**Historical Background**

Interest in postcolonialism dates back to the 1950s when Alfred Sauvy coined the term *Third World* to refer to developing nations, such as those in Africa or South America. They differ from what has come to be known as the First World countries—those in most of Europe and North America—which are characterized by industrialization, democracy, relative affluence, and similar cultural assumptions and beliefs. The white populations of countries once belonging to the British Empire (Australia, Canada, New Zealand) occupy a status of their own as they fulfill the definition of a First World country, but have more recently been linked with the colonizing power than some others, such as the United States. At the bottom of this hierarchy are the native populations who, although in some cases they compose the majority, are ruled by their white conquerors. Postcolonialism is interested in all but the First World; however, because many members of the First World have historically been the oppressors, they too are involved in the discussion.

Colonialism is, simply, the subjection of one population to another. It is most clearly seen in physical conquest, but in its more subtle forms, it involves political, economic, and cultural domination. The British rule in India, for example, involved not only the use of force to subdue the latter but also the imposition of British institutions and tastes. When people are colonized, their traditions and practices are supplanted by imitations of those of the colonizer. Parts of the indigenous culture as elemental as food, clothing, and recreation tend to disappear, because they are either hidden or replaced, thereby removing that culture from history. The term *colonialism* is sometimes used to challenge the meaning attributed to it by the colonizers, who use the term to refer to the positive, civilizing effects of their efforts. In this challenging usage, *colonialism* takes on Marxist overtones to reflect the perceptions of local peoples who have experienced (or who have known the legacy of) the burdens imposed by the colonizers: foreign social, business, and legal practices; exploitation of natural resources; and military occupation.

Although the term *postcolonial* was not in use until the late 1980s, theories surrounding its concerns have been published since the 1960s. Over the years, the study of postcolonialism has primarily attracted the interest of literary scholars and critics. However, because it is concerned with what happens to a culture from the beginning of colonization to the present, it is also making inroads in fields as diverse as political science, sociology, and psychology. Postcolonialism theories offer topics of interest to members of these fields because the formal termination of colonial rule does not wipe out its legacy, and the culture that is left is a mixture of the colonized one and that of the colonizer, often marked by contrasts and antagonisms, resentment and blended practice. The two are no longer recognizable as having separate cultures. Consequently, issues abound regarding the development of national identity, identification of cultural histories and knowledge, the precolonial nature of the colonized, and the colonized’s resistance to the power base that has subjugated them.

Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, published in 1978, was an important influence on what would become known as postcolonialism. In his analysis, Said called attention to the pejorative stereotypes that the British, other Europeans, and Americans create of the peoples unlike themselves, thereby making it easier to justify military or economic conquest. Their view of the “**other**” world—“orientalism”—is inevitably colored by their own cultural, political, and religious backgrounds, leading them to depict those unlike themselves as inferior and objectionable—for example, as lazy, deceitful, and irrational. The self, by contrast, is defined as good, upright, and moral. The Eastern nations are given all the negative characteristics that the West does not want to see in itself. For example, the first reports of the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 attributed the deed to Middle Eastern terrorists, because it was impossible to think that an American would have done such a thing. In *Orientalism*, Said called upon the literary establishment to raise questions about colonization, imperialism, and constructions of the “other.” Over the ensuing decades, postcolonial theorists have probed those issues by examining such subjects as language, feminism, oppression, cultural identity, race, and education. The intent is to study what happens when one culture is dominated by another.

Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins point out the error of understanding postcolonialism simply as a “temporal concept,” a period of time following the end of foreign governance. Instead, they say, it is a complex mixture of contesting discourses, social hierarchies, and power structures. In fact, it seems that the *post* part of *postcolonialism* may be an overstatement of the way things really are, for today a new kind of colonialism is taking place. Weaker powers are no longer as likely to be taken by military conquest, but they are no less economically and culturally dominated. Major international corporations, drawn by the availability of cheap labor and cooperative local governments, practice what is known as neocolonialism, which has much the same effect as traditional imperialism. Under neocolonialism’s aegis, the customs and traditional “ways” of the subjugated peoples are weakened, changed, and sometimes destroyed.

Knowing exactly which works fall into the category of postcolonial literature was a simpler matter before the 1980s, when it was called Commonwealth literature. At that time, it was generally assumed that the term referred to the literature of cultures colonized by the British Empire, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and parts of Africa, all of which were dominated by white Europeans who imposed their own cultural traditions at the expense of the native population’s traditions. The problem with the label *Commonwealth literature* is its grounding in British culture. This term seems to indicate that the literatures of native cultures still belong to “the mother country.” Such a position also ignores the literature of white settlers in colonized lands. Some readers still argue that white writers in Canada, New Zealand, or Australia should not be included, because they practice British traditions, share the same language, and belong to the same race. They have not been oppressed. They have not had to hide their traditions. Others argue, however, that although the settlers were the colonizers, they (or their descendants) do not and did not belong to Britain in the same way that native-born citizens do. Their home is in the colonized country. Consequently, the literature of white settlers is not dissimilar in its sense of double consciousness (double vision**)** as defined by W. E. B. DuBois (see “American Multiculturalism” later in this chapter). That is, their literature views the world through the contrasting perspectives of both the colonizer and the colonized. It reflects the sense of belonging to neither, of being culturally displaced, a quality Homi Bhabha refers to as **unhomeliness**. The broadest view of postcolonial literature is that it is the literature written in English by people in formerly colonized countries, some of it authored by the colonizers and their descendants, but more of it by those they colonized.

The term *postcolonial* has since replaced the label *Commonwealth literature*, although the uncertainty regarding what literatures it includes continues. At the least, it seems to broaden the field of interest by opening it to countries colonized by Western powers other than Great Britain, such as Spain, France, Russia, Portugal, and more. Currently the literature of any country that concerns itself with the legacy of colonial rule qualifies, including, to name only a few, that of African countries, India, Sri Lanka, and most recently the Middle East. Some readers assume that postcolonial literature refers to texts produced after the colonized countries became independent, but others take it to mean the texts produced from the time of colonization to the present.

The subject matter of postcolonial literature is marked by its concern for ambiguity or loss of identity. Written by culturally displaced people, it investigates the clash of cultures in which one deems itself to be superior and imposes its own practices on the less powerful one. Its writers examine their histories, question how they should respond to the changes they see around them, and wonder what their society will become. They recognize in themselves the old culture and the new, elements of the native one and the imposed one. The result is writing that is critical of the conquerors and promotional about its own ideologies.

**Postcolonial literary criticism**, which began to attract widespread notice in the early 1990s, looks at the works of postcolonial writers but is not limited to them. Because its practitioners are interested in how the colonized came to accept the values of the more powerful culture and to resist them too, it looks at canonical texts as well as postcolonial ones. Attitudes toward the “other” are evident in works that may not, on the surface, seem to deal with colonialism at all. Helen Tiffin argues in “Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse” that because a precolonial past cannot be regained and contemporary identity cannot be free of that past, the real job of postcolonial criticism is “to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained … colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world.” She suggests that the way to do so is to use “canonical counter-discourse,” a process in which one examines “a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text, and unveils [colonialist] assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purposes.” By extension, the whole colonialist discourse in which that text participates is revealed.

In looking at *Jane Eyre*, for example, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle discover a strong racial theme in the novel. By bringing Bertha Mason, Rochester’s Creole wife (from the West Indies), to the center of the narrative, they make the allusions and images that refer to slavery and the slave trade, heretofore mostly ignored, important keys to prevailing social attitudes. Whereas traditional criticism has in large part overlooked Bertha, who lives as a madwoman locked in the attic, and has left the assumptions about her unexamined, Bennett and Royle uncover the ideology implicit in the unquestioned acceptance of her invisibility, imprisonment, and displacement from her homeland. Before their analysis, she was seen as a threat because of her madness. They make it possible to view her, instead, as a sufferer who has been driven mad. The roles of villain and victim are reversed, providing through this new perspective on a much-read novel additional insight into colonialist and anticolonialist thinking.

**Reference:**

Dobie Anne B. (2012) Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism. Australia: Cengage Learning. Pp (205-208)