

Research Papers



## Postcolonialism: A Counter Discourse

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### Abstract

*The encounter between the colonizer and the colonized resulted in a situation where the hegemonic colonial discourse was resisted in different ways and by different means. The writers of India, Africa and the Caribbean countries came up with a narrative of their own whereby they resisted the socio-political-economical and cultural aggression of the colonizer. In their writings, they produced means and ways that voiced and gave vent to those repressed feelings and wishes of the colonized that had been suppressed by colonial hegemony. This marks the rise of a postcolonial discourse whereby the colonized writers revived their identity, history, culture and myth. The present essay looks at diaspora, hybridity and multiculturalism as some major postcolonial counter discourses taking recourse to which the postcolonial fiction writers write back to ward off the Eurocentric bias and representation in literature.*

Postcolonial literature, as a form of resistance, “negotiates with, contests, and subverts Euro-American ideologies and representations” (P.K Nayar, 2008: xiii). The term postcolonial is used, in its broader sense “to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Bill Ashcroft et al, 1989: 2). Postcolonial literary theory, therefore, includes any text written in erstwhile colonized societies and also rewritings of literary texts from an alternative point of view. This characterization is enough to denote the postcolonial practice of “writing back” to ward off the Eurocentric bias of literature and literary analysis. However, Postcolonialism is also concerned with discourses that construct non-Western cultures as the West's “Other” and help to sustain the Eurocentric perspective by marginalizing them. Postcolonialism recognizes that the colonized are represented as others and are silenced as marginal or peripheral; and tries to

contest the methods of thinking that silence the colonized. In his epoch making book *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said argues that European nations shaped and produced knowledge about non-western countries and peoples through personal observations presented as scientific truths. Although Said concerns himself mainly with the representation of Middle Eastern people, it is still argued that through representations of non-western people in writings by Europeans, a dichotomy is created between Europe and the Orient. This hierarchical dichotomy created through European representations of the East describes the Orient in derogatory terms. While the Western is projected as superior, the Oriental is pitted as its inferior. As a direct result of these representations of the Orient by the Western, the image of the non-western emerges as a “construct”, as the West's “Other,” which establishes the West's superiority. Put simply, Said opines, “The Orient was therefore not Europe's

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interlocutor, but its silent Other”(Edward Said, 1997: 131). This thinking system also draws attention to the political dimension of this constructed identity as other. Orientalist representations function to exclude the non-western cultures and thus justify and legitimize the propriety and modesty of Western imperialism. Therefore, the central issue that we should be aware of, according to Said, is that all representations are ideologically biased and motivated. Said argues that “any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambiance of the representer” (Edward Said, 1979: 272).

This idea implies that there is no 'true' representation free of ideological bias and predisposition because “it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting. In other words, representations have purposes, they are effective much of the time, they accomplish one or many tasks. Representations are formations, or [...] they are deformations” (Edward Said, 1979: 273). Edward Said's argument is partly based on Foucault's idea of discourse, the textual nature of reality, and the close relationship between knowledge and power. Like Foucault, Said also sees knowledge and power as closely connected with each other in that power is exercised through using knowledge discursively, because, for Said “knowledge' [is] never raw, unmediated, or simply objective” (Edward Said, 1979: 273). Obtaining of knowledge in the colonial context is not an innocent act of knowing, and it is exploited by the colonizer as the power that leads to its establishment and sustenance.

Said's Orientalism gave way to various sorts of postcolonial textual analysis looking for ways of subverting colonial representations and recovering the voice of the oppressed and marginalized, and producing new modes of representation which can enable this recovering. Postcolonial writers and theorists underline the central role that the criticism of colonial history should play in their attempts to problematize Western grand narratives, and believe that Postcolonialism can be thought of as an assessment of history itself. Leela Gandhi asserts that Postcolonialism “is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past”( Leela Gandhi, 1998: 4).

Postcolonial literary critics therefore draw attention to the fact that during the hey-day of colonialism, much of the history writing of the colonized societies was generally carried out by the European and in pursuit of his own interests; and this makes history a discourse entirely Eurocentric where the colonized other is disqualified and excluded. This way of thinking points to the discursive role that history plays in colonial imposition and sustenance. In the colonial condition, history is depicted as the narrative through which the colonizing power asserts its hegemony over the colonized subject. Leela Gandhi continues, “colonialism, in terms of this logic, is the story of making the world historical, or, we might argue, a way of 'worlding' the world as Europe” (Leela Gandhi, 171).

As Postcolonial historiography questions history as a grand narrative, it is against the Western historiography which is ideologically constructed to claim authority over the colonized other. This is primarily seen as the postcolonial challenge to the hegemony of the Eurocentric, the so-called official and standard version of colonial history. The fact that postcolonial writing and literary theory endeavor to deconstruct the dominant discourses makes them intersect in several ways with the movements of Poststructuralism and Postmodernism. This is generally regarded as “the appropriation of contemporary post-structuralist accounts to the field of post-colonial writing” ( Bill Ashcroft et al, 1989: 177). There is a productive way of bringing Postmodernism and Postcolonialism together in terms of thematic and rhetorical concerns as this will prove to be reinforcing, particularly when these are relevant to the issues of marginality. There are considerable overlaps in the concerns of Postcolonialism and Postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon discusses and analyzes these overlaps in three major groups of 'formal,' 'thematic' and 'strategic'. She argues that formal issues such as what is popularly called 'magic realism,' thematic concerns regarding history and marginality, and discursive strategies like irony and allegory are all commonly shared by both the postmodern and the postcolonial writers. Pertinently, they do not bother even if the final uses, to which each is put, differ.

Postcolonialism resists the dominant discourse in the same way as postmodern literature does. It regards grand narratives such as history as a colonial tool which imperial powers use to sustain their existence. Accordingly, postcolonial

writing undermines the validity of the so-called objective truth and knowledge. Certain postmodern techniques which question the validity of a single 'Truth' are also detectable in postcolonial writings. The reader is likely to come across discontinuous flashing narratives, magic-realism, subversive hilarity, self mockery, intertextual allusions, the inclusion and parody of different writing styles, established historical events and personages combined with fictional and fantastic characters, palimpsest and ekphrasis, and an extensive use of irony in postcolonial literary texts. The study of postcolonial discourses in countries like India and Africa involves an examination of diaspora writing, hybridity and multiculturalism whose ambivalence is noticeable in their conformity to and resistance to the Eurocentric discourses.

The encounter between the colonizer and the colonized resulted in a situation where the hegemonic colonial discourse was resisted in different ways and by different means. The writers of India, Africa and the Caribbean countries came up with a narrative of their own whereby they resisted the socio-political-economical and cultural aggression of the colonizer. In their writings, they produced means and ways that voiced and gave vent to those repressed feelings and wishes of the colonized that had been suppressed by colonial hegemony. This marks the rise of a postcolonial discourse whereby the colonized writers revived their identity, history, culture and myth.

Most of the postcolonial writers have considered the hybridized nature of postcolonialism as complimentary to the subversion of the Eurocentric colonial discourses. Such writings focus on the fact that the encounter between the colonizer and the colonized is a complex process. It's not a one way process in which the oppressor obliterates and annihilates the oppressed completely, or the colonizer marginalizes or silences the voice of the colonized in absolute terms. The clash between the two opposing cultures gives rise to the formation of a new hybrid culture. This hybridity is used as a very powerful device by the postcolonial writers not only for evading the replication of the binary categories of the past but also for developing new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth. Bill Ashcroft et al in their epoch making book *The Empire Writes Back* write:

While post-colonial literary theory has drawn on European theoretical systems it has done

so cautiously and eclectically. Alterity implies alteration, and no European theory is likely to be appropriate in different cultural circumstances without itself undergoing radical rethinking - an 'appropriation' by a different discourse. Theories proposed by critics like Homi Bhabha and writers like Wilson Harris or Edward Brathwaite proceed from a consideration of the nature of post-colonial societies and the types of hybridization their various cultures have produced. In much European thinking, history, ancestry, and the past form a powerful reference point for epistemology. In post-colonial thought, however, as the Australian poet Les Murray has said, 'time broadens into space' (Bill Ashcroft et al, 1989: 32-33).

In the whole plethora of postcolonial writings, works like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, G.V Desani's *All About H Hatter*, Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood*, V S Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, and others 'set out to disrupt Eurocentric notions of history and the ordering of time' (Bill Ashcroft et al, 1989: 33). In fact, the same could be said about Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, R. K Narayan's *The English Teacher* and *The Financial Expert* and other such Indian and African novels that are a fine depiction of the double existence that colonized people live using hybridity as a weapon for resistance against colonial onslaught. It simply means that the encounter between two alien cultures results in the birth of a new culture that retains the impression of its own but absorbs the things from the new culture and is thus hybridized. It seeks for the revival of its history and traditions and accommodates them to the modern situation. There develops new forms of language that balance between the language of the colonizer and the colonized.

It could be argued that hybridity, whether through the contact between colonizer and colonized, or through experiencing of diaspora life on the soil of the colonizer, opens up doors for a multicultural way of life which by itself becomes a site of resistance against the hegemonising and all powerful colonizer. According to Bill Ashcroft, "The post-colonial world is one in which destructive cultural encounter is changing to an acceptance of difference on equal terms" (Bill Ashcroft et al, 1989: 35). In other words, postcolonial writing is absolutely fed up with the "endless human history of conquest and annihilation justified by the myth of group 'purity', and as the basis on which the post-colonial world

can be creatively stabilized” (Bill Ashcroft et al, 1989: 35). Likewise the postcolonial cultures speak of syncretism and multiculturalism in order to break the myth of universalistic and monolithic western notions of history, politics, metaphysics, culture and economy. In the postcolonial body of writing the periphery moves to the centre, and the writers speak of harmony and eclecticism where everybody is given his due share in the making of the world unlike the colonial discourse. The other of the colonial discourse finds a due space and likewise what is good from the powerful culture is also retained.

In the postcolonial world, hybridity and multiculturalism can be seen as the natural results of the contact rather encounter between colonizer and colonized people and also as a result of immigration of the colonized to the land of colonizer where rootlessness- a longing for one's own identity and culture, cultural shocks and alienation become the hallmarks of the colonized diaspora who in fact do not find any choice but to live a hybrid and multicultural life overseas. And, so diaspora becomes a term of growing relevance to postcolonial studies.

The term diaspora refers to the scattering of a people. It is a sort of exile which inflicts loss of immense magnitude on the people who experience it. In fact, this scattering throughout the world leads to a splitting. There develops a dual ontology and the diasporic subject is seen looking in two directions- towards a historical cultural identity on the one hand and the culture of relocation on the other. In fact, hybridity develops in the very existence of a diasporic subject as he starts living a double existence- the existence of home culture and the existence of an alien culture with which he cannot but compromise. According to Salman Rushdie, this situation leads to the emergence of 'imaginary homelands' (Salman Rushdie, 1991) which continue to be written and re-written as the world, taking on an ever more global character. Diasporic writing becomes strategic because the identity of the diasporic subject is actively inscribed.

Most of the postcolonial Indian and African writers, throughout their writing career, have been involved in questioning the monolithic European worldview and have demonstrated by their multicultural and hybrid identities the potential of an Indian and African writer to disrupt and dismantle the oppressive and hegemonic western worldview. The nature of such literature is essentially hybrid, diasporic and multicultural in

its origin and development and therefore offers a formidable resistance to an equally strong hegemonic and oppressive European control.

As we know, postcolonial literature is by itself a strategy of resistance as it makes room for the colonized to seek his roots, retrieve his history, and lament the loss of culture and identity as inflicted by the colonial agency. For example, the colonizer's worldview is often challenged by the term used by Ashcroft et al as 'appropriation' – the ability to Indianize or Africanize the language of the colonizer (Bill Ashcroft et al, 1989: 37).

Postcolonial writers, taking recourse to most of the postmodern strategies, question and subvert the so called 'fixed' notions devised by the colonial society. The encounter with the colonizer necessarily produces an ambivalent condition which in turn creates a colonial hybrid. The colonial society is ambivalent in its nature as it is “double duty bound” due to professed civilizing mission of the colonizer on one hand and the use of a violent subjugating force on the other hand. In fact, it is “split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (Homi K. Bhabha, 1994: 107).

The hybridized nature of the colonized makes him a mimic man who takes things from the colonizer. However, this mimicry becomes a dynamic force and, thus, a source of resistance. Homi K. Bhabha writes: “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not the quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, . . . Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates;' the other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference of recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic of a colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both normalized knowledge and disciplinary powers” (Homi K. Bhabha, 1994: 86).

That means colonialism has profound effects on the colonized people, and the relationship of power between the two creates mimic men among the colonized. As a result, the colonized becomes a hybrid and he loses the purity of his own culture and identity and with the passage of time is compelled by the situation to disrupt the colonial edifice and seek for his lost identity, culture and history. In this process, the colonized develops a language of his own by

restoring to 'appropriation' and 'abrogation', two very important features of counter discourse in the postcolonial literature. The colonized becomes a hybrid and mimic man by his attempts to assimilate the culture of the colonizer. Or to put it other way round, the colonized becomes free in the process as he is unable to alter his status and condition rather his essence in harmony and communion with the colonizer. This includes active resistance to the colonial situation, but also an attempt to recapture the cultural legacy that the colonial situation has tried to eradicate.

Thus it could be argued that hybrids in the colonial situation become subversive with their developing sense of longing for their own roots. Their mimicry turns out to be the most subversive and powerful weapon with an evolving sense of freedom. In fact, according to Bakhtin, they 'jostle from below' the colonial edifice.

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