

# Postcolonial Literature

## Introduction and General Concerns

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## What is Postcolonial Literature?

- Literature from the countries of the former European empires
- Contests Euro-American ideologies and representations
- Engages with the history of oppression, colonialism, racism, injustice
- Focuses on issues of race and ethnicity, minority, indignity, migrants and refugees...
- Literature of emancipation, critique and transformation
- Diversity
- The problem of using the term "Postcolonial"
- The problem of English language

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## Commonwealth Literature

- Term used in the 1950s
- Literature from Britain's erstwhile colonies—Asia, Africa, Australia, South America and Ireland
- British monarch recognised as a symbolic authority
- The term homogenised diverse people and turned them into a ghetto
- Commonwealth writers write under sharp differences in context; their writings present a diversity of experiences and perspectives
- Commonwealth Literature is rich in Poetry and Fiction and rather poor in drama, non-fiction prose and literary criticism
- "Commonwealth Literature does not exist"

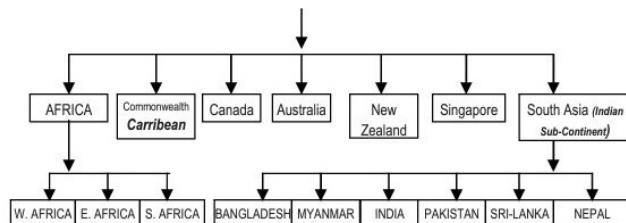
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## What is the Commonwealth?

- Meaning: Traditionally, the word "Commonwealth" was used in England to mean a political community founded for the common good
- In History: After the Civil War started in England (1649–53 and 1659–60), the Kingdom of England was replaced by the "Commonwealth" under the republican rule
- From 1653 to 1659 the Commonwealth is also known as the Protectorate
- The Commonwealth of England was the first republic in the English-speaking world
- Present-day: Commonwealth countries mean the countries which were once upon a time under the British domain and now free sovereign nations forming an association for common good

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## Major Commonwealth Countries



## The Commonwealth of Nations

- The Commonwealth of Nations is an intergovernmental voluntary organisation of 53 independent member states
- Majority of the member-states were formerly part of the British Empire
- All members have equal status in the Commonwealth
- The British Commonwealth, as it was called first, was formed in 1931 with 7 members
- In 1949, the modern Commonwealth was formed under the present name after the London Declaration
- The member states co-operate within a framework of common values and goals as outlined in the Singapore Declaration of 1971
- These include the promotion of democracy, human rights, good governance, the rule of law, individual liberty, egalitarianism, free trade, multilateralism and world peace
- The symbol of this free association is the Head of the Commonwealth, a ceremonial position held by Queen Elizabeth II

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## Milestones

- 1964 — First conference of Commonwealth Literature at the University of Leeds
- 1965 — *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* launched
- 1987 — Commonwealth Writers' Prize installed (till 2011)
- 2012 — Commonwealth Book Prize and Commonwealth Short Story Prize installed

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## The Commonwealth Writers' Prize

- Organized and funded by the Commonwealth Foundation
- A leading award for fiction that was first awarded in 1987 to Olive Senior for *Summer Lightning*
- Some major awardees
  - 1990 – Mordecai Richler, *Solomon Gursky Was Here*
  - 1991 – David Malouf, *The Great World*
  - 1992 – Rohinton Mistry, *Such a Long Journey*
  - 1994 – Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy*
  - 1996 – Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance*
  - 1998 – Peter Carey, *Jack Maggs*
  - 2000 – John Maxwell Coetzee, *Disgrace*
  - 2001 – Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang*
  - 2003 – Austin Clarke, *The Polished Hoe*
  - 2004 – Caryl Phillips, *A Distant Shore*
  - 2005 – Andrea Levy, *Small Island*

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## What is Colonialism?

- Colonialism is (often violent) **economic and political domination** (often by means of colonization) **of one people** (mostly the natives of Africa, Asia, Australia or the Americas) **by another** (mostly European)
- Imperialism is the **ideology or concept** behind the **practice** of Colonization
- In postcolonial studies, colonialism is synonymous with oppression, inequality, racism and exploitation
- The economic and political domination had other far-reaching effects
  - Non-European cultures and knowledges were destroyed, modified or “disciplined” by colonisers (**Cultural** and **epistemological** conquest of the natives)

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## English in India

- Best example of colonialism as cultural and epistemological conquest
- Stage One
  - Colonial administrators (Macaulay) and Indologists (William Jones) studied Indian languages and knowledges (law, religion or arts), made translations
- Stage Two
  - The Western scholars announced that Indian texts and cultures are primitive, irrelevant and outdated
- Stage Three
  - Substituted English as the medium of instruction and as the language of knowledge itself, arguing that it sanctions equality, liberty, development and modernization
  - English carried the white man's burden of “civilizing” the “natives” of India who were considered primitive, child-like, effeminate, irrational, irreligious and criminal
  - Science, medicine, anthropology and other disciplines “normalized” this view of the Indians

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## Three Features of Colonialism

- The governance of these non-European places by European administrators and rulers (through economic, political, and military modes)
- The study of non-European cultures by European academics, scholars, and scientists (in anthropology, literature, ‘area studies’)
- The slow transformation of native societies (through missionary work, English/European education systems, European modes of bureaucracy).

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## Decolonization

- The nominally free erstwhile colonies seek freedom from colonial forms of thinking, a freedom to revive and rejuvenate native forms of knowledge.
- Decolonization is a dialogic process—it engages European thought in a dialogue.
- It is a state of mind as well as a critical methodology that draws on postcolonial theory.
- Frantz Fanon held that Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.

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## Neo-colonialism

- The continuing economic exploitation of Asian and African nation-states by Euro-American powers (the former colonial masters).
  - Not by direct state control
  - By a nexus between politicians, bankers, the military and bureaucracy in varying degrees
  - The more dangerous form of colonialism

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## Postcoloniality

- The historical, material, and actual living conditions of newly independent Asian, African, and South American countries within the global system.
- Emphasizes the impact of global geopolitics, globalization and economic changes upon material aspects of life in Asian and African countries.
- Postcoloniality is marked by transformation, and includes the strategies of resistance, negotiation and cultural assertion that countries like India adopt to deal with increasing neocolonial interference and control exerted by “First World” nations.
- Uses the principles of modernity, but at the same time resists it, demanding entirely new concepts of modernity.

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## Postcolonial Theory

- Explores how colonial ideology, strategies of representation and racial prejudices are coded into literary texts
- Early phase
  - Colonial Discourse Analysis
    - Looked at the ways in which systems of knowledge enabled oppression
    - Engaged in unmasking the colonial ideology in literary and cultural works produced by European countries
    - Was concerned with the linguistic expression of colonial practices and power relations rather than with actual historical and institutional conditions of capitalism, geographical acquisitions or market forces
    - Turned to the colonial *text* rather than the colonial *context*

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## Indigenous Literatures

- Postcolonialism involves a resistance to the colonial representations of indigenous cultures
- Within the discourse of the “nation” in Postcolonialism, issues of ethnicity, indigeneity, displacement and belonging, land rights, subaltern and native historiography, linguistic imperialism, etc become relevant.
- Postcolonial theory has often been criticised for having often failed to address—or even for having obstructed—questions raised by Indigenous scholars and writers.

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## **Dalit Literature**

- Postcolonial literatures involve subaltern resistance and subaltern historiography.
- Resistance against political homogenisation of the Hindus as including the Dalits, while effectively othering and alienating them and their culture of physical work.
- Interrogates the ways in which power is concentrated in the nation

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## **“Third World” and “Fourth World”**

- These are offensive phrases no longer used.
- “Third World” was a pejorative term used to refer to what was regarded as the “undeveloped” or developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America
- “Fourth World” refers to the marginalised native populations and indigenous peoples who were turned into a minority in Third World countries as a result of colonial expansion and “progress” which sometimes went as far as genocide.
- Native American literature, Native Canadian literature, Australian aboriginal literature, Maori literature of New Zealand and Dalit literature of India

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## **White Studies**

- Postcolonial studies has encouraged, in the USA, ‘white studies’—the cultural history of whiteness.
- Based on the idea that whiteness constructs itself at the socio-economic costs of the minorities (especially Blacks), white studies foreground the ideological and political roots of white cultures.
- American scholars Theodore Allen, Noel Ignatiev and Valerie Babb

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## **Ecological Literature**

- Postcolonialism has had a longstanding engagement with environmentalism.
- Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Ecological literature or literature of the environment intersect with issues of imperialism, environmental exploitation, entitlement and belonging, neocolonialism and globalization, etc.
- Postcolonial ecologies is another related concept
- The work of Caribbean, Latin American, African and South Asian scholars and activists who have contributed to global environmentalism and a sense of place in literary production

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## Internationalization of Literature

- Postcolonial Literature is highly institutionalised and internationalized
- Because of the celebrity status of
  - Booker prize winners from former colonies
  - Postcolonial critics like Spivak
- Transnational, cross cultural, multilingual
- Popularity of non-European models
- The danger: Postcolonial literature becomes a commodity

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## Stages in Postcolonial Writing

- First Stage (1950s-60s)
  - Bi-culturalism (European and native)
  - Nationalism and Cultural assertion
  - Local and tribal identities as opposed to universal humanism
  - The conflict between European modernisation and native traditions
  - Reclaiming the past through Realism
  - Writers like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, George Lamming, Patrick White, Derek Walcott...

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## Stages in Postcolonial Writing

- Second Stage (1970s)
  - The impact of colonialism on native cultures and postcolonial identity
  - Social realism
  - Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Bhabhani Battacharya, v.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiongo

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## Stages in Postcolonial Writing

- Third Stage (1980s)
  - Disillusionment with the postcolonial nation-state
    - *A Man of the People* (1966), *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1982), *The Mimic Men* (1967), *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968)
  - New forms like Magic Realism, mixing up of genres (autobiography, popular culture, documentary history and fiction), an experimental play of form, meaning, politics and ideology
    - Gabriel Garcia Marquez
    - *In a Free State* (1971), *Midnight's Children* (1982)

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## Stages in Postcolonial Writing

- Fourth Stage (1990s)
  - Themes like secessionist movements, new minority and ethnic identities, globalization, cultural roots and identity, migrant and displacement, multiculturalism
    - *Omeros, The Famished Road*
  - Diasporic writers discussed dual locations and dual roots, hybrid identities
    - *A Harlot's Progress, The Buddha of Suburbia, Jasmine, The Monkey King*
    - Agha Shahid Ali, Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt

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## Themes in Postcolonial Writing

- HISTORY
  - **Interrogating colonialism**
    - Cultural alienation, cultural revivalism and cultural fundamentalism
    - The anti-colonial struggles of the 'Third World' and the rise of nationalism
    - The creation of 'mimic men' in colonial culture
  - **Retrieving history**
    - The appropriation of history by the colonial master ("White histories")
    - The attempts to retrieve and re-write (re-right) their own histories by the formerly colonised cultures
    - The modes of representation

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## Themes in Postcolonial Writing

- NATION
  - **Constructing the nation**
    - Modes of imagining and representing the nation (Imagi-Nations)
    - The role of place, community and space in making a national identity
  - **Cultural identity**
    - Especially for aborigines, subalterns and ethnic minorities
    - The politics of nativism and violence
  - **Postcolonial subalternization**
    - Marginalization of certain communities and identities and resultant protest

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## Themes in Postcolonial Writing

- GENDER
  - Double Marginalization
  - Postcolonial Feminisms
    - Gendered Nations—identity, racism, imperialism, sexism, nationalism
    - Marriage and Family
    - Motherism—motherhood, motherland, mother tongue
    - Patriarchy, Fundamentalism, War
    - Body, Desire Sexuality
    - Subaltern Women

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## **Themes in Postcolonial Writing**

- GAY AND LESBIAN WRITING
  - Race, Ethnicity, Sexuality
  - Family, Relationships
  - Queer diasporas and Globalizations
  - National, ethnic, cultural identity

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## **Themes in Postcolonial Writing**

- DIASPORA
  - Nostalgia, Memory—return as well as dislocation
    - Reclamation of the Past
  - Hybridity and Identity
    - Double consciousness, Multiple identities
  - Globalization
    - Transnationalism
    - Cosmopolitan cities and migrant spaces

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# **Thank You!**

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