

Post-colonial Indian Writing in English Literature and Nationalism

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on the topic, “Postcolonial thinking in Indian English Literature and its impact on Nationalism”. The core content is organised under four main subdivisions. The first part throws light on the meaning and definition of the term “Post colonialism”. The significance of the term in the broad area of “literature” is explained. The second part attempts to trace the origin and the development of “Post colonial theory”. The contributions of the Postcolonial theorists like Fanon Frantz, Edward Said and Peter Barry are analysed. The main themes of “Postcolonial Literature” like ‘Racism’, ‘Nationalism’ and ‘Ethnicism’ are also discussed. The third part analyses the postcolonial Indian English authors like Salman Rushdie and Anita Desai with special reference to their novels “Midnight Children” and “Cry the Peacock” respectively. The final part analyses the impact created by the Postcolonial Indian English writers on the Indian readers with regard to ‘Nationalism’.

Keywords: Post colonialism, Postcolonial Literary theory, post-colonial theorists, Post-colonial Indian English writers, Post colonialism and Nationalism.

Introduction

The broad meaning of the term “Post colonialism” can be best understood by tracing the etymology of the words, “Post” and “Colony”. The word “Post” is derived from the Latin term “Postis”, which means “after” or “behind”. The word “Colony” takes its origin from the Latin term “Colonus”, which refers to “a cultivator, a planter or a settler in a new land”. Literally, the term “Post colonialism” refers to the “period after colonialism”. Broadly, the term “Post colonialism” refers to “the ways in which race, ethnicity, culture and human identity itself are represented in the modern era, after many colonized countries gained their independence.

Until the mid-twentieth century, the European powers exerted their dominance over the vast regions of Asia, Africa and South America. The dominance was confined not only to the political lives of the people, but also extended to the cultural, economic and social living conditions of the colonized people. A massive struggle in the colonized nations resulted in the overthrow of the colonial rule. These liberated nations are known as “Postcolonial”, suggesting “liberation from colonialism and imperialism”. In this way, the term, “Postcoloniality” can be defined as,

...the historical, cultural, economical, political and actual

living conditions of the newly independent nations.

Postcolonial Literature

Until the lion learns how to write;
every story will glorify the hunter.

These words of Nozipo Maraire, stresses the necessity and significance of Postcolonial Literature. The term “Postcolonial Literature” refers to “the literature produced by the people, who were formerly colonised and subjugated”. In other words, “Postcolonial Literature”, refers to “the body of works by the colonised people to annihilate the influences exerted by the colonizers in their lives”. Postcolonial Literature emerged in the mid-twentieth century, when many colonised nations were fighting for their liberation from the colonisers. Helen Gilbert’s definition of “Postcolonialism” reads as,

It is the term that indicates a degree of agency or a programme of resistance, against cultural domination, signals the existence of a particular historical legacy, a stage in a culture’s transition into a modern nation state.

The term “Postcolonial” has become a convenient term to describe any kind of resistance against class, race and gender oppression. The Australian critics Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffins enlist the purpose of the term “Postcolonial” as,

.....to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by the European imperial aggression.

Language Employed By The Postcolonial Writers

Postcolonial writers differ in their view of the choice of language in Postcolonial writings. Some writers stress the use of native language in their works. These writers strongly believe that their age old customs, manners and traditions can be expressed best in their native language. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, a Post colonialist writer from Kenya is one such writer who had a successful start in the English language. Ngugi then ceased to write in English and started writing in Gikuyu, a language spoken primarily by the Kikuyu people of Kenya.

Another set of writers prefer the usage of the language of the colonisers, may it be English or French. These writers wanted to enhance the inter-nation communication, by writing in English. They aim at redirecting the tool of ‘language’ against the colonisers. The Postcolonial English writers employ the colonisers’ language, to oppose the colonisers and to rectify the damages created by them in the historical, social, cultural and economical sects. However, these writers transform the English language, so as to create a native experience. Postcolonial writers like Raja

Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Chinua Achebe are of the view that the imperial language need to be transformed in order to suit the native readers. Therefore, they employed the techniques of “appropriation” and “nativisation” of the English language. In his foreword to “Kanthapura”, Raja Rao writes as,

One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own, the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought – movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien; yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before- but not of our emotional make up.

The Postcolonial writings are replete with regional dialects and native phrases so as to suit the native readers. Chinua Achebe, a renowned Postcolonial writer, expresses his view as

.....the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new surroundings. (Achebe, 223).

However, modifying the imperial language so as to suit the native cultural experience is a scholastic process.

Postcolonial Theory

“Postcolonialism” as a “critical literary theory emerged in the mid-twentieth century. Postcolonial theory is a literary theory or critical approach, which focuses on the literature produced by the countries, which were once colonised. In some instances, it also deals with the literature written by the colonizing countries, which takes “colonies and their people” as the subject matter. The Australian critics. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffins, summarise the essence of “Postcolonial theory” in a nutshell as,

Postcolonial theory involves discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being. None of these is ‘essentially’ postcolonial, but together they form the complex fabric of the field.

The ancestry of Postcolonial criticism can be traced to Frantz Fanon's "The Wretched of the Earth", published in French, in 1961. However, Edward Said's book, "Orientalism", published in 1978, is considered as the foundational work in Postcolonial studies. Peter Barry in his comments on Said's "Orientalism" says as,

Edward Said's "Orientalism", is a specific expose of the Eurocentric Universalism, which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western, and the inferiority of what is not.

The major exponents of "Postcolonial theory" are Robert J.C. Young, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi. K. Bhabha. These critics have contributed a lot to the field of Post colonial discourse.

Postcolonial Indian English Literature

The Indian subcontinent remained under the British Imperial rule for more than two hundred years. During the imperial rule, the natives were subjected to a number of harassments. Especially, the cultural and moral lives of the natives were deeply disfigured. Accordingly, the Indian writers emerged with a view to unite Indians and to wipe out the colonial perspectives. As there were many regional languages in India, the Indian writers chose English as the medium of their writings. The literature produced by the Indian writers in English, came to be known as "Indian English Literature". The early works of the Indian English authors were set against the backdrop of the "Postcolonial" themes of 'Nationalism', 'Racism,' 'Ethnicism' and 'cultural Identity. The writers also dealt with a variety of sub-themes such as 'rootlessness', 'alienation', 'gender discrimination', 'labour exploitation', 'hybridity', 'poverty', 'corruption', 'marginalism' and so on. Among the various genres of Postcolonial Indian English Literature, the genre of 'novel', emerged as the most successful and effective one. Amit Chaudhuri, in his book, "The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature", expresses his view about novel as,

The Postcolonial novel, becomes a trope for an ideal hybridity by which the West celebrates not so much Indianness, whatever that infinitely complex thing is, but its own historical quest, its reinterpretation of itself.

The early exponents of Postcolonial Indian English Literature are Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and so on. The writers of the modern age are Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor and so on. The Postcolonial Indian English Literature gave enormous scope for the women writers. The women writers who received universal recognition are Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and so on.

Salman Rushdie's second novel, "Midnight's Children", published in 1981, ushered a new trend in the Postcolonial writings through the application of a

technique named ‘ magical realism’. The Cuban novelist, Alejo Carpentier, defines the term ‘ magical realism’ as,

....an unexpected alteration of reality....,
an unaccustomed insight that is singularly
favoured by the unexpected richness of reality
or an amplification of the scale and
categories of reality.

The technique of ‘magical realism’ is used by the Indian English Writers as a Postcolonial effort to resist the European notions of realism. ‘Magical realism’ promotes hybridity of cultures by defamiliarising the readers and by broadening their perspective of the global world.

The novel is narrated by the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, who stands as a representative of the new class of Indian Youths after independence. By endowing the protagonist with magical powers, the novelist speculates on a variety of themes like ‘nationalism’, ‘realism’, ‘partition’, ‘politics’, and so on. The novelist asserts the fact that, in the Postcolonial Indian scene, the growth and development of each and every individual is directly proportional to the wholesome development of the nation.

The women writers of the Postcolonial Indian English Literature, switched on to the microscopic themes of ‘ alienation’, ‘poverty’, ‘isolation’ and ‘disillusionment’ in the familial lives of the Indian folk. Anita Desai’s first novel, “Cry the Peacock”, published in 1963, echoes the sufferings and agony of the Indian women folk. Maya, the woman protagonist of the novel, experiences an unhappy marital life. Maya has been married to a middle-aged lawyer named Gautama, who devotes much of his time to his career. The astrologer’s prediction about Maya’s early demise, makes her nervous. She wants to enjoy life to the fullest, with this minimal time. However, all her sexual advances has a cold response from Gautama. In a sense of dejection, Maya is driven insane, which leads to Gautama’s tragic death. Maya’s sense of ‘alienation’ and ‘rootlessness’ reflects the plight of the entire Indian womenfolk. In his book, “The Second Sex”, Simone de Beauvoir, says as,

One is not born but rather becomes a woman.
No biological, psychological or economic fate
determines the figure that the human female
presents in society, it is civilization as a
whole that produces this creature.

In this way, the Postcolonial Indian English authors composed their works with a view to voice the sufferings of the under privileged, in order to uplift them, thereby contributing to the growth of the nation, both culturally and socially.

Conclusion

The Oxford Dictionary of the English language defines the term “nationalism” as,

...a sense of identification with one's own nation and to extend one's support for its interests; especially to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations.

Having relieved themselves from the manacles of Imperialism, the Indian people rejoiced and enjoyed the fresh air of freedom with a sense of reverence towards the nation. But this unity was soon shaken up by the various anti-social elements, who encouraged a sense of discrimination in the minds of the Indians in terms of race, gender, caste, colour, creed, region, language and so on. The anti-nationalist forces wanted to divide people so as to obstruct the progress of the country. Hence, the people of India must bear in mind the importance of "Unity"; which alone can pave way for the nation's progress. In the book, "Rise Up and Salute the Sun", Suzy Kassem, writes as,

Mankind should always stay united, standing shoulder to shoulder so evil can never cheat and divide them.

In this regard, Literature plays an important role in the national integration of a country. Albert Camus expresses his view about the responsibility of the writers as,

...the purpose of a writer is to protect the civilization from destroying itself.

It is possible only for a writer to shape the minds of the readers, so as to lead them towards a wholistic view of "Nationalism". The Postcolonial Indian writers continue to exert a dominant influence in the Indian scenario, by inculcating the values and significance of "Nationalism".

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