
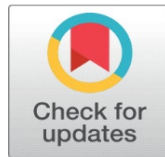


LITERARY RESPONSES TO THE BRITISH EMPIRE: POSTCOLONIAL READINGS OF 20TH CENTURY ENGLISH FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Here shown to be inextricably bound up with the new forms of identity, power and resistance which developed within British imperial culture by examining a total range of 20th-century English fiction. Through a reading of canonical texts like E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* the paper comes in terms with how these books critique the imperialist/colonial ideologies. The analysis sheds light on the longstanding literary function of English fiction for imperialist narratives as well as subversive and critical potential. Key themes under consideration are the depiction of cultural identity, hybridity in postcolonial subjects and forms of resistance adopted by characters featured within these 'narratives'. It also introduces the persistence of imperial thematic in English literature even after the official decline of British Empire and discusses how decolonization influenced (or not) literary themes and narratives. This work shows that postcolonial theory is still new and dynamic within the field of literary criticism, offering potential paths for future research into how this theme has developed in modernity and international settings.

Keywords: Postcolonial Theory, British Empire, 20th-Century English Fiction, Colonialism, Cultural Hybridity, Imperialism, Literary Critique

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. OVERVIEW OF BRITISH EMPIRE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON LITERATURE

The British Empire, the largest in history, was a significantly larger import bank than any other capitalized bank and so most of its mainly income it invested abroad.... This extensive scope for which we primarily led during and after the empire had a substantial say in the literature it gave birth to. The English literature of the 19th and early part of the twentieth century manifested imperial ideologies, depicting British empire as civilizing agency (Amirani, n.d). Most times her subject were either savage but noble or passive victim on whose fate life instruction would have been a sort. The result was a British literary canon replete with contending constructions of empire, power and identity.

1.2. EMERGENCE OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Postcolonial theory became an established critical field starting in the latter half of the 20th century offering readers a means to regard and interpret literature composed during colonial rule—and their interpretations. Postcolonial theory, which was developed through the works of scholars such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak seeks to interrogate the manner in which literature reinforces or resists imperialist ideologies (Ashcroft et al., 2002). This methodology focuses on the voices and viewpoints of the colonized, gives backtalk to consumerist configurations proceeded by colonial talk, yet exposes layers non-verbal relations pulse in writing.

1.3. OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THE PAPER

Introduction This paper attempts to delineate the characteristics of postcolonial readings in 20th-century English fiction with special reference to themes like identity, power and resistance in relation with British Empire. Tracing the representation of colonialism in early 20th-century fiction, postcolonial critiques of empire and a transformation from colonial to post-colonial narratives, this study uncovers how literature has been complicit with or resistant to imperial legacies.

2. ENGLISH FICTION WITH COLONIAL/ POSTCOLONIAL BACKBONE

2.1. EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY FICTION AND PORTRAYALS OF COLONIALISM

Early 20th-century English fiction about colonialism has largely been produced by British authors who depicted the colonised subjects and imperial muscle in a way that sits closely to what western narratives taught its people at home. So, you have in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) conflicting and strained relationships between the British colonizers and an Indian population living under British rule. This image is a testament to the power relation and cultural miscommunications of the colonial encounter.

2.2. AMERICA IN A TIME OF EMPIRE; B. POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OR EMPIRE

This is in stark contrast to older colonial narratives, as postcolonial writers from the ex-colonies have criticised and permanently turned over these portrayals of empire. In this context, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) like a sledgehammer beat out one of the best counter-narratives to how colonial Africa had been represented. Using his narrative as a tool, he recovers the past of Africa by presenting Okonkwo, once an Igbo leader whose fate intervenes with British missionaries and colonial bureaucrats. In his narrative of the environmental destruction by colonialism, Achebe would then ultimately be contradicting the childish narratives through which nations such as England refer to themselves chivalrous civilizers and not some methodological machines who were escorted behind Armor tanks bearing a trail Osama beds procreant beyond imagining (Achnebefoi, 1958).

2.3. THE SHIFT FROM COLONIAL TO POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES

In the course of 20th century literature, literary narratives also began to move away from elaborating colonial domination into articulating accounts and voices of those under colonization. This transition can be seen in the works of authors like Salman Rushdie as his novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) explores Indian post-colonial history after the British departure. Rushdie weaves history and myth together in his tale — but its central argument that native peoples should forge bottom-up approaches to dealing with the complicated, jagged identities produced by processes of colonization. In giving voice to the nuances of post-colonial identity, Rushdie — along with a generation of writing who would become known across traditions as “postcolonial” writers—changes our relationship in literature from one guided by Eurocentric concerns towards more global history and culture (Rushdie 1981).

3. IDENTITY AND OTHERNESS

3.1. SYMBOLIZATION OF CULTURAL SELFHOOD

In the 20th-century English novel, for the most part; specificity to culture often covers self-other binary which is a major post-colonial topic in literature. This contradiction is especially blatant when it has to do with the colonized subject's side by side next to their colonial rulers. Cultural identity in many works is showed either as an invention altered by the imperial presence. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), for example, Africa and its people are depicted as the exoticized "other," a dark heart-of-mysteries image opposed to the light-and-logic purity of European civilization. It portrays the colonizer as culturally superior and it verifies colonial myths – in order to make a historical account, history must be written by winners, which also serves to dehumanize the other (Conrad 41) Yet ensuing postcolonial literature has quite rightly called such representations into question, only to offer us a more subtle and realistic understanding as well of the complex ways in which colonized peoples act upon their own identity.

3.2. HYBRIDITY AND THE POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECT

Taking Homi K Bhabha's concept of Hybridity, a stand out feature postmodernism is portrayed in the realm of Postcolonial literature which elegantly communicates with themes like we have mixed and often contradictory identities due to colonial shit. The complexities of cultural hybridity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) are crystallized by the protagonist Saleem Sinai, whose birth coincided with that of India. His personal narrative, Morland told me, embodied the broader struggle to reconcile a postcolonial self that is neither fully traditional nor simply Western. His novel encapsulates the postcolonial subject, who has to navigate through different cultural influences due to colonialism and create a new identity after empire (Rushdie, 1981). The hybridity theme is very important in that it provides for a notion of identity construction which transcends the binaries of colonizer and colonized, something postcolonial literature must do to effectively redefine what an identified subject (that was) can eligible be.

3.3. RESISTANCE AND AGENCY

Many postcolonial narratives deal with central ideas of resistance and agency, they show how certain characters are able to fight back in the face of a imperial power. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) Antoinette, the Creole woman who lives on a Caribbean Island and becomes one of British male characters in this book as well, is ostracised by both husband himself through his miniate human acts against her and also colonial society. Rhys recasts Charlotte Brontë's classic *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of "the madwoman in the attic," and gives a voice to an otherwise silenced character for that tradition. Rhys uses Antoinette to critique the systems of power that erase mixed individuals and dehumanize them under colonial yokes, but at the same time is struck by how capable people are in navigating this reality subtly reshaping their identities amidst oppressors. (1966) It use here serves to underscore the harmonization of resistance into postcolonial literature that, at its core, amplifies autonomy and self-realisation against colonial suppression.

4. THE ENGLISH NOVEL AND THE LEGACY OF EMPIRE

4.1. IMPERIAL THEMES PERSIST.

While the British Empire may not have been all that, English fiction is still dealing with imperial themes because colonialism has become naturalised within British culture and identity since its demise. The colonial is revisited in many contemporary works as a past that still haunts the colonizer and those who were colonized. Eg, in *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) by J.G. Farrell one looks at the legacy of empire through a fantastical version on the Indian Rebellion looming large over India strikeing everyone and everything with terror so its own writers sing redemption songs to it from beyond — The book is penetrating in that it gets into the heads of colonizers and paints a sympathetic, but not unwarranted portrait filled with imperialist insanity as both strength and weakness. Indeed, Farrell's work shows how imperial ideologies still shape British stories until the very decay of empire (Farrell, 1973).

4.2. DECOLONIZATION AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

As you begin to think through the process of decolonization and its effects upon themes, narrative: structures in 20th-century English fiction. The newly emerged voices of the colonies after their independence had direct effect on English literature and symbolic ways that reflected power relationships began to part. Upcoming writers with post-colonial backgrounds and these emerging views, such as displacement, identity crisis cultural clash etc. created an alternative stream to the traditional 'Euro-centric view of English literature. *A Bend in the River* (V.S. Naipaul, 1979) tackles issues of postcolonial life in Africa – tensions between tradition and modernity; national identity coming to terms with British colonial agendas all within an unstable newly independent state. Naipaul, and other postcolonial writers before him, demonstrate that the effects of decolonization remain a profound factor in English literature as it encounters the post-colonial world and attempts to come to terms with its imperial past (Naipaul 1979).

4.3. MEMORY AND HISTORY

Postcolonial Literature deals with the effects of history on modern society, meaning historical memory has become as subject matter for writers who explore

past and present identities. In other postcolonial narratives, the past is repurposed to recover marginalised histories — hidden or forgotten colonies of alternative worldviews by which to counteract prevailing colonial discourses. The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro (1989) The novel tells a story with an English butler, Stevens who served to British lord during his sympathetic support for racial policies under Nazis rule. Stevens's reminiscences allow Ishiguro to reflect on memory, shame and the moral compromises demanded by loyalty — set against a backdrop of lingering colonialist attitudes in British culture. Ishiguro — demonstrates how literature can operate as a tool of working through the past, participating in personal and potential memory within postcolonial context.

5. CASE STUDIES OF POSTCOLONIAL READINGS

5.1. E.M. FORSTER'S A PASSAGE TO INDIA

A Passage to India (1924) by E.M. Forster is a landmark novel detailing the relationship between Britain and India during colonial times, On the other hand, a postcolonial interpretation reads it as an anti-imperialist work exposing the vast cultural differences and racial prejudices which epitomized British control in India. The key event of the novel, the accusation by Adela Quested that Dr. Aziz has assaulted her is a microcosm for those bigger conflicts amongst colonizer and colonized. He does criticize the British colonial administration for their inherent racism and arrogance, keeping Brits apart from Indians in a way that makes actual friendship or understanding impossible. The Marabar Caves, which become a key symbol in the novel, embody what Forster (1924) defines as British incomprehension and otherness toward India: fearing nothing more than failure to communicate. In postcolonial readings, A Passage to India demonstrates that he questions the moral or cultural alibis of British imperialism and suggests being in some sense incapable with liberal humanism claimed by colonialism does not overthrow long-standing power relations under live sinks.

5.2. JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

Though its representation of Africa and Africans is extremely nuanced, complex, and at times troubling (more on that later), Joseph Conrad masterpiece Heart of Darkness (1902) most generally read as the scathing indictment colonialism it was intended to be. From a post-colonial perspective, the novella may be read as an exposure of European imperialism and something which occurs due to racist attitudes inherent such actions. Marlow's trip down the Congo River to find enigmatic Kurtz is a tour of Europeans colonialism in Africa as well, an exotic enslavement exceeded only by Iago and Rudyard Kipling (Conrad 1902). Yet postcolonial critics like Chinua Achebe have pointed out that the novella reinforces stereotypes with its image of Africa as a dark, savage land without history or culture and depicts Africans only in voiceless shadows to show European characters' moral decline (Achebe 1977). Heart of Darkness — a text by which later postcolonial works are both compelled and repulsed, illustrating the ambivalence with which colonial literature frequently approached empire.

5.3. JEAN RHYS'S WIDE SARGASSO SEA

Another example of this type of story is Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), which plays on her portrayal of the first Mrs. Rochester Charlotte Brontë and gives a backstory to a character who only appears as "madwoman in the attic" Bertha

Mason in *Jane Eyre* (1847) Rhys reimagined Bertha as a woman named Antoinette Cosway, a Creole from Jamaica whose colonial and patriarchal context slowly destroys her identity and sanity in the original novel. By way of Antoinette's narrative, Rhys provides a poignant account which serves as an illustration to the depressive outcomes of colonialism in individual and global terms -loss of identity; disorientation and alienation for those who find themselves stranded between cultural dichotomy (Rhys: 1966). The story criticizes the colonial systems which ostracize Antoinette, a native of Jamaica and also already another in England where she will be confined both physically and mentally. In terms of voice, Rhys allows Antoinette to share her perspective on the events and dialogue that play a role in *Jane Eyre* which ultimately challenges what Charlotte Brontë wrote as "fact" about this madwoman locked away for life. By writing from this place within Bertha's (a character long dubbed by readers only as 'mad'), the master narrative begins to unravel itself revealing its presence at every turn. Accordingly, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is lauded in postcolonial studies for its opening up of a white European narrative and how it delves into the categories of race as well as gender, colonialism.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The present study has attempted a postcolonial re-reading of the English fiction writing in 20th century marked by negotiation over identity, power and resistance vis-a-viz British empire. From our reading of major literary texts — such as E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* — we have learnt that literature speaks volumes about colonialism: the problems it presents and its contemporary consequences. Postcolonial readings, however have shown how English fiction has served to consolidate imperial ideologies as well as challenge them from within by providing a platform for subaltern voices that critique the narrative of Empire with narratives which speak instead (and back) on their own behalf.

6.2. THE AFTERLIFE OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Postcolonial theory still offers an important framework for the newest literature produced, as Western colonialism will have created a lasting and resonating impact all over world political relations and social contacts. The implications of post colonialism readings are not only pertinent to historical texts but they also have significance in the analysis modern literature dealing with mobility, diaspora and cultural concoction. Literature is a way of continuing to come to terms with the legacies of empire, and postcolonial theory provides an account as well as method by which we may analyse how these histories are written about in literature – through narrative surplus/excess – and inform understandings both aesthetic but also cognitive whereby everyday notions become ways for us all geopolitically.

6.3. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The future studies of Post Colonialism as such are also manifold, not the least how post-colonial themes will develop in later modern and contemporary English literature. Future research could focus on new currents of post languages, examining the writings of latter-day authors deploying resistant techniques in face globalized reterritorialization around environmental and digital archipelagos.

Finally, comparative approaches to postcolonial literatures that bridge various regions and languages stand to offer fresh perspectives on the global reach of colonialism as well as how writers respond in manifold ways through their imaginations. Work such as this would do even more to illuminate those complex relationships of literature and culture in their historical power management with decisiveness, redirecting our attention towards the global activities that formed or destroyed empires; past rivals like Silk Roads unite China under a map akin to her little sister Nepal Island State India.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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