

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 1

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Hello and welcome to this course on postcolonial literature. Conventionally the study of English literature, at least in the Indian universities, has meant the study of British or at the most American literature. The category of postcolonial literature on the other hand brings us a fascinatingly diverse array of literary texts from parts of the world as varied as India, Africa, West Indies, Australia, and South America. Thus, though this course is primarily intended for graduate students of English literature, anyone who is interested in literature in general should benefit from it.

And since this course will read the wide variety of literature against the backdrop of colonialism and resistance to colonialism, it would also appeal to those who are interested to know more about the cultural legacies of colonialism as well as those who seek to engage themselves actively in the process of decolonisation.

Now postcolonial literature is a fast expanding field of studies and the huge number of academic journal, monographs and conference proceedings that are regularly brought out with the word postcolonial in its title bears testimony to this fact. This course will attempt to map the exciting possibilities as well the challenges that this comparatively new field of studies has thrown up and it will do so by discussing both literary works and critical texts that have come to constitute the postcolonial canon. But before we start doing that, we should begin by exploring the word “postcolonialism” which holds this new literary category together and gives meaning to it.

What is “postcolonialism”?

Understanding the meaning of the word “postcolonialism” presents us with our first major challenge. I refer to this as a challenge because for the past four decades now, the term “postcolonialism” has been used to mean several different things. Not only that, there is also no general consensus as to how the word postcolonial should be written. Should it have a hyphen separating “post” from “colonial” or should it be written as one word? Our first task therefore would be to know how to navigate through this confusing warren of meanings as well as spellings.

If you look at the word “postcolonialism” carefully, you will notice that the term is composed of two parts. The major component of the term is of course the word “colonialism” but there is also a prefix – “post”. And this prefix adds a very important dimension to our understanding of the term postcolonialism. If we go to the dictionary and look up the prefix “post”, we will see that generally it means “after” or “behind”. When attached as a prefix before a noun denoting a particular event, “post” indicates something that happens or comes after that event. For instance, the word post-graduation, which also uses the prefix “post”, signify something that comes after graduation. If I am doing post-graduation in English, it will mean I have completed my graduation and I am studying for a degree which can only be attained *after* graduation.

If we decode the term postcolonialism by applying this same logic, then the term should mean the period “after” colonialism. If we try and understand this particular meaning from within the Indian context, then we are almost inevitably directed towards a certain date – 15th August 1947. As we all know, India till 1947 was a British colony and on 15th August 1947 we ceased to be a colony and became a sovereign nation-state. This should mean that the period in the history of India after the date of our political independence should be categorised as

postcolonial. I will discuss why this understanding is problematic, but let me state that this understanding of the term postcolonialism is not entirely wrong. Indeed, the word postcolonial with the hyphen separating “post” and “colonial” has often been used to refer to the post-independence history of states which were once politically part of large European empires. Nevertheless, this is not the mainstream understanding of the term within the field of postcolonial studies, and to mark this difference, the word “postcolonialism” is used without the hyphen by most scholars of postcolonial studies.

Postcolonialism

But what is the problem if we use postcolonial to mean post-independence? Well even without a well-rounded definition of colonialism at our disposal, I think we will all agree that colonialism has a number of different aspects to it, and the political is but only one aspect of colonialism. To try and understand this further let us look at the date 15th August 1947 more closely. What happened on that date? On 15th August the British monarch and the British parliament ceased to have any direct political control over the affairs of India. India from that date became a politically sovereign nation-state. But this political power which Britain exercised over India till 14th August 1947 was only part of what we understand as British colonialism. Indeed, apart from the political domain, British colonialism also exerted a huge amount influence on the social, cultural and economic spheres of India and that influence did not come to an abrupt end on the 15th of August 1947.

Even today, if we look around, we find ourselves surrounded by legacies of British colonialism ranging from the miles and miles of railway tracks that criss-cross the country to the English language in which I am now communicating with you. Perhaps the most profound impact of British colonialism in India was economic. It was with the advent of colonialism that India became thoroughly integrated within a global network of capitalism and even seven decades

after gaining political freedom we still remain integrated within the network of capitalism. Clearly then, not everything that constituted British colonialism in India has ended. Therefore, as far as understanding postcolonialism within the Indian context is concerned, a date like 15th August 1947 does not prove to be very useful.

Is there any other way of understanding the term postcolonialism then? Well there is. If you think about the discussion that we have had so far you will realise that we have been trying to understand postcolonialism as signifying things which come after the *end* of colonialism. As we have seen, many of the aspects which constituted the process of colonialism, at least in the context of British Raj in India, has survived well beyond our date of political independence and therefore it is not practicable to talk about the end of colonialism. But we get a new insight if we think postcolonialism as signifying things which come not after the *end* of colonialism but after the *beginning* of colonialism.

If this sounds a bit confusing, then let us try and understand it using the familiar Indian historical context again. If rather than the end of British colonialism in India, we are to look for its beginning, we are pushed as far back as the eighteenth century when the Mughal emperor Farrukshiyar issued a firman allowing the East India Company duty free trading rights in Bengal. Since the first quarter of the eighteenth century when the firman came into effect, the British colonial power started expanding their economic and political influence in India which was soon coupled by a strong socio-cultural influence. The impact of this colonial influence was such that India *after* colonialism emerged as something that was markedly different from the India *before* colonialism. Postcolonialism in this Indian context would therefore mean the sum total of all the various social, political, economic and cultural changes that started being perceived after the first impact of colonialism was felt. Chronologically therefore, postcolonial India is not the India after 1947, rather it is the India which started emerging from the 18th century onwards as the colonial power started spreading its influence across the land.

At this point, let us stop for a while and think about this new definition of postcolonialism that we have arrived at. If postcolonialism is the sum total of all the social, cultural, economic and political changes that is brought about by colonialism then are these changes relevant only in the context of the colonised country and not in the context of the colonising country? In other words, when we talk about the British colonialism in India, can we only talk about the emergence of a postcolonial India and not a postcolonial Britain? Of course not. Even a cursory acquaintance with British history since the 18th century would tell us that British society was as deeply affected by the process of colonisation as was the Indian society. And in fact this is not difficult to comprehend if we keep in mind that colonialism was ultimately a two-way traffic of ideas, goods and people between the colonised and the colonising nations. It is therefore implausible to think that colonialism only affected the colonised people and not the colonisers. Thus, if we can talk about a postcolonial India, we can also justifiably talk about a postcolonial Britain.

What is “Colonialism”?

So far in our discussion we have taken the term colonialism for granted, but now let us look at it more closely. If we want to understand what colonialism is, then the historical origin of the word provides us with an interesting clue. The word colonialism has at its root the word colony which in turn is derived from the Latin word “*colōnia*”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “*colōnia*” as “farms” or “landed estates” which were located in newly conquered territories of the Roman Empire, and were originally given as a gifts to Roman citizens who were mostly veteran soldiers. Establishing such Roman colonies in an otherwise hostile territory ensured that the occupied land remained under control, and among the various colonies that Rome had, London, was a prominent one.

This understanding of colony and colonialism, throws up a number of interesting points. The first is that colonialism or the process of establishing colonies is essentially a violent process because it involves forcibly occupying the land and using the territorial resources that originally belong to someone else. Colonies are therefore sites of hostility and violence. As we will see in this course, this colonial violence makes itself felt at several different levels including social, economic and cultural. But these more abstract kinds of violence are almost always coupled with the brutalities of physical violence. We see this in Peru where during the early decades of the sixteenth century Spanish conquistadors reduced the native population from about half a crore to something around three lakhs, or more recently in the 1893 war against the Matabele kingdom of present day Zimbabwe where the British force almost mowed down their African opponents like grass using the newly developed Maxim guns. In this course we will talk a lot about cultural violence as well as cultural resistance to violence but we should never really forget the barbarity of the physical violence which underlines the process of colonialism.

The second point to note in the dictionary definition of the Latin word *colonia*, which informs the present day use of the term colonialism, is that though Roman *colonia* were settlements away from the heart of Italy which was the centre of the Roman empire, they were nevertheless inhabited by people who still retained their rights as Roman citizens and who represented the political and economic interests of their mother country in the distant territory. Therefore, when we are talking about colonialism we are also talking about this relationship between a mother country, which is otherwise called metropolis and to which the colonising population belongs, and the conquered country which is transformed into a colony so that its resources can be siphoned off. If we look at this world map of 1921, the shaded area represents the British colonial empire. And here you can see that the comparatively small island of Britain acting as the colonial mother country or metropolis over a huge territory including the entire south Asia

that is present day Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Burma, along with Australia, Canada and large parts of Africa.

Now it can be argued that such territorial conquest and expansion which forms the basis of colonialism is observed throughout human history. As we have seen, even the British capital of London was once a colony of the Roman Empire. So doesn't this make the history of colonialism really the entire history of humanity? Well it may be so but as far as postcolonial studies is concerned, the focus is on the kinds of colonialism that have emerged since the sixteenth century and that have been primarily guided by the profit making motive of capitalism. We will be discussing this relation between colonialism and capitalism later on, but before that we will try and understand postcolonialism in relation to literature. This will be our topic for the next lecture. Thank you.