

Lecture 9: Race and Representation in Post-Colonial Literature

Duration: 1.5 hours

Part 1: The Construction of Race in Colonial Discourse (30 min)

1.1 Race and Colonial Ideology

The concept of race was central to the colonial project, used to justify European domination over non-European peoples. Colonial powers constructed racial hierarchies that positioned Europeans as superior and the colonized as inferior, based on pseudo-scientific theories of racial difference. These hierarchies were used to legitimize the exploitation and subjugation of colonized peoples, and they played a key role in shaping the social, political, and economic structures of colonial societies.

Colonial discourse often depicted the colonized as uncivilized, primitive, and incapable of self-governance, using racialized stereotypes to dehumanize them. This discourse was reflected in the literature, art, and political rhetoric of the time, which portrayed non-European peoples as racially and culturally inferior to Europeans. These racial constructions were deeply intertwined with the imperial project, as they provided the ideological basis for the colonization and exploitation of vast territories in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Americas.

In his influential work *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said critiques the ways in which European intellectuals and artists constructed the "Orient"—a term that broadly refers to the Middle East and Asia—as an exotic and backward place in need of European intervention and modernization. Said argues that this process of "Othering" was central to the formation of European identity and the justification of imperial domination. By portraying the colonized as the racial and cultural opposite of the European, colonial discourse reinforced the idea of European superiority and the legitimacy of empire.

The construction of race in colonial discourse was not just a theoretical exercise; it had real and lasting consequences for the lives of colonized peoples. Racial hierarchies were

institutionalized through laws, education systems, and social practices that reinforced the dominance of European settlers and elites while marginalizing indigenous peoples. In many cases, these racial divisions persist in post-colonial societies, shaping contemporary social and political dynamics.

1.2 Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Race

Frantz Fanon, one of the most important thinkers in post-colonial theory, offers a powerful analysis of how race and racism shaped the experiences of colonized peoples. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon explores the psychological impact of colonialism on the colonized subject, focusing on how racial hierarchies were internalized by both the colonizer and the colonized.

Fanon argues that the colonized subject is made to feel inferior through the process of "epidermalization"—the internalization of racial difference based on skin color. In a world structured by colonial racism, the black or non-European subject is constantly confronted with images and representations of themselves as inferior, backward, or subhuman. These images are reinforced by colonial education, media, and social interactions, leading to a profound sense of alienation and self-hatred.

Fanon's work is deeply concerned with the psychological effects of this racialized system of oppression. He argues that the colonized subject is trapped in a double bind: they are forced to conform to the values and norms of the colonizer in order to gain recognition and social mobility, but in doing so, they are made to feel alienated from their own culture and identity. This dynamic is exemplified by Fanon's concept of "black skin, white masks," which refers to the way in which colonized subjects often adopt the cultural and behavioral traits of the colonizer in an attempt to gain acceptance, only to find themselves excluded and dehumanized by the very society they seek to emulate.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon extends his analysis of race to the broader political context of decolonization. He argues that colonialism not only dehumanized the colonized but also created deep divisions within colonized societies, particularly along racial and ethnic lines. Fanon's critique of race in the context of colonialism remains a foundational text for understanding the psychological and political effects of racial hierarchies in both colonial and post-colonial societies.

1.3 The Colonial Gaze and the Representation of Race

The "colonial gaze" refers to the way in which colonizers viewed and represented the colonized. This gaze was informed by racial hierarchies and stereotypes, and it shaped the way in which colonized peoples were depicted in literature, art, and popular culture. The colonial gaze objectified and exoticized the colonized, reducing them to mere caricatures that reinforced the idea of European superiority.

In many cases, the colonial gaze was paternalistic, portraying the colonized as childlike, passive, and in need of European guidance and protection. This image was used to justify the "civilizing mission" of colonialism, which claimed to bring progress, education, and civilization to the supposedly backward and primitive peoples of the colonized world. At the same time, the colonial gaze was also often fearful and paranoid, depicting the colonized as violent, irrational, and dangerous—a threat to the stability of the colonial order.

Post-colonial literature often critiques and deconstructs the colonial gaze, exposing the ways in which it dehumanized and marginalized the colonized. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Jean Rhys, and Derek Walcott have challenged the racial stereotypes and colonial representations that were perpetuated in both European and colonial literature. By reclaiming the voice of the colonized, post-colonial writers offer alternative perspectives on race and identity that challenge the dominant narratives of the colonial period.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), for example, is a direct response to colonial representations of African societies as primitive and backward. The novel offers a nuanced and complex portrayal of Igbo culture, challenging the racialized stereotypes that were used to justify British colonialism in Nigeria. Similarly, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) reimagines the character of Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic" from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, offering a more sympathetic portrayal of a Creole woman trapped in a colonial and patriarchal world.

Part 2: The Representation of Race in Post-Colonial Literature (30 min)

2.1 Racial Stereotypes and the "Other"

Post-colonial literature frequently engages with the ways in which racial stereotypes have been used to construct the colonized as the "Other." In colonial discourse, the colonized are often portrayed as the racial and cultural opposite of the colonizer—uncivilized, irrational, and inferior. These stereotypes served to justify the colonial project by reinforcing the idea that the colonized were in need of European intervention and governance.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said explores how European scholars, writers, and artists constructed the "Orient" as a place of mystery, decadence, and danger. These representations were based on a set of racialized and cultural stereotypes that positioned the Orient as the opposite of the rational, civilized West. Said argues that these stereotypes were not just the product of ignorance or misunderstanding but were part of a broader system of power and domination that underpinned European imperialism.

Similarly, in African and Caribbean contexts, racial stereotypes were used to depict black and indigenous peoples as inferior and uncivilized. These stereotypes were reinforced by European literature, art, and popular culture, which often portrayed blackness as a marker of primitiveness and savagery. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), for example, Africa is depicted as a dark and mysterious place, and the African characters are reduced to faceless, voiceless figures who serve as little more than background for the white European protagonist's journey into the "heart of darkness."

Post-colonial writers have often sought to challenge and deconstruct these racial stereotypes, offering more nuanced and complex representations of race and identity. By reclaiming the voice of the colonized, these writers resist the reduction of their characters to mere racial types and instead explore the diversity and complexity of the post-colonial experience.

2.2 Race, Identity, and Hybridity

Race and identity are deeply intertwined in post-colonial literature, particularly in the context of hybridity. As we discussed in previous lectures, hybridity refers to the mixing of cultures, languages, and identities that occurs as a result of colonialism and migration. In many post-colonial societies, individuals are forced to navigate complex racial and cultural identities that are shaped by both their indigenous heritage and the legacy of colonialism.

In post-colonial literature, characters often grapple with the tensions between their racial identity and their cultural or national identity. This tension is particularly evident in diasporic literature, where characters must navigate the complexities of being part of a racial minority in a foreign country. In many cases, these characters experience a sense of double consciousness, as they are forced to view themselves through the eyes of both their own community and the dominant society.

The concept of double consciousness was first articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois describes double consciousness as the feeling of being caught between two identities—one's own racial identity and the identity imposed by the dominant society. This sense of fragmentation and alienation is a common theme in post-colonial literature, particularly for characters who are part of racial or ethnic minorities in Western societies.

In Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), for example, the characters are West Indian migrants living in London, and they struggle with the racial discrimination and marginalization they face in British society. Selvon's novel explores the ways in which race shapes the characters' experiences of identity, belonging, and community, as they navigate the challenges of being black in a predominantly white society. The novel also highlights the ways in which racial identity intersects with other forms of identity, such as class and nationality, as the characters struggle to find their place in a society that views them as outsiders.

2.3 The Body as a Site of Racial Identity

In post-colonial literature, the body often becomes a site of racial identity, as characters are defined and categorized based on their physical appearance. The body is frequently racialized, with skin color, facial features, and other physical traits serving as markers of difference. This racialization of the body is a central theme in many post-colonial texts, as writers explore how physical appearance shapes the experiences of their characters in both colonial and post-colonial contexts.

The racialization of the body is often linked to ideas of purity and contamination. In colonial discourse, racial mixing was often viewed as a threat to the racial and cultural purity of the colonizer. This fear of miscegenation was reflected in laws and social practices that

sought to maintain strict boundaries between different racial groups. In many post-colonial societies, these ideas of racial purity and contamination continue to shape attitudes toward race and identity.

In Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the character of Antoinette is defined by her mixed-race heritage, as she is both Creole and European. Antoinette's racial identity is a source of both attraction and repulsion for the white European characters in the novel, particularly her husband, Rochester. Her body becomes a site of racial ambiguity and desire, as Rochester is simultaneously drawn to and repelled by her difference. Rhys's novel explores the ways in which race and gender intersect to shape Antoinette's experience of identity and power in a colonial society.

Similarly, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), the bodies of enslaved characters are racialized and commodified, as their physical appearance becomes the basis for their exploitation and dehumanization. The novel explores how the trauma of slavery is inscribed on the bodies of its characters, particularly Sethe, whose back bears the scars of the beatings she endured as a slave. Morrison's portrayal of the body as a site of racial trauma highlights the ways in which race and identity are intertwined with physical suffering and violence.

Part 3: Case Study of *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (30 min)

3.1 Challenging Colonial Representations of Race

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is one of the most important works of post-colonial literature to engage with the theme of race and representation. Published in 1958, the novel offers a complex and nuanced portrayal of Igbo society in pre-colonial Nigeria, challenging the racialized stereotypes that were prevalent in European literature about Africa.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents a rich and detailed account of Igbo culture, highlighting its social, political, and religious systems. The novel counters the colonial narrative of Africa as a primitive and uncivilized continent, offering instead a portrayal of a sophisticated and dynamic society that is disrupted by the arrival of British missionaries and colonial administrators.

Achebe's novel is a direct response to the kinds of racialized representations that were common in European literature about Africa, such as those found in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In contrast to Conrad's depiction of Africa as a dark and mysterious place, Achebe presents Africa as a place of complexity and diversity, where individuals and communities navigate the challenges of both tradition and modernity.

3.2 The Impact of Colonialism on Racial Identity

One of the central themes of *Things Fall Apart* is the impact of colonialism on racial and cultural identity. The arrival of the British in Umuofia disrupts the social and political order of the Igbo people, leading to tensions between those who embrace the new religion and governance structures and those who seek to preserve their traditional way of life. This tension is reflected in the novel's protagonist, Okonkwo, who resists the changes brought by colonialism and struggles to maintain his identity in the face of external pressures.

Achebe explores how the imposition of colonial rule and the introduction of Christianity create divisions within the Igbo community, particularly along racial and cultural lines. The novel highlights the ways in which colonialism not only imposes foreign systems of governance and religion but also creates new racial hierarchies that marginalize the indigenous population. Okonkwo's resistance to colonialism is not just a defense of his cultural traditions but also a response to the racial and cultural domination imposed by the British.

3.3 The Representation of Race and Power

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe also explores the relationship between race and power in the context of colonialism. The British missionaries and colonial administrators are depicted as figures of authority who impose their values and beliefs on the Igbo people. The racial hierarchy that underpins colonial rule is reflected in the ways in which the British view and treat the indigenous population. The Igbo are often portrayed as inferior and in need of guidance, reinforcing the idea that colonialism is a benevolent and civilizing force.

Achebe challenges this portrayal by offering a more complex and critical perspective on the power dynamics of colonialism. The novel exposes the violence and coercion that underpin colonial rule, as well as the ways in which the British use their racial and cultural

superiority to justify their domination of the Igbo people. Through Okonkwo's story, Achebe highlights the personal and collective costs of colonialism, as individuals and communities are forced to navigate the challenges of cultural assimilation and resistance.

Conclusion

In this lecture, we have explored the theme of race and representation in post-colonial literature, focusing on how colonialism constructed racial hierarchies that continue to shape post-colonial identities. Through the works of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Chinua Achebe, we examined how post-colonial literature critiques and deconstructs the racial stereotypes and colonial representations that were used to justify European domination.

We discussed how race and identity are intertwined in post-colonial literature, particularly in the context of hybridity, and how the body becomes a site of racial identity and trauma. Through the case study of *Things Fall Apart*, we explored how Achebe challenges the colonial gaze and offers a more complex portrayal of African society and identity in the face of colonialism.

As we continue through the course, we will examine how other post-colonial writers engage with the theme of race and representation, and how literature serves as a space for challenging the racial hierarchies and power dynamics that were established during the colonial period.

Evaluation Task: Analyze how Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* challenge colonial representations of race, focusing on how the authors use their characters to critique racial hierarchies and stereotypes (1000 words).
