



Postcolonial literature: A definitive and analytical study

Bilal Ahmad Dar

Ph.D., Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India

Abstract

The words 'Postcolonial' and 'Postcolonialism' are often used when we talk about the countries, states etc. that have gone through the bitter period of colonialism and imperialism. Colonialism, as we know, is the process of subjugating the weaker and less powerful country by the more powerful and dominating one. Writers from the erstwhile colonies like Africa, Somalia, Australia, India, Pakistan, Ireland, Trinidad etc. have profusely written both poetry and fiction through which they have projected the colonial ideologies and violence perpetrated by the colonizers against the colonized. Alongside this, they have also shown the resistance and rebellion of the Natives against their colonial masters or colonizers. The binary of colonizer and colonized is one of the main subtexts of Postcolonial Literature and Postcolonial Theory. Postcolonial Literature addresses the issues of subalternity, oppression, resistance, and revolt. The papers attempts to explain and highlight through an analytical study what Postcolonial Literature is all about. Besides this, an attempt will be made to define Postcolonial criticism in its right and proper perspective.

Keywords: Colonialism, postcolonial, subjugating, ideologies, binary, Africa, colonizer, colonized

Introduction

The literatures of nations such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Kenya, India, Pakistan, Jamaica and Ireland are postcolonial... (John McLeod)

Postcolonial writing can now be defined as the textual/literary processes through which formerly colonized people assert their difference from, resistance to, and negotiation with, European colonial masters and cultures while attempting to develop similar strategies to tackle contemporary globalizing and neocolonial processes of domination by Euro-American Powers (P.K. Nayar)

Postcolonial Literature in theoretical parlance is defined as the literature that belongs to the countries that have gone through the bitter and biting phase of European Colonialism. To be more precise and direct, Postcolonial Literature is the literature written in the Third World Countries like Africa, Somalia, South America, and other erstwhile colonized spaces based on the theme of subjugation and resistance. Bill Ashcroft *et al.* define postcolonial literature in the context of the following countries:

...Literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all postcolonial literatures... What each of these literatures has in common beyond their specific and distinct regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power... (2)

The nature and aim of any Postcolonial work is resistance, contestation and rebellion against the dominant Empire. Postcolonial literature is the literature against the ideology

and stance of the Empire/Centre. According to Pramod. K Nayar:

Postcolonial literature is that which negotiates with, contests, and subverts Euro-American ideologies and representations. Technically, most modern literature can be termed 'postcolonial', in the sense that large areas even Europe and Asia were once parts of the Roman or Ottoman empires... I treat postcolonial writing as a literature that critically engages with history of oppression, colonialism (both external and internal), racism, and injustice, but with a particular emphasis on issues of race and ethnicity. It is a literature of emancipation, critique, and transformation. (xii)

Postcolonial literature attempts to highlight how the natives have been essentialised and pigeonholed. By highlighting this they want to reclaim and regain the ambience and the culture that has been bungled and destroyed by the outlandish cultural imperialism. J.A. Cuddon in his book *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Terms* talks about the often-asserted goal of postcolonial literatures in these lines:

Postcolonial literatures seek to reclaim self-representation from stereotypical portrayals in colonial literatures and colonial discourses, and to do so they often use the 'writing back' paradigm, or rewriting of Western 'master' texts... (551)

Colonial experience has produced many postcolonial writers. Chinua Achebe from Nigeria is considered as one of the most famous and at the same time influential postcolonial novelists. His *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is the foundational and seminal text in the area of postcolonial literature. In this particular novel, Achebe very lucidly highlights how the fair skinned people treated and

essentialised the Nigerian. Further, Achebe shows how Okonkwo acts as a symbol of resistance against the dominant White ideology and Ideological State Apparatus. Joseph Conrad's novelette *Heart of Darkness* (1902) also serves as the best example of Postcolonial novel. This novel is an outright diatribe and critique on Colonialism. Lois Tyson in his book on literary theory titled *Critical Theory Today* has made a following observation about *Heart of Darkness*:

Heart of Darkness is extremely anticolonialist in its negative representation of the colonial enterprise: the Europeans conducting the ivory trade in the Congo are portrayed as heartless, greedy thieves who virtually enslave the indigenous population... (427)

We have novels in legions that belong to the category of postcolonial Literature. In nutshell, we can say that Postcolonial Literature is the literature of resistance, of dissent and rebellion. It is the literature the essential subtext of which is how the colonizers treat the Natives of colony. It is the literature which shows us the binary of colonizer and colonized. It is a literature that highlights the violence of colonialism-epistemic, cultural, economic, political, and military.

Defining postcolonial criticism

Post colonialism is an academic discipline that attempts to analyze, explain, and respond to the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism. (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*)

Postcolonial Criticism is the most interesting area of study in the contemporary literary theory because of its social, political, and global relevance. In common critical parlance, Postcolonial Criticism is the analysis of any literary work written in the aftermath of colonial experience. Postcolonial Criticism of any work shows us how dominant ideologies treat the subaltern natives. It analyzes and highlights the relative position of the colonizer and colonized in the text. Ann B. Dobie in his book *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* gives a very succinct and relevant definition of Postcolonial Criticism in the following words:

Postcolonial literary criticism is an analysis that looks to uncover the colonialist or anticolonialist ideologies in a text. It frequently brings marginalized characters and events to the centre of a reading or looks at how colonialism initiated pejorative cultural stereotypes. (355)

Postcolonial Criticism shows us how in a literary text the dominant colonizer tries to subjugate and undermine the powerless colonized. Postcolonial analysis of any literary text highlights criminal, negative, and biased ideology of the colonizer. How the colonized tries to resist the dominant colonizer is the often aimed concern of Postcolonial criticism. M.H. Abrams writes:

A recurrent topic of debate in postcolonial study is how, and to what extent, a subaltern subject, writing in a European language, can manage to serve as an agent of resistance against, rather than of compliance with the

very discourse that has created its subordinate identity. (237)

How the relative powerless and disadvantageous elements in the text are essentialised, stereotyped, and criminalized by the colonizers is the main focus of Postcolonial analysis of the text. Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* offers a very comprehensive and appropriate definition of Postcolonialism/ Postcolonial Criticism as under:

'Postcolonialism' is the theoretical wing of postcoloniality. It refers to a mode of reading, political analysis, and cultural resistance/ intervention that deals with the history of colonialism and present neocolonial structures. It is a mix of rigorous epistemological and theoretical analysis of texts and political praxis of resistance to neocolonial conditions.... Postcolonialism seeks to understand how oppression, resistance, and adaptation occurred during colonial rule. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering, and crucially, interrogating the colonial past. (17)

We have plethora of books written by the leading postcolonial theorists like Edward Said, Spivak, Homi Baba, Franz Fanon, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Syed Altas. It is actually Edward Said's book titled *Orientalism* (1978) that ushered in the Postcolonial Studies or what we call as Postcolonial Criticism. In this book Said highlights the biased approach of the Occident against the Orient. Said further highlights how the occident uses its *Camera Obscura* in order to show the Orient in a very poor picture. How the Orient is stereotyped in the Occidental Texts is also given a thorough study by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Syed Hussain Altas in his acclaimed book *The Myth of Lazy Native* (1977) also focuses on the colonial and imperialistic tendencies in the powerful Occident. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* An iconic essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is also the leading work on the Postcolonial Studies/ Postcolonial Criticism. Likewise, the very influential collection of essays, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin is the foundational book on Postcolonial Criticism. *The Wretched of the Earth* (1966) by Franz Fanon is also one of the important and seminal works on the area of Postcolonial Studies and criticism. Alongside Franz Fanon, we have Albert Memmi whose book titled *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1965) has made quite a name in the Postcolonial theory. In this particular book Memmi has problematised the binary of colonizer and the colonized. Theorists like Fanon, Memmi etc are really the pioneers of Postcolonial theory and criticism. This is attested by P.K. Nayar through following lines:

Postcolonial theory can be said to have originated in the mid-twentieth century texts of Franz Fanon, Aime` Cesaire and Albert Memi. Anticolonial writing, nationalism, resistance, anti –Westernization, and cultural identity in colonized nations have been integral to the writings (and speeches) of Kwame Nkrumah, Gandhi... and others from the colonized nations. (22)

When we do a Postcolonial reading of any texts we search for how the marginal and disadvantaged characters are treated. How stereotypes and expletives are hurled against the less powerful races. How colonized are essentialised and othered by the colonizers. Postcolonial Criticism not only highlights the physical violence that is perpetuated against the colonial subjects but it also shows us how the subjects are also subjected to epistemic violence. While doing a postcolonial reading of a text, a postcolonial critic is engaged in the analysis whether a literary text reinforces or resists the exploitative ideology of the colonizer. Lois Tyson in this connection writes:

...Most postcolonial critics analyze the ways in which a literary text, whatever its topics, is colonialist or anticolonialist, that is, the ways in which the text reinforces or resists colonialism's oppressive ideology. For example, in the simplest terms, a text can reinforce colonialist ideology through positive portrayals of the colonizers, negative portrayals of the colonized... Analogously, texts can resist colonialist ideology by depicting the misdeeds of the colonizers, the suffering of the colonized, or the detrimental effects of colonialism on the colonized. (427)

It highlights the covert ideology of the dominant group. How the natives are forced as well as persuaded to assimilate the culture of the colonizer and to detest and throw away their indigenous culture. Postcolonial reading of a text aims to highlight the dyad of Marginal and Central characters. John McLeod in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism* has following to say about the Postcolonial reading of the text:

Postcolonialism involves reading texts produced by writers from countries with a history of colonialism, primarily those texts concerned with the workings and legacy of colonialism in either the past or the present... Reading texts produced by those that have migrated from countries with a history of colonialism... (33)

Hence, from the arguments taken above, we can safely conclude that the literature written by the writers belonging to the erstwhile colonies is termed as the Postcolonial literature and the analysis of the Postcolonial Literature through the lens and parameters of Postcolonial theory is Postcolonial criticism.

Reference

1. Abrams MH. A Glossary of Literary Terms. India: Thomson Business International India Pvt. Ltd, Print, 2006,
2. Ashcroft Bill, *et al.* The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures. London: Routledge, Print, 1989,
3. Dobie Anne B. Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism. Australia: Cengage Learning, Print, 2012.
4. Cuddon JA. A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. London: Penguin, Print, 2000.
5. McLeod John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. New Delhi: Viva Books, Print, 2010.
6. Nayar Pramod K, *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. India: Dorling Kindersley, Print, 2008.

7. Tyson Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User Friendly Guide*. New York: Routledge, Print, 2006.