

Lecture 5: Gender in Post-Colonial Literature

Duration: 1.5 hours

Part 1: Feminist Post-Colonial Criticism (30 min)

1.1 Colonialism and Gender: A Dual Oppression

In post-colonial societies, women often experience a double form of marginalization, shaped by both colonial and patriarchal systems. Feminist post-colonial criticism is concerned with how colonialism imposed new gender roles and exacerbated existing forms of gender inequality. While men in colonized societies were subjugated by the colonizer's economic and political systems, women were doubly oppressed: first by colonial authority and second by the patriarchal structures within their own communities.

Colonialism altered the roles and status of women in colonized societies in profound ways. In many cases, colonial powers introduced legal systems that restricted women's rights, limiting their access to property, education, and public life. Traditional forms of gender roles and social organization were disrupted, often to the detriment of women. For example, in some African societies, women held significant political or economic power before colonization. However, European colonial systems frequently imposed patriarchal norms that diminished women's roles, pushing them into domestic spheres and reinforcing gender inequality.

In addition, the colonial narrative often depicted women of the colonized regions as passive, subservient, and in need of saving, reflecting the broader colonial discourse of the "civilizing mission." This narrative justified both colonial domination and the imposition of Western gender roles. European colonizers presented themselves as protectors of "oppressed" native women, using their status as liberators to legitimize colonial rule. However, this was often a form of paternalism that did not address the actual needs or desires of these women but rather reinforced the power dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized.

In her work, *Under Western Eyes* (1986), feminist post-colonial scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques Western feminist discourses for their tendency to generalize the experiences of women in post-colonial societies, often portraying them as a homogeneous group of victims. Mohanty argues that Western feminism often overlooks the complexities and diversities of women's lives in the Global South, imposing a Eurocentric framework that does not account for the specific historical and cultural contexts in which these women live.

1.2 Gayatri Spivak and the Subaltern Woman

One of the most influential figures in feminist post-colonial theory is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) has become a foundational text in the field. Spivak's essay critiques both Western intellectuals and post-colonial nationalists for their failure to adequately address the experiences of subaltern women—those who exist at the margins of both colonial and post-colonial power structures. Spivak argues that subaltern women are often denied a voice in both colonial and nationalist discourses, as their identities and experiences are overwritten by the agendas of others.

Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" refers to individuals and groups who are excluded from the dominant structures of power and representation, particularly within the context of colonialism. Subaltern women, according to Spivak, are doubly marginalized—first by the patriarchal systems within their own societies, and second by the colonial system, which silences them and imposes its own forms of gender oppression. Even in post-colonial societies, Spivak argues, the voices of subaltern women continue to be silenced, as nationalist movements often prioritize male-centered narratives of resistance and liberation.

In her essay, Spivak uses the example of *sati*, the Hindu practice of widow immolation, to illustrate how subaltern women are silenced in both colonial and nationalist discourses. British colonial authorities condemned *sati* as barbaric and used its abolition as a justification for colonial rule, claiming to be liberating Indian women from patriarchal oppression. Indian nationalists, on the other hand, defended *sati* as a symbol of Indian tradition and resistance to colonial intervention. In both cases, Spivak argues, the voices of the women themselves were erased. The colonial and nationalist narratives were more concerned with using *sati* to advance their own political agendas than with addressing the actual needs and experiences of the women involved.

Spivak's work challenges both Western feminist and post-colonial discourses to recognize the complexity of subaltern women's experiences and to resist the temptation to speak for them. She argues that the act of "giving voice" to the subaltern often ends up reinforcing the same structures of power that silence them in the first place. Instead, Spivak calls for a more self-reflexive approach to scholarship, one that is attentive to the limitations of its own position and to the ways in which knowledge is produced and circulated.

1.3 Intersectionality in Post-Colonial Feminism

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by African-American feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, has become a key framework in feminist post-colonial criticism. Intersectionality recognizes that different forms of oppression—such as race, class, gender, and colonialism—intersect and shape each other in complex ways. Post-colonial feminism uses intersectionality to analyze how colonialism and patriarchy intersect to shape the experiences of women in post-colonial societies.

In many cases, the oppression experienced by women in colonized societies cannot be understood solely in terms of gender. Instead, their experiences are shaped by the interplay of multiple forms of oppression, including colonial domination, racial discrimination, and economic exploitation. Post-colonial feminism challenges the idea that women's oppression can be understood in isolation from other social and political factors. It calls for a more nuanced analysis that takes into account the specific historical and cultural contexts in which women live.

For example, African-American feminist scholar bell hooks has argued that Western feminist movements have historically been dominated by the concerns of white, middle-class women, often ignoring the experiences of women of color, working-class women, and women in the Global South. Similarly, post-colonial feminists critique the tendency of Western feminist movements to focus on issues like reproductive rights or wage equality, while overlooking the broader structural inequalities that shape the lives of women in post-colonial societies, such as poverty, access to education, and the legacies of colonialism.

Part 2: Representation of Women in Post-Colonial Texts (30 min)

2.1 Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and the Politics of Polygamy

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1979) is a seminal text in African feminist literature, exploring the lives of women in post-colonial Senegal and the challenges they face in balancing tradition and modernity. Written in the form of a letter from the protagonist, Ramatoulaye, to her friend Aissatou, the novel reflects on the complex intersection of gender, culture, and religion in post-colonial Africa.

One of the central themes of *So Long a Letter* is polygamy, a practice that remains common in many African societies. Ramatoulaye, a widow, reflects on the impact of her husband's decision to take a second wife, a much younger woman, without consulting her. The novel explores how polygamy, while accepted within the framework of Islamic law and African tradition, can have devastating emotional consequences for women.

Bâ critiques both the patriarchal structures that uphold polygamy and the broader societal expectations that women should accept their roles as wives and mothers without question. Ramatoulaye's decision to remain with her husband, even after his betrayal, reflects the internalized pressures of tradition and religious duty. However, the novel also highlights the ways in which women find strength and solidarity in their relationships with one another. Through her friendship with Aissatou, Ramatoulaye finds the courage to challenge the expectations placed upon her and to assert her own identity as an independent woman.

So Long a Letter is a powerful exploration of how colonialism and patriarchy intersect in post-colonial societies. While Senegal has achieved political independence, the novel suggests that the struggle for gender equality is far from over. Bâ's work challenges both African men and women to reconsider the roles assigned to them by tradition and to imagine new possibilities for gender relations in the post-colonial world.

2.2 Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: The Subaltern Woman's Voice

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a powerful example of post-colonial literature that reclaims the voice of the subaltern woman. The novel is a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, telling the story of Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic" who becomes the first wife of Mr. Rochester. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is portrayed as an exotic and dangerous figure, a colonial "other" who must be confined and controlled. However, in *Wide Sargasso*

Sea, Rhys reimagines Bertha's story, giving her a voice and exploring the colonial and patriarchal forces that drive her to madness.

Set in Jamaica, *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents Bertha (renamed Antoinette) as a Creole woman caught between two worlds: the white European colonizers and the black Jamaican population. Antoinette's identity is shaped by the racial and cultural hierarchies of colonial Jamaica, as well as by the patriarchal structures that govern her relationships with men. Her marriage to Rochester is marked by domination and control, as he seeks to impose his own identity and worldview upon her. Antoinette's descent into madness is a result of her inability to navigate the conflicting demands of colonial and patriarchal power.

Rhys's novel challenges the portrayal of Bertha in *Jane Eyre* and critiques the colonial gaze that reduces her to a passive and exotic object. By giving Antoinette a voice, Rhys reclaims her as a fully realized character with her own desires, fears, and agency. At the same time, *Wide Sargasso Sea* highlights the ways in which colonialism and patriarchy intersect to silence and oppress women like Antoinette, who are caught between competing systems of power.

2.3 Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: Gender and Caste

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is another important text in feminist post-colonial literature, exploring the intersection of gender, caste, and colonialism in post-colonial India. The novel tells the story of Ammu, a young woman from a high-caste Syrian Christian family in Kerala, and her forbidden love affair with Velutha, a lower-caste Dalit man. Their relationship is doomed from the start, as it violates the rigid caste and gender hierarchies that govern their society.

The God of Small Things highlights the ways in which colonialism and patriarchy have shaped the lives of women in post-colonial India. Ammu's life is constrained by both the expectations of her family and the broader social structures that dictate women's roles in society. As a divorced woman, she is already marginalized, and her relationship with Velutha further challenges the social order. The novel explores how caste, gender, and colonial history intersect to limit the possibilities for love, freedom, and self-determination.

Roy's novel is also a critique of how post-colonial nationalism often reinforces patriarchal and caste-based oppression. While India has achieved political independence, the novel suggests that social justice for women and lower-caste individuals remains elusive. Ammu's tragic story highlights the enduring legacies of colonialism, patriarchy, and caste discrimination in shaping the lives of post-colonial women.

Part 3: Gender and Resistance in Post-Colonial Poetry and Film (30 min)

3.1 Gender Resistance in Post-Colonial Poetry

Post-colonial poetry often provides a space for women to resist both colonial and patriarchal oppression. In the Caribbean, poets like Louise Bennett and Grace Nichols have used poetry to assert the voices of women and to challenge the gender roles imposed by colonialism and its aftermath. Bennett's use of Jamaican Creole in her poetry is an act of resistance against the dominance of European languages, while Nichols's work explores the ways in which Caribbean women navigate the legacies of slavery and colonialism.

In Africa, poets like Ama Ata Aidoo and Niyi Osundare have used poetry to critique the patriarchal structures that continue to oppress women in post-colonial societies. Aidoo's poem "The Dilemma of a Ghost" explores the tensions between tradition and modernity, highlighting the ways in which women are often caught between competing cultural expectations. Osundare's poetry addresses the struggles of Nigerian women, focusing on their roles as both victims and agents of change in a society shaped by colonialism and patriarchy.

3.2 Gender in Post-Colonial Cinema: *The Battle of Algiers*

Cinema has also been an important medium for exploring the intersection of gender and colonialism. One of the most influential post-colonial films is Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), which depicts the Algerian struggle for independence from French colonial rule. The film highlights the role of women in the anti-colonial resistance, particularly in the urban guerrilla warfare carried out by the National Liberation Front (FLN).

In *The Battle of Algiers*, Algerian women play a crucial role in the resistance, using their invisibility in the colonial system to smuggle weapons, plant bombs, and carry out attacks

against the French military. The film challenges the stereotype of women as passive victims and highlights the ways in which women have contributed to anti-colonial struggles. However, it also raises important questions about the cost of resistance, particularly for women who must navigate both the demands of the nationalist movement and the gendered expectations of their society.

Conclusion

In this lecture, we have explored the ways in which post-colonial literature engages with the themes of gender, power, and resistance. Feminist post-colonial criticism highlights the intersection of colonialism and patriarchy, showing how women in colonized societies have been doubly marginalized by both systems of oppression. Through the works of writers like Mariama Bâ, Jean Rhys, and Arundhati Roy, we have examined how post-colonial literature gives voice to the experiences of women and challenges the gender roles imposed by both colonial and post-colonial societies.

As we continue through the course, we will explore how other post-colonial writers engage with the themes of gender, identity, and resistance, and how literature can serve as a tool for challenging both colonial and patriarchal power structures.

Evaluation Task: Compare the representation of women in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ, focusing on how the authors explore the intersection of gender, colonialism, and patriarchy (1000 words).