spivak in the 1970s, did not employ the same label. The term first served as a reference to cultural interactions within colonial societies and the literary domain and was then used to approach the experience of former Western colonies. Postcolonialism was, almost from the start, a potential site of disciplinary and interpretative contestation. Hence, it has effectively cleared the space for some critical contestation about the use of the term and its hyphenation. This, in addition to the dominant post-structuralist influences and contributions, has cleared the way for some critics to define a difference between hyphenated post-colonial theory and postcolonialism (Ashcroft et al., 2013).

However, while its application was limited to the approach of colonial cultural productions and the representations of the colonized, the noted theory developed until used in many disciplinary analyses applied to both the past and present of colonial legacies and even the resistance of its subjects. Nevertheless, the prefix “post” is still subject to much controversy in the land of academia, where some critics refuse to define the colonial period in the material occupation of the lands and cultures and rather choose to extend it to the legacy and its effects on the lands and the people. Some theorists adapt the hyphenated post-colonial reference, while others criticize it, refusing to fall for the limited chronological period of colonialism and arguing for its maintenance in latent forms. As such, recent accounts have taken an interest in the process, effect, and reactions to the colonial act, including its neo-colonial manifestations (Ashcroft et al.).

Some critics (Slemon, 1990) have been concerned with the way in which the postcolonial fields overlap, and others (Hodge and Mishra, 1990; Chrisman and Williams, 1993) have been critical of the homogenizing effect of the umbrella concept of postcolonialism, eradicating differences between the various colonial experiences (Ashcroft et al.). However, similar to the concept of “patriarchy”, even if postcolonial theory beholds referential pitfalls, its theorization remains crucial in the analysis of past and present power relations (Slemon, 1990). Despite all critiques, recent accounts have proven the fundamental aspects of postcolonialism and the complementarity of its different approaches (Ashcroft et al.).

The postcolonial study is a multidisciplinary field of knowledge. The term postcolonial went from referring to independent lands to a whole body of study dedicated to deciphering the imperfections within the same independence. Drawing from history, sociology, and the advanced study of critical theory, postcolonialism draws a critical carpet between the colonized body's experience and the colonizer's lens and power, discerning as such the persistent colonial dynamics present within the political, social, cultural, and economic and its impact on the maintenance of unequal power relations. It disposes of many analytical lenses and themes ranging from feminism and postmodernism to themes revolving around identity construction and resistance and equally aims at navigating what this intersection beholds independence, dependence, repression, and resistance. In view of its interdisciplinary nature, postcolonial theory intersects with different and sometimes contradictory theories, like Marxism and Poststructuralism, which makes its relevance and applicability doubtful. The same flaws are mirrored in disagreements on the defining semantic frame of the theory (Ghandi, 1998).

Postcolonialism is concerned with the decolonization of both postcolonial states and Western ones as well, from the political condition to the cultural one. It consists of contesting the contemporary legacies of historical colonialism and breaking the present imbalances of power. It is also concerned with how academic, literary, and popular cultures contribute to the functioning and maintenance of imperialism and the triggering of resistance powers and movements. In this way, the concept of postcolonialism merges the approach of independence and decolonization with the present conditions and realities of the colonized peoples, what J.C Young referred to as an imperialistic context in view of the maintained political and cultural domination. The postcolonial also means approaching the historical and cultural modifications and effects of sovereignty on the former colony. On the other hand, ‘Postcoloniality’ is more interested in global conditions and how the postcolonial states function within a system of domination. Postcolonialism embodies the critique of postcoloniality and the intervention with its oppressive conditions (Young), but it is also interested in the agency and forms of resistance of the postcolonial world.

In short, postcolonialism embodies the response to the neocolonial condition, but it has a difficult adversary whose power extends over all global systems and institutions (Young). To defy such overreaching powers, the concerned theory draws its basis from a number of domains and disciplines, namely Marxism, poststructuralism, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and feminism (Young). In addition, it focuses not only on the act of oppression but on that of resistance as well. The postcolonial era in its name pays tribute to the great historical achievements of resistance against colonial power while equally describing the conditions of oppression prevalent after the symbolic "independence". "Postcolonialism commemorates not only the colonial but also the triumph over it. The 'post' marks the many remarkable victories that should not be allowed to fade into the amnesia of history" (Young, p.70).

Postcolonialism manages as such to celebrate the lost history of resistance while also criticizing the contemporary colonial ways of seeking powerful substantial change in postcolonial nations. It finally approaches both the historical and contemporary embodiment of colonialism and the intersection of both their influences, hence aspiring to build a world where postcolonial leftovers are no more.

Among the main postulations, postcolonialism establishes is that, between the colonial and postcolonial, indigenous agency was lost. That is why the anti-colonial mission involved the process of the colonized body's reclaiming of the agency. The objective is to realize both independence and self-determination but the actual reality clashes hard with such fantasy (Young). Drawing from the poststructuralist approach to subjectivity, postcolonial theory defies the idea that the postcolonial subject develops an independent subjectivity and definition of their existence and origins. Postcolonial subjectivity is hence a construction from foreign interactions and bodies. Defining the postcolonial subject can go against the postcolonial objectives of breaking the defined binaries of self and other, colonizer and colonized (Ashcroft et al.), in order to underscore the complexity of the colonial body and operations. The construction of the postcolonial subject is deemed "inseparable from the construction of its others" (Ashcroft et al., p.11). The other is dominant and has defined its position in the ideal and the origin of the sense from which the postcolonial subject position is derived, and its sense of identity is established. The postcolonial subject is hence defined through the other and cannot define itself. It is the same process of othering that allows the colonial body to define the postcolonial position and identity in marginalization and exclusion, which is exactly what the approach of Orientalism aims at highlighting.

In contemporary theory, the conception of the reference of agency revolves around individual practices and whether the latter is guided by the people's own will or external influences on their identity (Ashcroft et al.). The concept of agency is important in postcolonial studies because it gives weight to the subject of resistance of the oppressed to the oppressive powers. However, the poststructuralist theory came to break this hype through its theorization of subjectivity by noting that: "Since human subjectivity is constructed by ideology (Althusser), language (Lacan), or discourse (Foucault), the corollary is that any action performed by that subject must also be to some extent be a consequence of those things" (Ashcroft et al., p.7). The approach of agency aims at underscoring how, even while being difficult, resisting and challenging oppressive powers is not impossible. For instance, no colonized land was freed through the pure willingness of oppressive powers; most change came through the people's own resistance. This aspect of power resistance was not displayed in the land of battle alone but was also displayed in text and explored thoroughly when approaching cultural production with a postcolonial lens (Ashcroft et al.).

Consequently, postcolonial theory engages in the analysis of cultural productions in which defining signs of power are being exchanged between the Western and non-western subjects, with the latter mainly beholding signs with negative connotations. This exact idea is what Edward Said's *Orientalism* revolves around, making it a fundamental account in the practice of postcolonial theory. In the concerned reference, what is established is that "the will to knowledge, and to produce its truth, is also a will to power." (Young, p. 387)

Said hence criticizes the surveillance mechanisms that the colonial bodies adopt in ways of establishing their power; he also shows how it reduces the "other" to be main subjects of observation, "depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual)" (Said, 1978, p. 40). This surveillance was not only practiced in real-life colonial contexts but was also further established through Western knowledge structures and domains.

Owing to such practices, the Orient has served as the recurring contrasting image, "the other", that defines the West. It is through this comparison that Orientalism is established as an academic tradition, one based on the distinction between the Orient and the Occident (Said). The same discursive pattern and mode of thought marked the starting point for many writers in the development of their accounts revolving around the oriental people, their customs, and experiences (Said). Orientalism frames Western dominance of the Orient by maintaining its knowledge and approach. Generating views about the Orient and essentializing the latter in their experiences allows western viewers to exercise their power and practice their domination (Said). An essential part of a discourse-based approach to Orientalism is to understand "the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was

able to manage and even produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (Said).

Orientalism refers to the Western reproduction or reimagining of the Orient. Exchanging with other institutional, discursive powers, Orientalism is a discourse that reveals through its production of knowledge "a will to truth", manifesting as such "a will to power". In the extension of Foucault's analysis of discourse, Said studied the configuration of power in the systems of knowledge generated about the Orient. While Foucault's discourse account is more focused on a body of social institutions, Said's focus mainly falls on the construction of oriental narrative through literary accounts. The concerned scholar supports his literary analysis with many academic domains in his way of underscoring the imperialist view of the orient established in the literature of the colonizer. The same literature through which the otherness of the orient is both established and maintained. This conception of the other was apparent in their approach as "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different" (Said, p. 48) in contrast with the European body, and this same approach through the western texts served to justify the noted colonial intervention. In sum, Said aimed to discern how Western bodies of knowledge aimed to generate a representation of the Other, the Orient, one which would assign the latter to a lasting position of inferiority to the West. Orientalism aims at detecting the politically bound discourse of the author, one influenced by his historical, cultural, and racial background.

However, despite the whimsical framing of the image of the Orient, Orientalism is not just the result of pure imagining, but it actually has a corresponding reality. It would be disingenuous, as Said asserts, to think that the Orient was simply created or imagined (Said). It is not simply a Western fantasy but a result of a considerable investment in reality both in theory and practice (Said). However, Edward Said clarifies how no production of knowledge is fully objective, not even within the world of social sciences. Considering the fact that the author is a human subject too with their own context and conditions unique to their experience brought forth in every production of theirs. In this way, the same applies to any Western author writing about the Orient, for his position could be clear as someone different than the oriental figure and one way more powerful than the latter. In that same vein, Said specifies the need for "being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more importantly, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer." (Said, p. 11) For such reason, Said uses the methodological tool of defining the person's position before approaching their account. In some cases, even in a failed attempt to remain professional and objective, the orientalist practices on human detachment automatically withdraws sympathy from experience.

The Orientalist functions as a generalist, making biased statements about the Orient and reducing its worth and definitions to Western power and knowledge (Said, p. 355). However, postcolonial approaches did not stop at Orientalist visions alone but were further explored and developed through other domains of thought, including subaltern studies. The Subaltern reference initially stands for one of "inferior rank," and Gramsci used this concept to refer to the groups that are deprived of hegemonic power. The subaltern tends to be, as such, the most marginalized and poorest among all societies. In addition to their marginalized position, the history of the subaltern is fragmented, for they do not have control over their own narratives and representations; the only accepted and documented history is that of the ruling classes (Ashcroft et al., 2013). Therefore, the purpose of developing subaltern approaches was to break this imbalance present in historiography and demolish the superiority of the elite works and approaches, starting with south Asian historiography. Since subordination cannot be approached without recognizing its binary links with dominance, the subaltern scholars aimed to analyze and criticize the dominant representations and historical accounts. According to Foucault and Deleuze, if allowed the chance, the oppressed can be aware of their conditions and eventually voice them (Spivak 1993). In her renowned account, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gayatri Spivak is critical of Foucault and Deleuze because, in her opinion, they, in turn, adopt Eurocentric ways of approaching the subaltern condition and voice. They hence practice what she referred to as "epistemic violence". Through her critique, Spivak proceeded to point out the flaws of applying universal critical conceptions on a different culture and finally came up with the conclusion that "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, 2010, p.104). The subaltern subject cannot know or speak itself, so the intellectual chooses to do so on their behalf; they cannot speak because they are deprived of access to all resources of power and do not speak the mainstream political language. The European scholar's fault is his assurance that he is aware of the subaltern's needs and proceeds to speak on their behalf. That is why, besides being aware of their privileges, the researchers approaching the subaltern experience should make a difference between the subaltern's needs and their desires, their imagining of a fair world in which their independence and satisfaction are realized, far from the mainstream capitalist visions of a fair and functional future.

In this way, just as Gramsci was interested in how the intellectual contributes to the cultural and political hegemony of the subaltern, Spivak focused on the hindering of Western knowledge ownership of postcolonial subjectivity and agency. According to her analysis, knowledge is never innocent, as it mostly seeks to serve its producer's interest. The Western subject is concealed through legal and political bodies yet pretends to have no geo-political determinations. That is why Spivak approaches knowledge as any sort of commodity that is imported from the West to the Third World in order to make a profit. The "other" is therefore only studied

in the profit of foreign research and states. How can we then decolonize research knowing that most of it dispose of certain colonial influences?

While Spivak's conception can be interpreted as negating the possibility of realizing subaltern resistance, her actual argument is that no mode of representation is fair or suitable as long as the dominant languages are in no way inclusive of indigenous languages and concerns. One cannot speak on behalf of a subject that is as far from the dominant discourse as one could be. The problem, according to Spivak, is that the subalterns are deprived of the power of proper platforms that would allow them to voice their concerns and actually influence sustainable reform. In short, the subaltern lacks agency; they lack the opportunity to make decisions for themselves, and their subjectivity is not self-developed but rather a result of foreign discourse. Their identities and experiences are written for them, not through and by them. An admiration of subaltern visions is not enough; proceeding with supporting their work and their ways of realizing their imagined future is necessary. In sum, while criticizing untenable fixtures of the noted "saviors", Spivak promotes sustainable change, even if it could be slow.

Finally, the approaches change, but the cause remains unique. Through its different lenses, postcolonial theory aims at dissecting the dynamics of power that have been influenced by and maintained since colonial times. Despite the differences in their analyses, all postcolonial scholars argue against the determinant consequences of Western exploitation that could be traced along each and every one of political and personal domains. Postcolonialism has accompanied the emergence of the new humanities as modern fields of knowledge that aim to decolonize the academic canon and proceed with recovering and recognizing the long silenced and marginalized knowledge (Ghandi). The problem remains, as Leela Ghandi notes that postcolonialism is approached today as a renowned theory only thanks to the same knowledge imbalances it criticizes. It has hence gained its prominence only from its linkage to the Western post-structuralist and postmodernist academic bodies. For instance, one of the biggest references in postcolonial theory, *Orientalism*, might have gained attention for its reliance on discourse theories and its dependence on Foucauldian paradigms. In her turn, Spivak had only been able to join the canon through her renowned translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, and most of her work equally relied on critical intersections between the works of Derrida and Foucault (Spivak, 2010).

Despite all its flaws, the postcolonial theory remains among the most useful approaches and the most powerful causes against the big challenge of decolonization. Almost every life domain is embedded with uneven power dynamics, even the domain of knowledge production. As part of the latter body, literature, in its turn, takes part in a system in which knowledge and power define all. That is why postcolonial theory also takes an interest in how academic, literary, and popular bodies can maintain, challenge, or resist the remains of colonial missions (Young, 2016). The effects of colonization as such cannot be limited to the political and physical levels alone, but it also ranges to personal and intellectual levels, which is what this article aims at exploring. Colonialism is not only a way of appropriating an area; it is also a literary perspective that is based on the uneven relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. In fact, it almost completely avoids one part of this relationship – namely, the colonized.

This is not to say that postcolonialism may be expanded to include anything; rather, it means that it should be viewed as a critical instrument rather than a normative definition (Ponzanesi, 2021). As Stuart Hall has stated, "in any case, the post-colonial does not operate on its own but is in effect a construct internally differentiated by its intersections with other unfolding relations" (Hall, 1996, p. 245).

We need to distinguish between various social and racial groupings more carefully, according to Hall, because their roots are frequently found in colonial ties. Hall's assertion is essential for comprehending the non-monolithic nature of postcolonialism while accepting its unquestionable ability to handle a broad range of shared issues, including both the edges and the very center of an empire. Making the "invisible visible" (Young, 2012, p.23) and bringing many fields of study into the conversation via the prism of postcolonial critique is the challenge of postcolonial theory. The flexibility of postcolonialism is its greatest asset since it enables it to connect disparate regions and recurring patterns.

Postcolonial writings can be interpreted as alternative histories that both contest colonial narratives and give voice to individuals whose tales have been overlooked or obliterated by European historians. Many postcolonial texts also interact with and "write back" colonial literature and history, either implicitly or explicitly. In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, three renowned scholars in Commonwealth literary studies, introduce the idea of "writing back." Their book's title alludes to the remark that "The Empire writes back to the center as they debate a variety of topics, including postcolonial writing and rewriting as well as postcolonial reading." (Innes, 2011, p. 40).

Even if most scholars of the concerned literary theory have established Said's account as the founding work of postcolonial literary theory, *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) was a seminal work that greatly influenced literary studies in the direction of post-colonial studies. The postcolonial literary theory takes an interest in literature written about locations and populations that were colonized

before or actually undergoing that in the present, and these texts can be either written by the colonizer or the colonized themselves. In the application of postcolonialism, the concerned literary theory centers on themes of othering, power, agency, and resistance. It is hence directed at the study of two main occurrences: the first one is the colonized attempt to reclaim their agency and their stories through their writing, and the second is the colonizer's justification of their colonial establishment through the depiction of the other as inferior.

The field of postcolonial studies has significantly influenced how we currently perceive the concept of literariness but also explores how the writers originating from the colonized lands attempt to reclaim their culture and land back through their literature. That is why postcolonial literary theory cannot be defined through one side, but its approach encompasses both the literature of the oppressed and the oppressive. It can explore the journey of the former from subjects of power to objects generating resistance and independent discourse. However, resistant efforts might be hindered by the pitfalls of the concerned literature. While attempting to generate their own discourse, the colonized might fall into the mimicry, a point Homi Bhabha develops, of Western frames of knowledge and hence end up contributing to the perpetuation of its power. When approaching such drawbacks, postcolonial critics have defined the experience of postcolonial writing in three phases: Adopt, Adapt, and Adept.

In the first phase, as Peter Barry highlights in his account: *Beginning Theory*, "The writer's ambition is to adopt the form as it stands, the assumption being that it has universal validity." (Barry, 2017, p. 190). The postcolonial writers proceed as such by accepting and applying the European literary tradition that is deemed universal without questioning its functionality. In the second and adapt phase, the concerned writers aim at maintaining the European form, all while preserving the non-European subject matter (Barry), hence finding a way to make use of both sides in their literary works. The third and final phase marks the declaration of postcolonial writers of their independence from the form and characteristics of European knowledge production. It is the phase in which the writers try to remake their own specifications that apply to their context and experience with no regard to the universally prioritized Western forms (Barry). This might not be unique to the form alone but might even include the style and the use of Western languages. The writers finally go about prioritization of indigenous cultural production as a way of marking intellectual independence from colonial power and knowledge.

The idea of place and displacement is another element that is highlighted through such approaches in postcolonial literary theory. The question of one's place in the world is undoubtedly at the forefront of the latter approach since it focuses on the relationships between the former colonies and Empire or the center and margins. As a result of these binaries and the violent hierarchy they involve, one side of the opposition is always dominant, and the binary opposition itself serves to affirm that dominance (Ashcroft et al.). The postcolonial theory aims at demonstrating that the opposition should be eliminated and that there should no longer be a margin-to-center division.

3. Findings and Conclusions:

After engaging in heavy readings of relevant accounts to my research, the findings indicate that :

- Postcolonial theory is multidisciplinary and draws its basis from a number of domains and disciplines, namely marxism, poststructuralism, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and feminism.
- The postcolonial literary theory takes an interest in literature written about locations and populations that were colonized before or actually undergoing that in the present, and these texts can be either written by the colonizer or the colonized themselves.
- Despite all its flaws and its referential pitfalls, all postcolonial theorists agree that postcolonialism refers to the outcome of the colonial conquests and powers. Furthermore, the postcolonial theory remains among the most useful approaches and the most powerful causes against the big challenge of decolonization.
- Postcolonial writings can be interpreted as alternative histories that both contest colonial narratives and give voice to individuals whose tales have been overlooked or obliterated by European historians.
- Postcolonialism not only discerns how the colonial literature was used to perpetuate the position of the colonized as passive and inferior while indirectly justifying the political imperial mission but also explores how the writers originating from the colonized lands attempt reclaiming their culture and land back through their literature.

In conclusion, postcolonial literary theory has proven useful not only in the criticism of Western texts but also in the approach and celebration of postcolonial literature generated by the colonized. The wide reach of postcolonial discourse into other disciplines such as development, ecology, social justice, feminism, and socialism seeks to apply its alternative knowledge to alter existing power structures and produce a more just and equal reality for people all over the world.

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