What is Postcolonial Theory & Literature?

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The present piece of writing explores and defines postcolonial theory, its roots, development, major critics, principles, issues, covering area and different forms. Some critics argued that, the postcolonialism is the continuation of colonialism in the sense that the colonies got freedom only from political rule and there started the complex process of postcolonialism, self-imposed colonialism.

Here the focus point is to discuss post colonialism as a literary discourse in Indian context. The British had an extended empire during the nineteenth century and this empire had a fairly strong hold on all its territories. This territories were of two kinds those like Canada, New Zealand and Australia in which the English people colonized and established their culture, and those like India and Nigeria where they were rulers by force and imposed their institutions and norms. The process of self-determination and the granting of political independence to each country of Empire brought out postcolonial age in the history of the World. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the term ‘Post colonialism’ has gained currency and what is more, it has eclipsed terms like postmodernism, post structuralism and so on. Hans Bertens rightly assumes:

“In the course of 1980s, Commonwealth literary studies become part of the then emerging and now vast field of literary, cultural, political and historical inquiry that we call postcolonial studies.” [Bertens, p. 200]

The term ‘Postcolonial’ has been substituted in the 1970s for the post-independence issues throughout the world. It has both historical as well as ideological significance. Postcolonialism is a critical theory which focuses colonial experience from the colonised society’s point view, semantically Postcolonialism means something that has concern only with the national culture after the departure of imperial power. But in actual practice it has to be understood only in reference to colonialism, myth and history, language and landscape, self and other are all very important ingredients of Postcolonial Studies. It means that the physical area of postcolonial study is wider than any other discipline in literature. It consists of the writings world over. In Postcolonial Studies the writing centre changed from the middle aged Europe to world over. The marginalized countries like India, Pakistan, Shri Lanka, and other Asian Countries, outside the Asia, Nigeria, Canada, Australia, South Africa and many Islamic countries are foregrounded in Postcolonial Studies. Again Bertens’ remark is notable here:

“In recognition of this new situation, in which writing in English from the former colonies- including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and other Asian colonies- has proved itself as a vital and as important as the literature written in England itself; we now usually speak of ‘literatures in English’ rather than of ‘English Literatures’ if we want to refer to English language writing.” [Bertens. p. 195]
Thus, Postcolonial Studies expanded the scope of literature in later period. India, one of the biggest colonies of British Empire, got independence in 1947 that is political and the whole scenario of literary study has been changed. There were discoveries in Indian religious texts like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Upanishads and many other. The texts were used as the base material for creative writing, and from the time being the new branch of Indian English literature came into existence.  

This is all about Postcolonialism and Postcolonial Studies, now we have to turn towards the base of the postcolonial discourse. Postcolonial discourse attempts to redefine, reformulate and reconstruct the colonized self. The post-colonial should mean the period beginning with national independence in contrast to the colonial rule. It is because the age of colonialism is over, so the whole world is to be considered as postcolonial, but if we think, it is continued colonialism in hidden form. The imperial impact is still alive and active today in literature. There are discussions over neo-colonialism as the countries like Nigeria, and India may be both postcolonial in the sense that being formally independent and neo-colonial psychologically at the same time. In short though they got independence and freedom from the British rule, colonialism is still ruling their psychology and it is known as neo-colonialism. But a lot of discussion over this matter leads to the way round and comes to post- colonialism and Postcolonial Study, the most accepted phrases. The world except Europe and now America is affected and affecting a lot from the imperial dominance; it exploited the literature of marginal. The European and the then English literatures were used as a tool of manipulation, to set the rule, to repress the orient in Said’s term. 

Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’ is the founder stone of post-colonial study. Orientalism established the scientific way to study the postcolonial theory which was published in 1978. It revolutionized the stream of postcolonial theory and literatures. The book has its own terminology. It depicts the imbalance between the West and East by showing the superiority of West over the East, West always dominated the East. Said applied terms and concepts like ‘orient’, ‘the other’ and ‘occident’ to show the relation between two distinct cultures-West and East. 

*Orientalism* is one of the parts in a trilogy, the other two books are *The Questions of Palestine* (1980) and *Covering Islam* (1982). This fact is stressed out by Leela Gandhi, a postcolonial critic: 

“*Orientalism is the first book in a trilogy devoted to an exploration of the historically imbalanced relationship between the world of Islam, the Middle East and the ‘Orient’ on the one hand, and that of European and American imperialism on the other.”* [Gandhi, p. 9] 

Here, Gandhi uses the phrase ‘historically imbalanced’ to show the antiquity of the relationship between East and West. Said rightly emphasized the policies, schemes and methodologies of the Occident making dominant over the Orient. The focus point of *Orientalism* is to create awareness in continental literatures. Marginalization must be banned through the effective use of Eastern literature. The factors like irrationality, sensuality, primitiveness, despotism and idleness are attributed to the East to establish
dominance of West. This process of attribution marginalized Eastern literatures. Binary opposition of East and West suggests that the valley of discrimination among them is wider:

“West and East form a binary opposition in which the two poles define each other, the inferiority that orientalism attributes to the East simultaneously serves to construct the West’s superiority. The sensuality, irrationality, primitiveness, and despotism of the East constructs the West as rational, democratic, progressive and so on.” [Bertens, p. 205]

Again, the view of superior West and inferior East is expressed by Peter Barry in his comments on Said’s Orientalism. He says that Said’s Orientalism started post-colonial theory properly exposing the very basic ideas regarding this area:

“Hence, another major book, which can be said to inaugurate postcolonial criticism proper is Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), which is a specific expose of the Eurocentric universalism which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western, and the inferiority of what is not. Said identifies a European cultural tradition of ‘Orientalism’, which is a particular and long-standing way of identifying the East as ‘other’ and inferior to the West.” [Barry, p.193]

He further, explains the three stages of postcolonial literature to understand the various dimensions of postcolonial theory. The first stage is the Adopt phase in which the writer seeks the form of genre and mentions its universal validity. The second stage is the Adapt phase, here the author adapts or borrows the form, particularly the European form to delineate the native subject matter. The last stage is the Adept phase, focusing over the independence of the text. In last phase, we do not find interference of European cultural forms. Regarding the third phase, Barry made a remark:

“Characteristically, postcolonial writers evoke or create pre-colonial version of their own nation, rejecting the modern and, the contemporary, which is tainted with the colonial status of their countries. Here, then, is the first characteristic of post-colonial criticism- an awareness of representations of the non-European as exotic or immoral ‘other.” [Barry, p.194]

The above commentary on ‘Orientalism’ clarifies the objective of study of postcolonial theory as to unite the different cultural, social, political, economic, ethno-racist aspect in literatures of both the worlds- East and West.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is another important thinker in postcolonial theory; her critical work In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (1987) deserves special mention including the essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ She widened the scope of subaltern literature including the literatures of marginalized women. She makes harsh comment on the male dominant society and shows the secondary position, inferior role given to women in patriarchy. According to Spivak, women are doubly exploited and under estimated in postcolonial literatures. Subaltern is a military term, but Spivak used it to denote
the lower rank, marginal status of women and the literature exploring it. She is fully postcolonial feminist critic:

‘Spivak can be said to be the first postcolonial theorist with a fully feminist agenda. That agenda includes the complicity of female writers with imperialism..... Spivak’s insistence on the importance of feminist perspectives is part of a larger role that she has perhaps unintentionally played over the last two decades: that of the theoretical conscience of postcolonial studies. Her work has as much addressed theoretical shortcomings in post colonial theorizing as it has focused on postcolonial issues itself.”  
[Bertens, p. 211]

Spivak’s chief contribution to postcolonial theory is her terms-subaltern, essentialism, strategic essentialism-which gained a specific reference in post-colonial literary and critical studies in contemporary literatures.

The next significant postcolonial theorist is Homi K. Bhabha and his book The Location of Culture (1994) has made prominent contributions in postcolonial criticism. His concept of Hybridity gained currency in defining the vision of postcolonial theory that all cultures are confluenced in each other and it cannot be separated. In this regard, the diasporic writing become important; it redefined the postcolonial aftermath not only in literature but also in socio-cultural, political, national, economic, et cetra sectors. Selden remarks:

“Bhabha sees hybridity as a problematic of colonial representation which reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal (of differance), so that other ‘denied’ knowledge’s enter upon the dominant discourses and estrange the basis of its authority.”[Selden. p.228]

Bhabha also raises the question of cultural identity. He uses the term mimicry to indicate the Westernization of native cultures. Native cultures are imitating- it is blindly- the Western culture without knowing cultural demolition of natives. Bhabha criticized Frantz Fanon’s-Fanon is one of the earliest writers associated with postcolonialism-Black Skin, White Masks. Leela Gandhi rightly quotes:

“In his comments on Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks, the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha announces that memory is the necessary and sometimes hazardous bridge between colonial and the question of cultural identity.”  [Gandhi. p.9]

After the discussion of prominent exponent of postcolonial theory Said Spivak and Bhabha, literatures excluding British and American were called Commonwealth Literature. Now Commonwealth Literature included different types of literatures from different cultures. To include all these literatures a new term having reference of time is coined i.e. Postcolonial Literature. According to many postcolonial critics the postcolonial literature is appropriate and most authorative term to denote, describe and study the emerging literatures in English. Resistance, subversion and reconstruction are the significant features of postcolonial literature. Postcolonial literatures in all languages, particularly in English are based on the
conflict between the traditional culture of history, gender, culture and politics. The Indian English Literature can be divided into four major postcolonial discourse as one Minority Discourse in which Rohinton Mistry’s ‘Such A Long Journey’ and ‘Fine Balance’, Boman Desai’s ‘The Memory of Elephant’, and ‘And Some Take a Lover’ are important works. Two diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie (Midnight’s Children, Shame, Satanic Verses), Vikarm Seth (A Suitable Boy) are important postcolonial novelists. The third category is Feminist Discourse Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De are major writers in this category, and the last category is of Political Discourse which repeats the above writers like Rushdie. Thus, Indian English Literature has a great impact of postcolonial theory, inside and outside the country.

Hence it becomes necessary to note down some of the issues often discussed in postcolonial theory. The issues are:

1. Cultural difference in literary texts. E.g. gender (feminist criticism), class (Marxist criticism), and sexual orientation (lesbian/ gay criticism).
2. Double identity and identity crisis in different cultures and their texts.
3. Rejection of Western literature and their norms, and establishment of native literature creating their own norms.
4. Western literature has not the ability to speak over the matters like colonialism and imperialism.
5. Support to the notion that western literature is not the universal literature.
6. Representation of prominence of ‘Other’ cultures in literature.
7. Strong belief in hybridity, multiculturalism, multi-ethnicity, and cultural polyvalency.
8. Use of ‘otherness’ and ‘marginality’ as the power, source of energy and potential change for the natives.
9. Foregrounding of marginality is the chief task of native literature.

Postcolonial theory revolves around this issues and they are found in postcolonial literatures.

Thus, postcolonial theory—as epistemology, ethics, and politics—addresses matters of identity, gender, race, racism and ethnicity with the challenges of developing a postcolonial national identity, of how a colonized people’s knowledge about the world is generated under specific relations between the powerful and the powerless, circulated repetitively and finally legitimated in service to certain imperial interests. Terms and concepts used in postcolonial theory and literature are enlisted here, in brief.

1. **Discourse:** discourse means any thought communicated by speech; but according to Foucault, discourse is the material manifestation of a thought that is preserved, transmitted and still affects our present day thinking.
2. **Eurocentric:** Eurocentric means Europe is the source of all knowledge. Postcolonial theory used this term to denote the marginality of ‘Other’ literatures.
3. **Foregrounding**: It means considering significant. Postcolonial theory foregrounds the ‘Other’ literatures.

4. **Hegemony**: hegemony refers to power and control (indirect) in Marxist criticism.

5. **Hybridity**: The term stands for mixture, intermingling of different cultures. It is syncretism and multiculturalism.

6. **Intertextuality**: Every work contains the bits or some factors of other work can be called intertextuality.

7. **Marginality**: Marginal means of secondary, sub important. In postcolonial theory Europe is the centre and colonies are margins.

8. **Mimicry**: Bhabha uses this term to mean that blind imitation of western ideology, literature and lifestyle.

9. **Orientalism**: According to Said, it is a Western style of dominating and having authority over East. It is a huge body of texts establishing their superiority over ‘Other’ texts.

10. **Other**: Feeling of considering a person, subject, text out of focus. For colonizer, colonized is the ‘Other’.

11. **Subaltern**: Subaltern means of lower rank, but Spivak has widened its scope and attributed the term to the literatures of marginality and suppressed groups of society.

12. **Expatriate**: The term expatriate means the native who goes to the West and works there but keeps the option open to come back home.

13. **Immigrant**: It refers to that person who leaves his/ her country for a foreign land for good.

14. **Multiculturalism**: It is referred to writing of that writers whose origin lies in another country and they work in third country.

15. **Periphery**: peripheral is the similar term to margin. Europe is the centre and ‘Other’ are periphery.

   In brief, the ultimate goal of postcolonial theory is combating the residual effects of colonialism on cultures. It is not simply concerned with salvaging post worlds, but learning how the world can move beyond this period together, towards a place of mutual respect. Postcolonialism began when colonialism is over. But colonialism is still ruling psyche of the people of independent countries like India, Africa, West Indies, New Zealand and Canada. It provides them the theme of neocolonialism, resistance, subversion, reconstruction, search for identity, problems of diaspora, alienation, landscape, national identity, feminist and political themes.
References: