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Colonial Discourses and English Studies: A Critical Analysis of Postcolonial Theory

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Abstract: Colonial discourse, of course, has immense impact on postcolonial literature, especially in the field of English studies. It generates new ideas and concepts in writing for the writers. The postcolonial writers analyze and evaluate the colonial discourses in their literature effectively. Postcolonial theory explores various assumptions of colonial struggles in the era of post-colonialism such as the psychology of the west, condition of the natives in the colonial era, and the overall impact of colonialism in the literature of postcolonial era. This article talks about the role of colonial discourse in English studies in the perspective of postcolonial theory.

Keywords: Colonial Discourse, English Studies, Postcolonial Theory

Introduction

Colonial discourse creates the images of the non-European by Europeans in literature and other fields. In other words, this is the narrative construction of the non-Europeans. It also covers the fields of arts, law, social science inquiries, archaeology, political thought and so on. According to Pramod K. Nayar (2010), within colonial discourse studies, post-colonial literary criticism has focused on the role of English literature, English language and cultural representations, demonstrating how colonial English literature texts are imbricated in colonial structures of dominance and oppression.

Pramod K. Nayar (2010) also says that the task of postcolonial literary criticism has been (primarily in English studies), to locate modes of representation – narratives – where Europeans constructed the natives in politically significant ways. Colonial discourse is racialized, of course, and because racial discourses feed directly into the imperial-colonial system (colonialism being the conquest and domination of one race by another), the task of postcolonial literary studies has been to unpack those literary figures, themes, and representations that have enforced imperialist ideology, colonial dominance and continuing Western hegemony. Adapting Said's argument that discourses shape and determine colonial experience for both colonizers and colonized, postcolonial studies locate a political role for literary representations.

Frantz Fanon strongly highlighted the psychological effects of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized in 1960s. According to him, colonialism destroyed the souls of the repressed and suffering natives. Basically, the colonial masters saw the natives as a non-human, animalized 'object or thing' which annihilates the identity of the native. Nayar (2010) said that Fanon's insight into the psychology of colonialism was simply this: When the colonial paints the native as evil, pagan, and primitive, over a period of time the native begins to accept this prejudiced and

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racialized view as true. As a result, the native comes to see himself as evil, pagan, and primitive. The black man loses his sense of self and identity because he can only see himself through the eyes of the white man. In the 1960s, Fanon also argues that for the native the term 'man' itself begins to mean 'white man' because he does not see himself as a man at all. In terms of culture, the native extends this accepted notion to believe that only values that matter are those of white man.

Structures of colonial domination were, of course, racialized in the sense that they were created and administered by acknowledging and reinforcing the racial difference between the natives and the colonial masters. The European master possessed the power to govern, and the natives were 'subjects' to the systems created by the masters. These structures were sustained not merely by the use of military and economic power – though these were, expectedly, central to it – but through a complex dynamic of 'representation' and 'discourse'. Colonial presence produced images and representations of natives – by which I take to mean, essentially, non-white races and ethnic groups in Africa, Asia and South America – that were consumed by both colonial races back in Europe as well as the natives themselves. This later phenomenon, where the natives assimilated and believed his/her prejudiced, skewed and often downright false presentation of him/herself by the European was made possible through the education system, religion, and the law (Nayar, 2010).

Literature Review

Beginning around the time of the Renaissance, at the apex of European mercantilism and outward expansion, colonialism reached its zenith during the nineteenth century with the now notorious 'scramble for Africa'. In the aftermath of World Wars I and II, the exhausted imperial powers could neither exert the level of control necessary to maintain their overseas territories, nor morally justify their continuation. As a result, colonialism began to unravel, and it was into the 'gaps' caused by the European retreat around the 1950s that the colonized asserted themselves. More precisely, this was the time of the Algerian war of independence against France, the Mau Mau uprisings in Kenya, the dethroning of Egypt's King Farouk, and the faint rumblings of dissent in Indo-China and the Levant (Goodman, 2005).

W.R. Goodman (2005) also says that in the vanguard of postcolonial theory is the Martinique-born poet and playwright Aime Cesaire, whose 1950s essay "Discourse on Colonialism" galvanized subsequent theories and movements, most notably the concept of 'negritude', a social and literary movement. In collaboration with Leon Damas and Leopold Senghor, Cesaire's negritude movement promoted the rich culture accomplishments of people of color in order to resist assimilation.

While thematic parallels signify the ubiquitous nature of the colonial project, they do not however mean the colonized countries, regions, or people should be conflated into an undifferentiated amalgam or unity called 'the colonized'. Instead, it is important to recognize the variation of other crucial factors and how they function – economic, political, social, and cultural structures within different colonized regions as well as within the colonizing power itself. In other words, there is no essential colonial reality or sensibility but rather multiple realities created by a monolithic Eurocentric endeavor. Consequently, a theoretical framework emerges to address these complex and multifaceted variables as they relate to the colonial condition.

Paralleling postcolonial literature therefore is the discipline of post-colonial theory or criticism whose focus is on the ideological and political but without necessarily excluding the aesthetic. Rather, postcolonial theory is an inclusive and inquisitorial field that probes the relationships between center and peripheries, the colonizer and the colonized. It can also be seen as a 'corrective' to the hegemonizing impulse of Western-centered discourse (Goodman, 2005).

Modernity emphasized rational and optimal use of resources in order to achieve maximum profits. This was directly linked to the economic system of capitalism where profits and efficiency were seen as intimately linked. The other side of this modernity was that as it expanded, more countries in Europe sought greater profits, resources and labor outside Europe. That is, modernization and industrialization needed sources of labor and raw materials and markets for their products. European markets and factories could not generate profits from within European sales alone. This meant that European countries began to look at Asia, South America and Africa as sites providing them the much-required resources. In this way, modernity directly led to voyages of discovery (for trade routes) and conquest (for control over resources in other parts of the world). Colonialism emerged out of this process of industrial modernity and its capitalist modes of production (Nayar, 2010).

Pramod K. Nayar (2010) also states that for various nations in Africa, Asia and South America modernity has historically been characterized by the rule and dominance of native cultures by non-native, usually European ones. Modernity has thus been 'colonial modernity' for many regions of the non-white world. Colonialism can be described as the process of settlement by Europeans in Asian, African and South American territories. Colonization found its climactic moments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was an exploitative mechanism – economic exploitation of resources, the use of native people, the conquest of territory and markets – based on the difference in race, culture, forms of knowledge, technological advancement and political systems between the Europeans and the natives.

Twentieth-century commentators from Africa and Asia – Mahatma Gandhi, Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, Albert Memmi – during the anti-colonial struggles pointed to the racial dimension of colonial rule, the inequalities of power and the slow but steady erosion of native values and cultures (especially languages) by colonial rulers. They interpreted colonial as something more than mere military-political power, viewing it as a process of cultural domination through representation, discourse and documentation (Nayar, 2010).

Pramod K. Nayar (2010) also tells that this critique of colonial racialized acts of representation in law, history writing, literature, religion and educational practices provides the opening moves of what has come to be known as postcolonial theory. It focuses on question of race within colonialism, and shows how the optic of race enables colonial powers to represent, reflect, refract, and make visible native cultures in particular ways. Postcolonial theory begins with the assumption that colonial writing, arts, legal system, science and other socio-cultural practices are always racialized and unequal where the colonial does the representation and the native is presented. In fact, postcolonial theory is a method of interpreting, reading, and critiquing the cultural practices of colonialism, where it proposes that the exercise of colonial power is also the exercise of racially determined powers of representation.

Colonial Discourses and English Studies

A now-classic method in postcolonial literary studies is to, therefore, uncover the 'subtexts' of Eng. Lit. texts, to probe beneath the obvious and apparently universal/humanist/aesthetic themes in order to reveal their racial, gendered, imperial assumptions. One of the principal critical texts in this postcolonial approach is Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* (1989). Viswanathan demonstrates how English literature as a discipline was introduced in India by (i) rejecting native literary traditions in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic, (ii) installing English texts in their stead, (iii) using these texts as modes of creating a class of Indians who would be trained to serve the colonial administration (Nayar, 2010).

English literary texts are neither universal nor simply about human values. They encode prejudices that are racial, attitudes that serve the empire and carry stereotypes that are false but powerful in their consequences. The task is one of re-interpretation, to examine the values of literary texts for what they conceal. Re-interpretation in postcolonial literary studies involves paying attention to the contexts in which English literary texts were produced, and to work colonial ideologies through these texts. Thus, Chinua Achebe's famous reading (1975) of Joseph Conrad's cult novel, *Heart of Darkness*, argued that Conrad had absolutely no interest in Africans, and reduced them, in his novel, to animal and dehumanized images. Edward Said's (1993) reading Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* argues that the Caribbean plantation in Antigua is linked inextricably to the family's fortunes and life in England and thereby showing how the colony is inseparable from the European country. Sara Suleri's (1992) reading Kipling's *Kim*, Homi Bhabha's (1994) reading Forster's *A Passage to India*, Peter Hulme's (1986) reading Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Nigel Leask's work (1993) on the English Romantic poets are some of the key texts that illustrate this process of postcolonial readings of colonial literary texts (Nayar, 2010). More recent works have not dealt directly with literary representations but have paid attention to literary cultures – the publishing industry libraries, the circulation and consumption of texts.

Nayar (2010) also says that postcolonial cultural studies have included re-interpretations of other kinds of colonial writings. Thus, Mrinalini Sinha (1995), Inderpal Grewal (1996), Antoinette Burton (2003), Betty Joseph (2004) and Anindita Mukhopadhyay (2006) have worked at the interface of literary studies and history to unpack colonial ideologies in a wide variety of administrative, legal and ethnographic texts. According to the reading anamorphic literary texts from the colonial period did not, for obvious reasons, resist the empire, or critique imperialism. However, works such as Forster's *A Passage to India*, the conclusion of Jonathan Swift's classic *Gulliver's Travels* do exhibit signs that their authors were not entirely convinced of the 'rightness' of the empire. In fact, Bhabha's often virtuoso readings reveal that colonial discourse was fractured and flawed. Kumari Jayawardene (1995), Indrani Sen (2002) and Indira Ghose (1998) have also, in a similar vein, demonstrated the incomplete nature of colonial discourse in their readings of literary texts.

Here postcolonial reinterpretation work at something else: They seek not the Saidian kind of colonial discourse that dominates and controls the native, but rather the gaps and fissures within this discourse that actually provide the native with the means of resistance and the dissenting colonial with the modes of articulating opposition. The significance of such postcolonial re-interpretations cannot be overemphasized. They show how not all English writing is necessarily

racist or imperialist, how by seeking colonial ideologies in all English texts, postcolonial readings perform the same act of homogenizing all Western literature that we once accused the West of doing to native writings and that resistance is always possible even within the so-called overtly imperialist texts. In such postcolonial readings, Edward Said's sweeping judgments of European writings get overturned (Nayar, 2010).

Postcolonial Literature and Theory

According to W.R. Goodman (2005), within the colonial paradigm, cultural subjugation meant the transformation or representation of lands and regions as spaces of mystiques and exoticism for the European traveler, as in Andre Gide's novel *The Immoralist*; or as sinister, impenetrable spaces which nonetheless held out the promise of commercial exploitation, as in Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*. Goodman (2005) also says that it involved representations of the colonized as irrational, overemotional, disorderly, and in incoherent – familiar examples include Dr. Aziz in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, and the chaotic, swirling crowds of Lahore in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*. Where existing or traditional cultural forms were recognized by the colonizers, their value was generally undermined by categorizing them as naïve, mythic, superstitious, or aesthetically crude – all rationales for situating colonized cultures outside the modern Eurocentric sphere. It was to these biased representations that postcolonial literature responded, not only to reverse the fictionality of the colonizer's narrative but also to show how colonial representations had had an impact on the totality of life for the colonized, from the formation of colonial public policy and education, to constructions of identity.

While it is important not to collapse the colonial condition into an undifferentiated set of experiences, there are nonetheless certain thematic parallels which much postcolonial literature, from Africa to New Guinea, shares in common. Writing from different countries and cultures, the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his novel *A Grain of Wheat* and the Indian Raja Rao in his novel *Kanthapura* both express the simultaneous pain and triumph involved in the struggle for independence. Likewise, the sense of displacement and alienation in one's own land and within one's own psyche is addressed in the West Indian novelist George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* as well as in the Nigerian Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. Metaphoric themes that wrestle with the crisis of identity in a decolonizing world are also extensively used in diverse postcolonial literatures, for example in the Trinidadian V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* and in *Remember the House* by the Indian novelist Santha Rama Rau. Many postcolonial writers have employed the literary forms and techniques of the colonial power's own language and so used allegory, disrupted narrative flow, magic realism, irony, and so on to create alternative views of the colonial situation. This appropriation demonstrates the ability of postcolonial writers to use the 'tool' of metropolitan language – the language emanating from the colonial center, the metropolis – against itself. The Indian-born novelist Salman Rushdie exemplifies this cleverly crafted appropriation in many of his novels, notably in *Midnight's Children*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Moor's Last Sign*, and *Shame*, as does Arundhati Roy in her Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (Goodman, 2005).

Martinican founder of postcolonial theory is the psychotherapist Franz Fanon, whose books *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks* are profound philosophical analyses of the psychological as well as the socioeconomic factors inherent in colonialism. In this sense, Fanon sees racism as consequences of political oppression. In the following decade, the Palestinian-

American Edward Said's *Orientalism* would become the foundational text of postcolonial criticism. For Said, postcolonial writing – literary and theoretical – is a form of resistance to highly dubious Western constructions of the 'Orient'. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said scrutinizes the colonial formation through the prisms of culture and narrative (Goodman, 2005).

Conclusion

If we move from literature to language, we can see that postcolonial studies proceed to locate European languages as instrumental of colonial power. Walter Mignolo (2003) in his grand study of the European Renaissance meticulously teases out the imperialist-colonial politics of Spanish grammar books and their role in the conquest of South America. This magisterial study shows how grammar, syntax, and dictionary projects are never only about language, but rather serve very devious imperial purposes and often determine interpretations in other disciplines such as education, history, and the law. The language of aesthetics derived from English and European theories has also been used, as studies have shown to homogenize, catalogue, organize, and discipline native landscapes, peoples and cultural practices (Nayar, 2010).

The destruction of aboriginal and vernacular languages, as numerous writers from Asia, Africa, North and South America, and Australia have argued, can be readily traced to the imposition of European languages with colonial rule. Even translation from the vernacular-native into European languages, as several postcolonial translations scholars (Harish Trivedi, Tejaswini Niranjana, Susan Bassnett) have shown is a political act.

The acceptance of English by natives in the colonial period created a politics of representation because the language was racialized and gendered. With political independence English continues to be the language of power (in administration, finance, law, and increasingly, global commerce), and the metropolitan sites and English-speaking minority are able to dominate postcolonial societies. This has resulted in a sharp divide between languages and literatures. Writings in native languages are not easily published by the bigger publishing houses, not circulated, reviewed or accepted easily by audiences; never acquire the prestige accorded to writing in English.

W.R. Goodman (2005) asserted that the production of postcolonial theory has grown exponentially over the decades with certain principles terms and key figures coming up frequently. Examples include Gayatri Spivak's 'subaltern studies' as well as her Marxist-feminist critiques in *In Other Worlds*; Homi Bhabha's propositions on hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence embedded in colonial discourse.

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