

Post Colonial Criticism



Basic Definition and Background

- Postcolonial Criticism is generally understood to be the analysis of literary works produced in countries and cultures that were under the control of European colonial powers and analysis of texts written about colonized places and peoples by authors from colonizing powers.
- The effects of colonization cannot be assumed to have ended. Even after the removal of European governance, there can be no reversion to pre-colonial societies. As a result, literature dealing with modern implications of colonialism can certainly be examined from a postcolonial criticism perspective.



The Scramble for Africa

- The colonial project started later in Africa than in any other part of the world, happening largely between 1880-1914.
- Between 1835-1880, Europeans had explored and mapped large portions of Africa, but had done little in terms of developing direct control of any colonies. In 1875, only 10% of Africa was controlled by European powers directly.
- The exploration of Africa by people like Henry Stanley opened the way for Europeans to begin the colonization of Africa.
- Concerned with the growing potential for conflict over African territories, the powers of Europe convened the **Berlin Conference in 1884** to discuss developing a plan to divide the territory.
- The Conference established **The Principle of Effectivity**, stating that powers could only hold onto colonies if they had actual control of them. This policy encouraged a more militaristic approach in Africa.
- The Berlin Conference kicks off the **Scramble for Africa**, so that, by 1902, 90% of Africa was under direct European control.
- By 1914, the only remaining independent states were Liberia and Ethiopia.
- The **Battle of Omdurman** provides an instructive example of the new policy
 - Battle between Anglo-Egyptian forces and Sudanese warriors, as part of the attempt by the British to reclaim the Sudan.
 - This battle was a crushing demonstration of the relative power of European and African forces. In the four hour battle, 10,000 Sudanese were killed, 13,000 wounded. The British suffered 48 deaths and 382 wounded men.
 - **Trivia Note:** Winston Churchill was at the battle, as part of the 21st Lancers.



Critique of European Centrality/Universality

- Post-colonial literature is concerned with breaking down the assumption (stated or unstated) that European literature and culture are the core of culture. They reject the notion of "otherness" that separates non-Western literature from European works.
- Identification of colonized lands and people as exotic, different, wild, savage, etc. establish the European perspective as "normal", delegitimizing the other culture.
- Construction of **The Other**, something that is separate/mysterious out of colonial peoples. By reducing their literature and traditions to the exotic, it is easier to diminish their value.
- In **The Post-Colonial Studies Reader**, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain that education often establishes the locally English or British as normative through critical claims to "universality" of the values embodied in English literary texts, and it represents the colonised to themselves as inherently inferior beings-- "wild," "barbarous," "uncivilised." (426)

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Theory of Place and Displacement

- Another major concern of post-colonial literature and criticism is concern with **place** and **displacement**.
 - A sense of self may have been lost by **dislocation**, resulting from enslavement, forced migration, or removal.
 - A sense of place may have been lost by **cultural denigration**, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model.
- The alienation of place is seen in peoples as diverse as Canadian free settlers separated from their native England and forcibly enslaved Africans.
- **Construction of Place.** Ashcroft and Griffiths explain:

This gap occurs for those whose language seems inadequate to describe a new place, for those whose language is systematically destroyed by enslavement, and for those whose language has been rendered unprivileged by the imposition of the language of a colonizing power. Some admixture of one or other of these models can describe the situation of all post-colonial societies. In each case a condition of alienation is inevitable until the colonizing language has been replaced or appropriated as English.¹

Theory of the Colonizer and the Colonized (Homi Bhabha)

- Developed theory of **hybridity**, arguing that the relationship between colonizer and colonized is inherently mingled, altering the identity of both.
 - The colonizer is affected by **mimicry**, the always slightly alien and distorted way in which the colonized, either out of choice or under duress, will repeat the colonizer's ways and discourse. Because of this mimicry, the colonizer will see herself in a mirror that slightly distorts her image, unsettling her sense of identity.
 - Racial stereotyping is a pattern of repeated identity construction and alteration—by having to constantly justify the truth of one's stereotypes, the colonizer constantly re-creates their own identity in opposition.
- Focuses his study on **liminal negotiations**, interstices and borders between the domains of difference. In other words, he focuses on the connection between colonizer and colonized, borders, points of conflict and contention, and argues that the most meaningful post-colonial transactions take place here.
 - Bhabha seeks to find the "location of culture" in the marginal, "haunting," "unhomely" spaces between dominant social formations.
- Bhabha's also attacks the Western production and implementation of certain binary oppositions. The oppositions targeted by Bhabha include center/margin, civilized/savage, and enlightened/ignorant. Bhabha proceeds by destabilizing the binaries insofar as the first term of the binary is allowed to unthinkingly dominate the second.



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Theory of Orientalism (Edward Said)

"My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness. . . . As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge" (*Orientalism*, p. 204).

- Primarily focused on Western conception of Middle East, Said's work is an appropriate critique of how Western literature and culture define and create Eastern culture.
- For Said, all discourse is inherently ideological, and for that reason, the West actually **created, rather than described**, the divide between the East and West.
- Said believes that Western culture **constructs** the Orient through imaginative representations
 - Seemingly factual reports, history & culture, and literature
 - Taken together, these forms of Western writing form a **discourse**—a loose system of supposed knowledge and understanding
 - This discourse forms a type of **hegemony**, a domination of the culture that is deemed inferior.
- While Said concedes that, to some extent, all cultures define each other in terms of the exotic, when combined with military and economic dominance, the result can be disastrous.
- Two Purposes of Orientalism
 - Legitimizes Western imperialism and expansionism
 - Works to convince "natives" that Western culture represents the ideal, universal civilization
- Defines the West by Opposition to the East
 - The East is depicted as sensual, irrational, primitive and despotic (Also defined as feminine)
 - The West (by contrast) is seen as rational, democratic, and progressive (masculine)

