



Department of English
School of English and Foreign Languages
BHARATHIDASAN UNIVERSITY
Tiruchirappalli – 620 024, Tamil Nadu, India

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Dr. M. Angkayarkan Vinayakaselvi

Associate Professor

Department of English

Bharathidasan University

Email: avs@bdu.ac.in

POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

Source:

A History of Literary Criticism

M A R Habib

Seminal Texts of Postcolonial literature

- Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950)
- Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1950)
- Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958)
- George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960)
- Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)
- Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978)

- *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft
- Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin and Gayatri Spivak's *The Post-Colonial Critic* (1990)

Important works by

- Abdul JanMohamed
- Homi Bhabha
- Benita Parry
- Kwame Anthony Appiah

- Postcolonial literature and criticism arose both during and after the struggles of many nations in Africa, Asia, Latin America (now referred to as the “tricontinent” rather than the “third world”), and elsewhere for independence from colonial rule.
- This struggle of postcolonial discourse extends over the domains of gender, race, ethnicity, and class.

Aims of Postcolonial criticism:

- To reexamine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized;
- to determine the economic, political, and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized peoples and the colonizing powers; to analyze the process of decolonization;
- to participate in the goals of political liberation, which includes equal access to material resources, the contestation of forms of domination, and the articulation of political and cultural identities

Multiculturalism

- One point of convergence of various postcolonial projects has been the questioning and reevaluation of the literary and cultural canon in Western institutions, through what is loosely called “multiculturalism.”
- Berman suggests that this reaction against the Western mainstream tradition was fostered largely by the rise of French literary theory, which insisted that the text was an indirect expression and often a justification of the prevailing power structure.

- This structure was inevitably a hierarchy in which the voices of minorities, women, and the working classes were suppressed. These voices now had to be heard.
- The central conservative argument against multiculturalism was advanced by Allan Bloom, Arthur Schlesinger, and others.
- Firstly, that in the past there existed a period of consensus with regard to the aims of education, political ideals, and moral values;

- Secondly, that this consensus, which underlies the national identity of America, is threatened by the cacophonous irreconcilable voices of multiculturalism.
- A third assumption of conservatives is that great literature somehow conveys “timeless truths”; Schlesinger states that history should be conducted as “disinterested intellectual inquiry,” not as therapy; William Bennett, Lynne V. Cheney, and the National Academies have all appealed to the notion of timeless truths.

- Literature was to “promote sympathy and fellow feeling among all classes,” to educate citizens as to their duties, to inculcate national pride and moral values.
- And English was a pivotal part of the imperialist effort.
- In 1834 Macaulay argued the merits of English as the medium of instruction in India, stating: “I have never found one . . . who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.” – This shows the European construction of self-image

Frantz Fanon (1925–1961)

- An important influence on him was his teacher Aimé Césaire, a leader of the so-called negritude movement which called for cultural separation rather than assimilation of blacks.
- Fanon's books included *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), translated as *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), which explored the psychological effects of racism and colonialism.

- Fanon produced a number of writings connected with Algerian and African revolution; his most comprehensive and influential work was *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961), translated as *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963).
- This now classic text analyzed the conditions and requirements for effective anti-colonial revolution from a Marxist perspective, modified somewhat to accommodate conditions specific to colonized nations.
- It also articulated the connections between class and race.

- Fanon's overall point and conclusion is twofold: firstly, "the bourgeois phase in the history of underdeveloped countries is a completely useless phase"
- The second point is that "a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness."
- In another chapter entitled "On National Culture" (originally delivered as a talk in 1959), Fanon addresses the important connections between the struggle for freedom and the various elements of culture, including literature and the arts.

- Fanon's essential point is that, in the circumstance of colonial domination, the "nation" is a necessary condition of culture.
- The "nation gathers together the various indispensable elements necessary for the creation of a culture."
- The struggle of a colonized people to reestablish the sovereignty of their nation "constitutes the most complete and obvious cultural manifestation that exists"

Edward Said (1935–2004)

- Said's thinking has embraced three broad imperatives: firstly, to articulate the cultural position and task of the intellectual and literary critic.
- Said's formulations in this area, influenced by Foucault, provided a crucial impetus to the so-called New Historicism in the 1980s.

- Said's second concern has been to examine the historical production and motivations of Western discourses about the Orient in general, and about Islam in particular.
- Said's own origin (or "beginning" as he would prefer) has defined a third, more immediately political commitment: an attempt to bring to light and clarify the Palestinian struggle to regain a homeland.

- *Beginnings* (1975) was Said's first influential book. Focusing on the question "What is a beginning?," Said traces the ramifications and diverse understandings of this concept in history.
- In *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), Said argues that critical theory has retreated into a "labyrinth of textuality" whereby it betrays its "insurrectionary" beginnings in the 1960s.

- In *Orientalism*, Said examines the vast tradition of Western “constructions” of the Orient. This tradition of Orientalism has been a “corporate institution” for coming to terms with the Orient, for authorizing views about it and ruling over it.
- Central to Said’s analysis is that the Orient is actually a production of Western discourse, a means of self-definition of Western culture as well as of justifying imperial domination of Oriental peoples

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (b. 1942)

- In her influential and controversial essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1983), later expanded in her book *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), she addresses precisely this issue of whether peoples in subordinate, colonized positions are able to achieve a voice.
- A “subaltern” refers to an officer in a subordinate position; the term was used by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to refer to the working masses that needed to be organized by left-wing intellectuals into a politically selfconscious force.

Homi K. Bhabha (b. 1949)

- The notion of “hybridity” is central to Bhabha’s work in challenging notions of identity, culture, and nation as coherent and unified entities that exhibit a linear historical development.
- Hybridity expresses a state of “in between ness,” as in a person who stands between two cultures.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (b. 1950)

- He has edited a number of pioneering anthologies such as *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (1984), *“Race,” Writing, and Difference* (1986), and *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), as well as helping to found African-American journals.
- The important works authored by Gates include *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (1987) and *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988).

- One of his goals in these texts is to redefine the notions of race and blackness in the terms of poststructuralist theory, as effects of networks of signification and cultural difference rather than as essences.
- In essays such as “*Writing, ‘Race,’ and the Difference it Makes*” (1985), he conducts an acute analysis of the concept of race, and draws attention to the explicit or implicit assumptions about race that inform the Western literary and philosophical traditions.

Thank You