



Postcolonial Theory: An Overview

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Article History

Received: 12-06-2025

Accepted: 20-06-2025

Published: 06-07-2025



Abstract:

In the field of cultural and literary studies, the role of literary theory cannot be over-emphasised. A Profound and immense gratitude to the intellectual efforts of Wolfgang Iser, who in *How to Do Theory* vividly justifies the dividing-line between the nature and functions of theories in the sciences, social sciences and the humanities. We read literary text through it, we understand the text-reader connection through its viewfinder. Through literary theory, we comprehend the author-text connection, the author-reader connection, as well as the text-context connection and much more. This paper focuses on postcolonial theory, which as Ato Quayson argues is a “child of postmodernism”. Although several, seminal books, articles and essays on this theory have been published over the years, this paper provides yet another simplification on what is known and popular about postcolonialism: its nature, the problems surrounding its definitions, its ancestral root, its subsequent development, the hyphenated and the unhyphenated versions of the term as well as its basic principles or tenants.

Key terms: Postcolonialism, Postcolonial Theory, Postcolonial, Literary Theory, Postcolonial.

Original Research

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INTRODUCTION

.....post-colonial theory has been found useful in examining a variety of colonial relationship beyond the classic colonizing activities of the British Empire.

Bill Ashcroft, Hellen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths, *Post-colonial Studies the Key Concepts* (Viii).

Absolutely, and the view of the trio, renowned theorists and cultural critics above seems to encapsulate the bamboozling and broad nature of postcolonial theory, as colonialism had transcended the British Empire in its interminable history. To corroborate this assertion they justify in the introductory segment of *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practices in Post-Colonial Literatures* that “more than three quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism” [1]. John Mcloed in *Beginning Postcolonialism* adduces that “colonialism has

taken many different forms and has engendered diverse effects around the world [7]. Consequently, in social sciences, cultural studies, humanities, anthropology and more specifically in history and literature, postcolonial theory has aided and shaped our comprehension of colonialism: its nature and its ever-widening impacts in the formally colonised places on earth. For Ann B. Dobie “to understand postcolonialism and its connection to literature requires looking first at its predecessor colonialism and its successor, neo-colonialism” (204). It is in literature Bill Ashcrof, Hellen Tiffin and Gareth Griffith write “the day-to-day realities experienced by the colonised peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential” (1) and postcolonial theory is so much desired to evaluate and examine all these through the interpretative viewfinder of the postcolonial critic.

What Is Postcolonialism?

Postcolonial theory or postcolonialism is “a highly eclectic term and difficult to define” (Quayson1). This is because the “term is replete with contradictions and conundrums” (Magret Drabble and Jenny Stringer 566). What for instance, they ask is the difference between, if any, imperialism and colonialism? Were not the forms of colonial rule and the process of decolonisation too varied to admit a single definition? To buttress this argument one step further, Wolfgang Iser argues that the ‘field of Postcolonial studies is full of disciplinary self-doubt and mutual suspicion. This is why it has turned Postcolonialism into a portmanteau word, an umbrella thrown up over many heads, against a great deal of rain’ (160). Indeed and some of these heads under the “umbrella” Ania Loomba further argues, “range from literary analysis to research in the archives of the colonial government, from the critic of medical texts to economic theory, and usually combine these and other areas” [9]. However, in spite of the broad and controversial nature of the term, it has been defined by some of these scholars according to their perspectives. According to Ato Quayson:

Postcolonialism is a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects both at the local level of ex-colonial societies, as well as at the level of more general global developments thought to be the after-effects of empire. Postcolonialism also involves the discussion of experiences of various kinds, such as slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race, gender, place, and the responses of the imperial Europe such as history, philosophy, anthropology and Linguistics [2].

Postcolonialism for Quayson analyzes and evaluates literary works with profound concern on colonial experiences by the ex-European colonies in Africa, Caribbean, Middle-east, Latin America, as well as the impacts it has left behind it, after these nations have gained their political independence.

Magret Drabble and Jenny Stringer define the term as ‘a body of writing emanating from Europe’s former colonies, which addresses questions of history, identity, ethnicity, gender and language’ (566). This definition agrees with Quayson’s, but while the latter uses ‘ex-colonial societies’ to depict the former European colonies in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, which still suffer from the legacies of colonialism in a new ‘form and guise’, the former uses ‘Europe’s former colonies’. Quayson also sees the former colonies as “empires” with Europe as their “centre”. Drabble and Stringer’s view has incorporated the concepts of “identity” which Quayson’s definition has ignored. Moreover, Ania Loomba asserts that ‘Postcolonialism is not just coming after colonialism and signifying its demise, but as the colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism’ [6]. Loomba’s standpoint showcases the metamorphosis of colonialism to neo-colonialism today through which the ex-European colonies everywhere in the world suffer, hence colonialism lives, it dies never it has masqueraded instead. This is why Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989) argue that the term “covers all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day”. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression [2]. It is against this backdrop that in *Post-colonial Studies Reader*, the trio intellectuals argue further that “European imperialism took various forms in different times and places” [1] across the globe.

Ancestral Root and Development

According to Peter Barry, postcolonialism is a recent theoretical development in the field of literary studies. This is because it emerged only “as a distinct category in the 1990s” (160). However, in the opinion of Ann B. Dobie “interest in postcolonialism dates back to 1950s, when Alfred Sauvy coined the term ‘Third World’ to

refer to developing nations, such as those in Africa or South America” (205). In an extended, fascinating argument, Dobie stresses that “although the term postcolonial was not in use until in the late 1980s, theories surrounding its concern have been published since the 1960s (205). Be that as it may, Franz Fanon for Barry is deemed to be the ancestral root of the postcolonial theory with evidence from the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). In this masterpiece, Fanon argues that the most pertinent thing that awaits the colonised is to try to “reclaim their own past” (162), so as to celebrate their own identity misrepresented by the west. This is because as he further argues, “both black and white children have been taught to see history and culture beginning with the arrival of the Europeans” (162), all of which are fallacious creation of the west. Similarly, postcolonial theory also examines the ways in which the literature of the colonial powers has been used to unveil the images of the colonised as inferior to the west.

Furthermore, if Franz Fanon is the “ancestry of postcolonial” (160) as Barry holds, then the seminal works of innumerable theorists and cultural critics have opened the window for the postcolonial theory to gain perpetual currency over the years. These include: Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and subsequently *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *In Other Words* (1987), *Race, Writing and Difference* (1986), an edited book by Henry Louis Gates one of the popular American postcolonial voices, Ania Loomba’s *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1988), Robert Young’s *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995), *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001), and subsequently *Postcolonialism A Very Short Introduction* (2003), Bill Ashcroft’s Gareth Griffith’s Helen Tiffin’s *The Post-colonial Reader* (1995), *The Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies* (1988) and subsequently *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practices in Post-Colonial Literatures*. (1989), Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of*

Culture (1994) and *Nation and Narration* (1999), Ato Quayson’s *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process* (2000), John Mcloed’s *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000) and *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (2007). It is crystal-clear that these masterpieces have popularised beyond measure, the theoretical and critical perspectives of postcolonialism. The result, innumerable articles, conference papers and book chapters have been published on innumerable theoretical concepts such as ‘colonialism’, ‘neo-colonialism’, ‘globalisation’, ‘comprador’, ‘dislocation’, ‘exile’, ‘exoticism’, ‘miscegenation’, ‘orality’, ‘othering’, ‘interpellation’, ‘manicheanism’, ‘hegemony’, ‘transculturalism’, ‘frontier’, ‘liminality’, ‘hybridity’, ‘race’, ‘class’, ‘palimpsest’, ‘cultural identity’ ‘ambivalence’, ‘diaspora’ to name but just some few.

Commonwealth Literature as Antecedent to Postcolonialism

According to John Mcloed, one significant antecedent for postcolonialism was the development of the study of Commonwealth Literature. It was a term literary critics began to employ from the 1950s, to describe literatures in English rising from a selection of countries with a colonial history. This literature for him, “incorporated the study of writers from the predominantly European settler communities, as well as the writers belonging to those countries, which were in the process of gaining independence from British rule such as those from the African, Caribbean and South-Asian nations” [10]. Aside the term Commonwealth Literature, it was also called by several varieties of labels: New English Literature, Literature in English, Third World Literature, World Fiction, Minority Literature, Multicultural Literature and then subsequently and now the predominant term Postcolonial Literature (Sukpreet Kaur & Aditi Paul: 82). So, for Mcloed, “postcolonialism accepts uncritically the geographical divisions of Commonwealth Literature, and equally it “does not discriminate adequately between different experiences of colonialism” (240).

For Ann B. Dobie, the term postcolonial has replaced Commonwealth Literature “to broaden the field of interest by opening it to countries colonized by western powers other than Great Britain, such as Spain, France, Russia, Portugal and more” (207).

Such literature for Barry has undergone three transitional developments. These are adopt, adapt and adept phases. In the adopt phase, writers in the former colonies were like apprentices to their European counterparts so, they accepted the European models, particularly in the novel, producing texts with universal flavour. In the adapt phase, the second stage, writers from the “former colonised world began to enjoy a slight free license, or “a sort of partial intervention”, as they they adapted the European forms to African subject matter. In the ultimate stage, the adept phase, the writers declared cultural liberty or independence, as “they have been producing literary masterpieces with their own distinctive style without any reference to the European models or norms.

Post-colonialism or Postcolonialism?

According Ato Quayson, the term postcolonial is written with or without a hyphen. With a hyphen it is written Post-colonialism/Post-colonial, while the unhyphenated version is written Postcolonialism/Postcolonial. Quayson further provides some intellectual motives for this discrepancy. For him, the unhyphenated version was first used by political scientists and economists to designate a period after colonialism. Some scholars he explains further argue that the hyphen denotes a movement beyond colonialism. However, by 1970s, the unhyphenated version began to be used for a wide range of cultural and literary analysis. Nowadays, the unhyphenated has become much more popular because it is widely used in conference papers, journal articles and book titles. Be that as it may, the hyphenated and the unhyphenated versions are used interchangeably by critics, researchers, and authors today, to both mean the period after

colonialism on the one hand, and as a tool of analysing literary works on the other. Hence, the dichotomy separating the two is controversial.

The Basic Principles/Tenets of Postcolonial Theory

According Ann B. Dobie, because of the varying degrees of ways different cultures have responded to colonialism, the lack of total concurrence on what postcolonial theory is or whom it involves makes it challenging to “set down its basic principles or tenets” and ofcourse this why there isn’t a single way of approaching post colonial studies as well. However, below are the basic assumptions generally accepted as the significant tenets of postcolonial theory.

- ✓ Colonizers not only physically conquered territories but also practiced cultural colonization by replacing the practice and beliefs of the native culture with own values, governance, laws, and belief. The consequence is loss or modification of much of the pre-colonial culture
- ✓ When their own culture is forbidden or devalued, the natives come to see themselves as inferior to conquerors. They abandon (or hide) their own cultural practices to adopt (imitate) those of the assumedly “superior” one
- ✓ Colonial subjects practice mimicry or imitation of dress, language, behaviour, even gestures of the colonizer instead of rejecting it
- ✓ European colonizers believed that their ideals were uiver-sal. As a concept, universalism is evident in the characteristics and themes in European (and, later American) literature
- ✓ The European colonizers assumed the superiority of their own culture and the inferiority of the conquered ones. They thought of themselves as civilized, and even advanced, and of the colonists as backward, even savage. Using their own culture as the standard for what any culture should be, a practice known as **Eurocentricism**, the powerful justified the imposition of their own culture on those

they deemed to be of less status, the **subaltern**

- ✓ The practice of **othering**, viewing those who are different from them as inferior beings, divides people and justifies hierarchies. Sometimes, the dominant culture sees the other as evil, in which case it is known as the **demonic** other
- ✓ On other occasion, the “other” is deemed to have a natural beauty, to be the **exotic** other
- ✓ Colonizers also become the colonized. In this two-way process, the Europeans to were affected by their contact with other cultures
- ✓ The effects of postcolonialism are still evident today, and a new form of colonialism is currently affected by international corporations, operating in developing nations
- ✓ The interaction of cultures created blended ones, mixtures of the natives and colonial process called **hybridity or syncretism** characterized by tensions and change, this process is dynamic, interactive and creative (208-209).

So, in a simplified undertone, Dobbie has encapsulated above, the prime principles of postcolonialism for much better comprehension of the theoretical position and postulations of the theory on the one hand, and to equally serve as a practical guide for the critic, with profound interest in postcolonial criticism on the other hand.

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