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Email : [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)

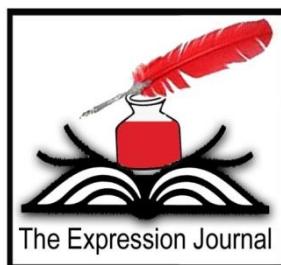
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## POSTCOLONIALISM AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Henna Amin

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Amar Singh College, Srinagar

### Abstract

Post colonialism is a complex phenomenon with manifold implications. From a historical point of view it refers to that function where the colonies were decolonized by the colonizers. The natives of the colonies achieved freedom in political, social, economic, and cultural and religious fields. The world we inhabit can be better understood through its relationship to the history of imperialism and colonialism. In occupied continents and subcontinents, like in Africa and South Asia, the colonizers often controlled their subjects by imposing their language upon them and even went to the extent of forbidding them to speak in India on native language. Eventually the colonies we are left to deal with the economic, political and emotional effects that their colonizers brought with them and left behind. Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 is known to be the foundational work on which postcolonial theory developed. Postcolonial criticism deals with various kinds of experiences — domination, slavery, exploitation etc. It also takes into account the response to the history, philosophy and language to the Western discourses. Post colonialism questions the so-called authenticity of the literacy and cultural canon in western institutions. It looks at history from the perspective of the colonized. The myth of the Orient constructed by the West for its vested interest was exploded by the seminal works written by postcolonial writers. Postcolonial writers have recognized the alienating effect of the English Language on the colonized people. They believe that the language was used by the British in the interests of native alienation. Critics and writers hold that English language is instrumental in the creation of an elite class, dividing an indigenous nation against itself. It is believed that its continuance in the postcolonial context does more harm than good. But there are writers who are comfortable with the language and they consistently defend its use.

### Keywords

Colonialism, Imperialism, Postcolonialism, Orientalism, Western Discourses,  
Alienation, Indigenous.

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### I

Colonialism and its offshoots, neo- and post-colonialism, are rooted in imperialism, a strategy used by a powerful nation to extend its military, economic and cultural supremacy beyond its frontiers over other regions. The Western and Eastern worlds have seen empires emerge, flourish a few centuries, and finally disintegrate.

Coming to modern times, England, France, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands set up, during the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, colonies in the Americas, the East Indies, and India. Between the mid-nineteenth century and the First World War, England, France, Germany and Italy vied with each other for imperialistic hegemony. By the end of the nineteenth century, the British Empire extended over more than one-fifth of the world with one-fourth of its population, its colonies being India, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Burma and the Sudan. France, the second largest colonial power, had under its domination Algeria, parts of Africa and Indochina. In the mid-nineteenth century Belgium colonized the Congo in Africa, subjecting its populace to atrocities, a glimpse of which is offered to us in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. More recently, during the Second World War and after it, the world witnessed a struggle for expansionism between the colonial powers. At the same time the United States of America and the Soviet Union contended with one another extending their influence globally.

Postcolonialism is a complex phenomenon with manifold implications. Historically, the term refers to that juncture where the colonizers decolonize their colonies, leaving the natives free to rule themselves in every field — political, social, cultural and religious. In this way post colonialism, a combination of 'post' ('after') and 'colonialism' ('subjugation') is the state of independence coming in the wake of domination. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, the term is not merely a chronological label referring to the period after the collapse of empires. It is ideologically an emancipator concept, particularly for the students of literature

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outside the Western world.<sup>1</sup> Adding another dimension to this definition, G Rai observes, "Post colonialism is an enterprise which seeks emancipation from all types of subjugation defined in terms of gender, race, and class. It does not introduce a new world which is free from the ills of colonialism; it rather suggests both continuity and change."<sup>2</sup>

Although colonialism is over, it has its after-effects in postcolonial countries with all their firm political sovereignty. Thus one might define postcolonialism as a set of theoretical approaches which focus on the direct effects and aftermaths of colonization.<sup>3</sup>

Postcolonial literature and criticism appeared both during and after the freedom struggles of many nations in Africa, Asia, South America and elsewhere. Seminal texts on postcolonialism were published in 1950: Aime Cesaire's *Discours Sur le Colonialism* and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. In 1960 appeared *The Pleasures of Exile* by George Lamming, and in 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth* by Fanon. According to Robert Young, the founding moment of postcolonial theory was the *Tricontinental*, a journal started by the Havan Tricontinental of 1966, which was responsible for the first global alliance of the nations of the three continents against imperialism.<sup>4</sup> Edward Said's *Orientalism* appeared in 1978. It exploded the myth of the Orient, a construct created by the West to further its own hegemonic interests in the East. It was followed by the *Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, and by Gayatri Spivak's *The Post-Colonial Critic* (1990).

Some more critics who dealt with postcolonialism include Abdul Jan Mohamed, Homi Bhabha, Benita Parry and Kwame Anthony Appiah. In Robert Young's view, postcolonialism continues to draw its inspiration from the anti-colonial struggles of the colonial era. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin also use the term postcolonial in a large sense, "to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" because of the "continuity of preoccupations" between the colonial and postcolonial periods.<sup>5</sup>

Postcolonialism is criticism which is eclectic. It involves an engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects. It often involves the discussion of experiences of various kinds such as those of slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race, gender, place and the responses to the western discourses such as history, philosophy anthropology and linguistics. It is as much about conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper as about conditions coming after the historical end of colonialism. Early voices of anti-imperialism stressed the need to develop or return to indigenous literary traditions so as to exorcize their cultural heritage of the specters of imperial domination. Other voices advocated an adaptation of western ideals towards their own political and cultural ends.

MAR Habib expresses the view that it is a mistake to treat either the West or the tricontinent as homogeneous entities which can somehow be mutually opposed. If we do so, then we overlook class divisions and gender oppression operating in both the West and in colonized nations. Many critics have observed

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that exploitation of workers occurred as much in the West as in the colonies they subjugated. Equally, colonization benefited primarily a small fraction of the population of colonizing nations.<sup>6</sup> So colonialism is a phenomenon internal to imperial nations as well as extending beyond their borders. Thus postcolonialism covers a broad range of themes within the colonizing powers, dealing with various forms of internal colonization as treated by minority studies of various forms such as African-American, Native American, Latin American and Women's studies. All of these have questioned the mainstreams of Western philosophy, literature and ideology.

Postcolonialism questions and reevaluates the literary and cultural canon in Western institutions through "multiculturalism." Its advocates appeared in American universities in the 1960s. The year 1968 saw left-wing uprising against liberal humanism, Western democracy, rationalism, democracy, objectivity and individual autonomy. These were all considered slogans which camouflaged the oppression of blacks, labourers, gays, women, as well as the colonial exploitation of third world countries. According to multiculturalists, these oppressive ideas were embodied in the canonical literature and philosophy — the literary tradition from Homer to Eliot, and the philosophical tradition from Plato to logical positivists.

Postcolonial criticism has a number of aims. It looks at the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized; determines the economic, political and cultural impact of colonialism on the colonized peoples and the colonizing powers; analyses the process of decolonization; and, above all, participates in the goal of political liberation which includes equal access to material resources, the struggle against forms of domination, and the expression of political and cultural identities.<sup>7</sup>

## II

In many parts of the world the English literature tradition continues to be a norm of value with texts from other traditions often being incorporated and viewed through perspectives intrinsic to the English heritage. Postcolonial writers and critics have for long recognized the alienating effect on the colonized subjects of the English language in general and of English literature in particular. For example, in India the introduction of English language and literature was aimed at creating among the Indians an elite class "who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."<sup>8</sup>

Since English language and literature was used by the British in the interests of native alienation, what role can it play in a postcolonial situation? If the English language itself was an instrument in the creation of an elite class, dividing an indigenous nation against itself, would its continuance in the postcolonial context not do more harm than good? Would the creation of a national literature within the ex-colonial language not continue the class disparity started by the colonizers? The definitive answers to these questions are still awaited. In the context of postcolonial Africa they are particularly urgent.

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o at a 1973 teacher's conference in Nairobi pointed out some of the inherent biases in the English Language<sup>9</sup>:

'[R]acism is expressed in the very structure of the English language, probably the most racist of all human languages. It was not only the character of black sambo, but also phrases like black market, black sheep, blackmail, blacklist, black everything, would testify to all the value assumptions in that linguistic negative definition of blackness.'

He regretted he had enriched the English language with his novels *Weep not, Child, The River Between, A grain of Rice*, and *Petals of Blood*, without giving anything back to the community, culture and language that inspired him. He swore that he would never write any more novels in English, but would henceforth write in Gikuya language.<sup>10</sup> He criticized the African writers who in the 1960s and 1970s advocated "Africanizing" the English language in order to express uniquely African experiences.

Ngugi's argument to take up the colonizer's language was to adopt his culture has been repeated by writers in India too. But the argument was never made vociferously. In very large multi-lingual and multicultural nations like India, English, though spoken by a minority, still involves millions of people. It has been estimated that more Indian speak and write English than in England itself. Although on the occasion of independence in the country English was declared an "associate" official language with the expectation that it would die out within a matter of two decades. English has not merely survived but has grown as a means of keeping people together and as a vital medium of communication.

Unlike Ngugi, Nayantara Sahgal feels no inconvenience in the use of English in her writing. Most of her characters come from upper class of Indian society. She writes only about the people she knows intimately. She does not write about the caste-ridden middle class or poor Indian villagers just to follow the accepted image of India. Her range of characters simplifies her technique: she does not have to labour to present Indian conversation in English, a problem which bothers many Indian writers writing in English, as most of her characters are the class of people who would talk and think in English in real life.

Achebe has consistently defended the use of English by African writers. He owes much of his international fame not only to his general ability to tell a captivating story, but also to his ability to recast the English language. In his essay, "The African Writer and the English Language," he writes about his own use of English. He quotes from *Arrow of God*:

"I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it, well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow."  
(*Arrow of God*, p.55.)

Now suppose I had put it in another way, like this for instance:

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"I am sending you as my representative among these people – just to be on the safe side if the new religion develops. One has to move with the times, or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight."

The material is the same. But the form of the one is in character. The other is not. Achebe chose to become a writer because he felt strongly about what the non-Africans, mostly the British and Europeans, had written about Africa and its people. He said that the first stirrings of his creative energies were the result of his reaction to the fictional work of Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary in which Africans were presented as barbaric beings who did not know even how to speak. This he calls the "literature devaluation." So he realized that a writer, especially a novelist, has a task to perform for his people, which he wrote about in his celebrated essay, "The Novelist as Teacher." In it he spelt the role of a novelist in the African context: that his job is not to produce art, but to write applied art, the art that is meant to perform the social function of educating his people about the true nature of their past and thus restore to them a sense of dignity and belief in themselves which had largely been destroyed by the colonial masters.

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