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Postcolonial study of selected works of Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Markandaya, Chinua Achebe and Alex Haley

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Abstract : *Postcolonial study is the study of interaction between European nations and societies they colonized. This interaction can be studied in various contexts; one of them is literature.*

*Postcolonial literature is very closely related to Postcolonial theory. In this research, Postcolonial theory has been applied to four works namely - **Sea of Poppies** by Amitav Ghosh, **Nectar in a Sieve** by Kamala Markandaya, **Things Fall Apart** by Chinua Achebe and **Roots** by Alex Haley.*

We come across the following Postcolonial features in the afore-mentioned novels - awareness of representation of

non-European as immoral, exotic 'other'; presentation of native culture; exploitation of natives; impact of colonial policies, psychological effects of colonization (hybridity and alienation); conscious breaking of colonizer's language and inclusion of native diction.

Thus, similar in their essential features the works voice the resistance among the natives against colonization.

Key words : *Postcolonial study, exotic, native, hybridity, alienation, resistance.*

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Introduction :

Postcolonial study is the study of interaction between European nations and societies they colonized. This interaction can be studied in various contexts; one of them is literature.

Postcolonial literature refers to writings of nations, peoples, cultures, who were once colonized by European powers. It is very closely related to the Postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial theory is an attempt to:

- Uncover colonial ideologies in European texts or,
- Explore strategies of resistance in native texts against colonialism.

According to leading postcolonial theorist Edward Said the colonizers “constructed” an image of the natives, the way they saw them, and called this image-’Orient’. According to him “Under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western Hegemony over the Orient..there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical theses...”(Said, Mongia:25).

Gayatri Spivak has stated, on this construction of image, that “when a cultural identity is thrust upon one because the centre wants an identifiable margin..It should then be pointed out that what is being negotiated here is not even a race or a social type’..but an economic principle of identification through separation”(Spivak, Mongia : 200)

According to Michael Foucault, the traits this type of ‘construct’ tries to identify “ are not the exclusive generic characteristics of an individual, a sentiment or an idea, which permit us to qualify them as ‘Greek’ or ‘English’(or third world) rather, it seeks the subtle, singular and sub individual marks that might possibly intersect in them to form a network that is difficult to unravel”(Foucault. qtd. by Spivak, Mongia : 200). Homi Bhabha muses that “the predominant strategic function” of colonial discourse “is the creation of a space for a ‘subject peoples’...It seeks authorisation for its strategies by the production of knowledges of colonizer and colonized which are stereotypical but antithetically valued. The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.” In marking out a ‘subject nation’, this discourse “appropriates, directs and dominates its various spheres of activity.”(41) Postcolonial theory counters these ‘constructs’ of colonial discourse. We have applied postcolonial theory to select texts, in order to

explore the writers’ responses (mostly native) to colonialism and to the colonial discourse.

Objective:

The project proposes to make a postcolonial study of the selected works of the following authors:

Amitav Ghosh, Kamala Markandaya, Chinua Achebe and Alex Haley, with reference to ***Sea of Poppies***, ***Nectar in a Sieve***, ***Things Fall Apart***, and ***Roots*** respectively.

The aim in this project is to trace postcolonial features in the novels and analyze how these novelists have expressed their colonial experience.

About The Novels

Sea of Poppies:

- Backdrop of the novel is the first Opium War in 1838, which signifies the British fetish for control over the world and its money markets. Events in the novel occur on the eve of this war in 1838 when Imperial Britain ruled India and forced her downtrodden people to cultivate fields of poppies instead of life sustaining crops.
- At the heart of the saga is an old slaving ship, Ibis. Its destiny is a tumultuous voyage across the Indian Ocean with its oddly assorted crew of sailors, coolies and convicts.
- Some of the important characters whose personal lives fill the pages are – Deeti who is a widow, Kalua the man she is running away with, Neel Rattan Halidar- a bankrupt landowner, Ah Fatt- a half Chinese half Parsi, the American sailor Zachary Reid- son of a freed slave, the Lascar Serang Ali and the orphaned French girl Paulette.
- Ghosh’s well researched details of life in nineteenth century India incarnate a piece of history that includes the humble mud walled homes in rural areas to the vivid streets of Calcutta, reverberating with the underlying political tensions and collision of moral values

Nectar in a Sieve:

- It is one of the great hunger novels written after independence exposing the British indifference towards their colonial subjects.
- Rukmani is the narrator of the novel. She tells her life-story in a reminiscent mood and recollects the events long after they have happened. For the most part the novel deals with the story of Rukmani's marriage with Nathan and their efforts to survive not only the vagaries of nature but also the disturbances caused by the tannery recently set up near the village.

Things Fall Apart:

- It deals with Nigerian encounter with colonialism.
- It mirrors a society at the crossroads of culture. The dilemma of choosing between the native culture and the Christian life of colonial masters has been brought out poignantly through the life of Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel.

Roots:

- It is the true story of an African native who is kidnapped and enslaved. His life with his American masters and that of his descendants has been narrated vividly.
- This novel presents an account of the life of Kunta Kinte, a young African boy captured and shipped to United States to work as a slave.
- The novel also presents life of his descendents.
- Kunta Kinte's history is carried from generation to generation as the family flourishes. Alex Haley of the seventh generation then rediscovers this history, which takes the form of the novel **Roots**.

Findings :

After analyzing the works according to the Postcolonial Theory we discovered following similarities in them-

- **Awareness of Representation of non-European as the exotic, immoral 'other':**

The whites considered 'the orient' to be the exotic 'other'. In his work **Orientalism**, Said says that the vast tradition of western 'constructions' of the orient is actually a production of Western discourse, a means of self-definition of western culture and of justifying imperial domination of Oriental peoples (Said, Mongia : 3). This discourse, rather than realistically portraying the Eastern 'other', constructs them based upon Western anxieties and preoccupations. Said sharply critiques the western image of the Oriental as 'irrational, depraved (fallen), child-like, 'different'; which has allowed the west to define itself as 'rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'. (40)

In the novels selected for this study we find that there is an awareness of the existence of this prejudiced, racial, Eurocentric ideology. In **Roots**, for instance, there is a European engaged in slave-trade who utters the following lines about the enslaved natives-

"Whoever would successfully manage slaves, must first understand that their African pasts of living in jungles with animals gave them a natural inheritance of stupidity, laziness and unclean habits, and that the Christian duty of those God had blessed with superiority was to teach these creatures some sense of discipline, morality and respect for work".

- **Presentation of Native Culture:**

In a chapter entitled 'On National culture' (speech to the Congress of Black African Writers in 1959), Fanon says that colonialism entirely disrupts the cultural life of a conquered people. He further says that "Every effort is made to bring the colonised person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behaviour, to recognise the unreality of his 'nation', and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure." ([/sfr-21.org/nationalculture.html](http://sfr-21.org/nationalculture.html). April 2011).

In order to break the image of natives portrayed by the whites, the native authors provide an illuminating insight into their native cultures in a bid to present the correct picture.

Amitav Ghosh relegates his British colonists to the margins of his story, giving pride of place to the neglected subjects of the imperial enterprise: colonialism's impoverished, and usually coloured victims. He writes with great compassion and empathy about members of the underprivileged class, most of all the migrants. Ghosh has given a vivid description of nineteenth century Indian food, people, their style of living, the different classes of Indian society and their social norms.

In *Nectar in a Sieve* we get to know extensively about the work culture of the rural masses of India. The religious, fatalistic and God-fearing attitude of people has also been highlighted by Kamala Markandaya.

Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* has showcased the Igbo culture, its customs and traditions which were in existence prior to colonization.

In *Roots* Alex Haley captures a unified African society in its multi-dimensional aspects, which includes their belief in charms, amulets and religious rites, and their dependence on agriculture, animal husbandry and hunting for livelihood. Their oral culture of using drum-talk as means of communicating important news and their oral tradition of passing on knowledge from one generation to another, has also been portrayed in this novel.

- **Exploitation of Natives:**

In their works, these novelists have unflinchingly exposed the exploitative measures employed by colonizers.

In *Sea of Poppies* we are shown how Neel Rattan Halder, the Raja of Raskhali estate was falsely convicted of forgery and exiled to Mauritius.

Kamala Markandaya is not vociferous in her resistance against colonialism but she too mentions

the following instance of exploitation-Raja was beaten to death for an instance of petty theft by chowkidars at the tannery, while the insensitive tannery officials refused to take any responsibility for the cruel act.

The ruthless massacre of Nigerian people by the British during the late 1800s and the early 1900s, in a bid to establish their empire, has found expression in *Things Fall Apart*. How the British sabotaged the Igbo tradition and beliefs so as to propagate Christianity has also been shown by Chinua Achebe.

Alex Haley's presentation of how Africans were brutally captured, shipped and sold as slaves in the American markets in his novel *Roots* is terrifying in its undiluted authenticity.

- **Impact of Colonial Policies:**

The colonial policies had far-reaching effects on the colonies.

In *Sea of Poppies* we are shown that opium - an important source of income for Britain - was grown on a large scale in India. It took up much of the cultivable land. Farmers, who used to consume what they grew, were denied their bread; instead, they were forced to grow opium for petty sums of money.

Industrialization accompanied British occupation everywhere. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, we see how the establishment of the tannery, which is symbolic of industrialization ruins the tranquility of the village, leads to price hike and to traffic in illicit relationships.

The theme of religious conversion in Igbo community is a dominant theme in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It is representative of the mass conversions to Christianity taking place in Southern Africa under the British occupation.

Through *Roots* we get to know that slaves were looked upon as lucrative investments by the white colonialists. Western parts of Africa used to be their major slave - catching grounds.

- **Psychological / Cultural effects of colonization:**

Hybridity and *Alienation* are the two major psychological and cultural effects of colonization. While in hybridity, we see the co-existence of traits of two different cultures in a person, in alienation a person may become strongly attached to his own culture and get separated from the society evolving around him. Hybridity, thus, can be called an interaction between two cultures while alienation arises from a clash of cultures. According to Homi Bhabha, hybridity express a state of 'in betweenness' as in a person who stands between two cultures. Bhabha critiques the presumed dichotomies between centre and periphery, colonized and colonizers, self and other, borrowing from deconstruction, the argument that these are false binaries. He proposes instead a dialogic model of nationalities, ethnicities, and identities characterized by what he calls 'hybridity'; that is, they are something new, emerging from a 'Third Space' to interrogate the givens of the past. In his work *The Location of Culture* he states-

'The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'. The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to ... a 'received' tradition. The borderline engagements of cultural difference

may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress'. .'
(prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/bhabha/location1.html. April 2011)

The character Paulette from ***Sea of Poppies*** is an ideal example of hybridity. Paulette born of French parents, brought up in India, had strong liking for Indian people and their way of living. At the same time, her independent adventurous spirit shows the Western element in her character. Amitav Ghosh has also created a typical native, Baboo Nobokrishna Panda who is deep into Indian spirituality but 'preferred to be spoken to in English and liked to be addressed by the 'anglice' of his name, which was Nob Kissin Pander'.

The British doctor Kennington in ***Nectar a Sieve*** worked in an Indian village. He was unsure whether India or England was his country.

Alienation is evident in Okonkwo life, the protagonist of ***Things Fall Apart***. While his society is more receptive to the changes which come with the arrival of the British, he cannot accept these changes and this drives him to suicide.

Kunta Kinte in ***Roots*** holds on to his roots even while working as a slave in a foreign land. This alienates him from his wife and the other slaves.

- **Conscious breaking of colonizer's language is an important postcolonial tool of the authors:** Alex Haley in ***Roots*** has distorted the English language by showing how the natives speak it. For example- 'He gimme half' (he gave me half), 'I ain't no good at it' (I am no good at it), 'we done made too dollars' (we have made two dollars).

- **Inclusion of native words** – words like 'udu' (a clay pot), 'ekwe' (a drum), 'chi' (a cultural concept), have been used in ***Things Fall Apart***. 'Ko' (a stringed musical instrument), 'tilo'

(sun), 'bolongo' (river) are few examples of the native words featuring in **Roots**. By giving parity to the native words and phrases with the English language, these authors assert the validity of their native cultures.

Conclusion :

The novelists have reacted to the discourse of colonization in their literary works. In **Sea of Poppies** we have parallel stories which trace the colonial effect on the lives of people belonging to different strata of Indian society. Kamala Markandaya in **Nectar in a Sieve** presents the poverty – stricken picture of India. She has also incorporated themes of exodus and rootlessness in her narrative.

Things Fall Apart considers black society in transition, poised between a past heroic age, free from white denomination, and a new period of colonial contact. Alex Haley has championed the cause of Black Americans in his novel **Roots** and has exposed the cruelties of the 'civilized colonialists'.

The authors of these novels belong to different nations spread across the globe. Moreover, they are products of different literary era but they document similar experience and in their essential traits they are akin to each other. It is this similarity that we have traced in our project.

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