

FOREGROUNDING THE BACKGROUND OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

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“Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape and direction, and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored, especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism and Neo-colonialism. Our culture over the last hundred years has developed against the same stunting, dwarfing background. (wa Thiong'o, xv)

Post colonial literature, beyond the special and distinctive regional characteristics, emerged in the present form out of the experience of colonisation and asserted itself by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing the differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes it distinctively post-colonial. Post colonial literatures developed through several stages which can be seen to correspond to stages both of national or regional consciousness and of the project of asserting difference from the imperial centre. Post colonial texts may signify difference in their representations of place, in nomenclature, and through the deployment of themes. But it is in the language that the curious tension of cultural 'revelation' and cultural 'silence' is most evident. But the appropriation which has had the most profound significance in post-colonial discourse is that of writing itself. It is through an appropriation of the power invested in writing that this discourse can take hold of the marginality imposed on it and make hybridity and syncreticity, the source of literary and cultural redefinition. In writing out of the condition of 'Otherness', postcolonial texts assert the complex of intersecting 'peripheries' as the actual substance of experience. But the struggle which this assertion entails – the 're-placement' of the post-colonial text – is focused in their attempt to control the processes of writing. Post Colonialism need not only mean a break from colonialism but it refers to a sort of 'continuity' in which the power was transferred from the 'colonial elite' to the 'post-colonial elite'. So, the experience of Colonialism undoubtedly finds expression in the Post Colonial literature.

“Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content . By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it ...” (Fanon 169). Imperial science suggested a colonized world that became in many respects a great laboratory in which the natural world was not only catalogued, studied and observed but also technologically manipulated in the name of commercial transformations on a great scale. But Imperial science however important in justifying Colonial rule for European did not itself define a common political discourse in which the colonizer and the colonized were linked. The knowledge that produced these transformations was a universal yet bounded field of expertise in which local knowledge found no formal place.

In the postcolonial world, the concept of identity as stable and monolithic is replaced by a pluralistic and hybridized one. The concept of hybridity occupies a central place in postcolonial discourse. Hybridity “has been seen as part of the tendency of discourse analysis to dehistoricise and delocate cultures from the temporal, spatial, geographical and linguistic contexts, and to lead to an abstract, globalized concept of the textual that obscures the specificities of particular cultural situations.” (Ashcroft 119-120). It is the indeterminate spaces and in-between subject positions that disrupt and displace established patterns and hegemonic cultural practices. This space questions essentialist notions of identity and conceptualization of purity and originality in culture.

Frantz Fanon argues that the colonial encounter gives birth to a psychological dependency among the colonized subjects in their futile attempt to become ‘white’. They take on western values, religion and practices of the white man and reject their own culture. In Fanon’s phrase, the native puts on ‘white masks’.“However, this‘mask’ over the black skin is not a perfect solution or fit. Fanon argues that the native experiences a schizophrenic condition as a result of this duality.” (Nayar 157-158) Like Frantz Fanon, Homi K Bhabha suggests that hybridity is the necessary attribute of the colonial condition. Bhabha offers analysis of ambivalent colonizer/colonized relations and the mutual construction of their subjectivities. He also argues that hybridity is “not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures...” (Bhabha 113)

Petals of Blood, is written such that it represents different types and classes of people in the Kenyan society during changing historical times: the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial eras. It reveals a society full of betrayals of the peasant class by the powerful ruling elite. Ngugi aims at awakening the revolutionary spirit among Kenyans similar to that

of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (Mau Mau) freedom fighters during the battle against the European settlers for independence. This national consciousness is modeled on Frantz Fanon's conception of the writer as a native intellectual who is in one of the three phases: the first phase which is characterized by the writer's unqualified assimilation, the second phase where the writer is 'disturbed but decides to remember who he is' by just recalling the past life of his people and the third phase which is the fighting phase where the writer becomes an 'awakener of the people' (Fanon 40-41).

In his essay from *Decolonizing the Mind*, titled 'The Language of African Fiction', while commenting on the language crisis he found himself in, Ngugi posed, "I knew whom I was writing about but whom was I writing for?" (Ngugi 72). *Petals of Blood*, the African Epic, reconstructs a nation's history with all its woes and wounds from the pre-colonial faithfulness to the post-colonial betrayals. Here, Ngugi constructs a chronicle of exploitation and of struggles for liberation, notably the resistance against imposition of British rule and the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950's. Kenya of *Petals of Blood* is a land of greed and corruption with a handful turncoat who ruthlessly impose their will on the many to exploit them. *Petals* appear as the symbol of purity, of inspiration, and of purification; the man (comprador bourgeoisie) who deflowers a virgin by force flowers himself in blood.

Petals of Blood deals in the main with neo-colonialism in all its manifestations: oppression, exploitation, social abuse and injustice and thus "...it probes the history of the heroic struggles of the people of Kenya, from pre colonial times to the present day, within a comprehensive cultural perspective which embraces the political, religious, economic and social life of Kenya". (Pandurang 132). Ngugi hopes that out of *Petals of Blood*, Kenyans (Africans) might gather 'petals of revolutionary love'. Ravindar Kumar Gill in one of his articles on *Petals of Blood* says "In the world of *Petals of Blood* nothing is free and the slogan 'eat or be eaten' is commonplace."

Petals of Blood represents Ngugi's anti-imperialist consciousness, which is a part of his dialectical design. New order brings only hunger, pauperization and violence disguised as capitalist development. The centre of Ngugi's thematic concern and his schematic structure is the role of the educated elite, here represented especially by Chui, Munira, Karega, and Joseph, all of whom go (at various times) to Siriana Secondary School. This old-boy tie (statistically or 'realistically' improbable, but structurally indispensable) allows Ngugi to make a series of comparisons between the characters as individuals, and also between them as representative members of the intellectual elite making significantly different political choices.

Michel Foucault opines that over the past few centuries the forms of power interplay have undergone a tremendous transformation. Being written in the realistic context of 1970s, Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* is a novel visioning the inversion of the colonial and the subsequently racial power-play in South Africa whose history since the advent of colonization till 1990s had been nothing but a chronicle of racism, violence, bloodshed, slavery, oppression and exploitation of the South African blacks by the white English colonizers in general. In the narrative, the blacks become revolutionary and the whites are placed aside. Thus, the whole scenario turns into a subverted topsy turvy situation: now the blacks become powerful whereas the whites powerless; slaves replace masters' position and vice versa; the blacks are in relaxed mood, while the whites are struggling for existence; the blacks become oppressors, while the whites oppressed. Such inversion and manipulation of the racio-political power-play affect the refugee Smales in the county of July's people and thus metaphorically foreshadow the re-making of history or decolonization in South African context. Here, the hypothesis is that the Smales' displacement to July's village and their subsequent reliance on him as their translator and protector dramatize an inversion of power that suggests Hegelian dialectical collapsing of the Smales' prior position of dominance and July's prior position of subordination.

The Smales were the members of a suburban, upper middle class white family living in the midst of South African turmoil and the racial war in the form of decolonization has forced them to flee from their home. Their servant July with whom they always treated well and had a very uncommon relationship offered to guide the victim family to his remote village. The Smales, having no other options, accepted July's offer and ran in haste and confusion to the dearth village. They knew little of the drastic adjustments they would have to make in order to survive in July's rustic village. Ironically, at the social level the present relationship of the Smales with their servant July implies the relationship of dependence, defiance, communication and miscommunication. It also dramatizes the broader political, economic and sexual power dynamics underscoring the white's racial rule of 'apartheid' and the black's resistance to it. In other words, the 'master/slave' relationship translates or maps onto comparable relationships of power. Now as the balance of power shifts, the former masters and the former servant must re-think the structure of their new relationship and the Smales must be confronted with their most basic assumptions about the way that the blacks and the whites should interact. In this regard, Gordimer employs a paradoxical mingling of 'continuity' and 'change' in order to introduce the Smales' unsettling immersion into a foreign class structure. The setting changes that not only

foregrounds the correspondence between the place and the formation of identity, but also introduces the inversion of power that characterizes the Smales' new dependence on July.

Among the many implications of the master-slave dialectic, there is the idea of having reciprocity or mutual dependence between the master and the slave; rather than a blanket opposition of dominance to subordination. The slave ironically shares with the master's power, because the master defines himself only in opposition to the slave. According to Hegelian dialect, the 'thesis' of the Smales and the 'antithesis' of July are merged into a 'synthesis' in which both fashions depend upon each other for the formation and legitimization of identity. The master-servant relationship and its complicated systems of dependency and complicity thus function perhaps as a metonymy for the broader power struggles that can be 'displaced' or mapped onto other contexts—namely the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the white and the black.

The most radical adjustment in which the couple has the greatest trouble in accepting—is their newfound subservience to July. He has become their host, their saviour, and their keeper. When July realizes the power he now holds, he takes advantages of the situation. Whether it is done intentionally or unintentionally, it is hard to decipher. Bam and Maureen are extremely frustrated over their loss of superiority and control, and their true racist views are uncovered and made far more obvious than when they were living in the city. We have the universal phenomenon that power corrupts and circulates, and thus affects human psychology. It is used both as a means of oppression and resistance/vengeance. Here, it is apparent in July who uses and abuses power in different circumstances. It is as if the inversion of power and strength emerged as a blessing (for him) from God as a reward of the black's having been oppressed, degraded and subordinated by the whites for hundreds of years. The characters in the novel are continually forced to negotiate with one another about the new circumstances, and Gordimer makes use of the awkward communication between the whites and the blacks those results from a new power-structure and the language barrier between them to illustrate the discomfort of that negotiation.

Thus, the overall impact of inversion of the colonial and racial power-play in this visionary narrative is negative, horrifying, and pessimistic. In other words, the future society Gordimer leaves us with is one of absolute chaos and unmitigated hatred. Even reasons for potential optimism are lost as time progresses and old foundations crumble.

Published in 1961, just one year before Trinidad achieved independence within the British Commonwealth, *A House for Mr. Biswas* recounts the struggles for independence that marked the lives of most colonials in the decades after the Second World War. Mr. Biswas's search for order and meaning is simultaneously a discovery of the open possibilities of colonial Trinidad. V.S. Naipaul's fiction deals with postcolonial displacement and homelessness resulting from diverse diasporic movements. In his novels, new cultural negotiation resulting from multicultural mixing of migrants in changed geographical and cultural space have been extensively explored. As these people are displaced from their homeland, their pasts can be revisited and realized only in partial and fragmented ways.

The postcolonial discourse of identity questions stable point of reference and acknowledges the destabilization and fragmentation affecting the concept of identity. In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said agrees upon the shifting nature of identity. Identity is always in progress, fluctuating between differences. "No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind" (Said 407). Thus, instead of positing identity in a pure, settled and unproblematic ground, we have to challenge essential models of identity.

Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* deals with Mr Biswas' search for identity in the multi-racial society of Trinidad and the disintegration of the Tulsi family under the impact of westernization. In the novel, the story of the Tulsi household is the story of the consolidation of Indian diaspora in Trinidad, its confrontation with western culture and its final disintegration. The novel shows the dilution of Hinduism in the expatriate Indian community as a result of its contact with the surrounding creole society which imitates the Western life style, follows Christianity and speaks English. The novel shows the endeavour of the first generation immigrants to preserve the Indian way of life which gradually disintegrates when the Creole world outside influences the members of the next generations. As a result of the process of assimilation and the impact of the west-oriented culture in Trinidad, certain aspects of Hindu culture take new forms that share aspects of both the cultures which ultimately lead to cultural hybridity. The westernized creole culture of Trinidadian society slowly weakens the traditional Hindu beliefs and customs. Naipaul presents the picture of hybridization and the disintegration of the orthodox Hindu rites and rituals. Indians in a multicultural space where the idea of a stable cultural identity is questioned throughout. The novel exemplifies the dynamic and fluid nature of social

spaces by depicting such spaces as constantly being negotiated and hybridized and also shows the articulation of social meanings and identities in a hybrid existence.

Some things cannot be taught, they must be experienced. Colonialism is one such experience which many countries of the world witnessed for centuries. Even with much of the dangers associated with postcolonial theory such as it being institutionalized by pressure being put on a limited number of critics or its wrong use by the Western countries for their own benefit, it has become one of the most prominent areas of study and it indeed broadens the perspective of human mind. Nothing ever becomes real until it is experienced and this holds so true in context of the colonial experience in the Post Colonial Literature. In his interview with Jerome Brooks, Chinua Achebe was so right to say, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."

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