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### Description of Module

Subject Name	<b>Women's Studies</b>
Paper Name	<b>Women and Literature</b>
Module Name/Title	<b>Postcolonialism and Feminist theory</b>
Module Id	Paper-2, Module-13
Pre-requisites	The reader is expected to have some knowledge of the impact of the British Rule in India
Objectives	To make the readers aware of the intersections of feminism & postcolonialism

### Postcolonialism and Feminist Theory

Since about the nineties postcolonial theory and criticism has had a major impact on literary and social studies. Words like postcolonial studies, postcolonial literature or postcolonial cinema are frequently encountered. Students of literature, language, social sciences and law now see their subject in a new light thanks to postcolonial theory. The insights from postcolonial theory are so rich that they illuminate not only the abstract world of our ideas but also the everyday world of our habits and practices. Thus

how we dress the way we do, how we view things in terms of inferior-superior dichotomy, why we consider some colours and shapes more important than others can all be partly explained by postcolonial theory.

### **Basic Terms**

The basic word in postcolonial is colony. The word colony gives us many more words namely colonize, colonial, colonizer, colonization, decolonize and decolonization. In the same way the prefix post gives us words like post-colonial and postcolonial, the hyphen and no hyphen in this case sometimes suggesting a different range of meanings of words. The colony is to be seen in relation to the mother country. Thus if India was the colony of Britain, then Britain was the mother country. If France was the mother country, Algeria was its colony. Colonizers were people in control of the colony: the British and French colonizers in most cases. The word colonial is used in conjunction with other words: colonial masters, colonial people, colonial period, colonial. Decolonization refers to a particular phase in history when a number of countries started winning their independence from powerful colonial powers like Britain and France. Many of these countries, mostly from Asia and Africa, achieved their independence after 1940. However, the word decolonization is also used to refer to the shedding of many colonial practices, beliefs and habits, a process not easily accomplished. As such, decolonization of the mind, is an ongoing process and is very complex in nature.

The word colonialism can also be differentiated from words like imperialism, neo-colonialism and internal colonialism, the last term to be seen in relation to nationalism. Colonialism refers to occupation of lands with the significant physical presence of the colonizers; whereas imperialism is more a form of ideology in which the actual presence of colonizers in the colony may not be necessary, but the 'colony', especially its economy, may still be controlled by the imperial power. Whereas the phase of colonialism may well be over—one reason being the resistance encountered by the rulers and the other being the expensive nature of the colonial game—imperialism continues to define relationships between independent nations. The cry of globalization, with its important agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), help the cause of imperialism in subtle ways. Neo colonialism is used as a synonym of imperialism, the word neo suggesting the hidden nature of colonialism in which the oppressive presence of colonizers is not noticed by the colonial people but their lives are nevertheless affected by the processes of imperialism. Internal colonialism, on the other hand, refers to nationalism acting like colonialism and applying force to control its own people. It is a known fact of our world that many religious, racial and ethnic groups, often facing discrimination, seek some form of independence, from the dominant power in their land. In turn they are ruled by force and the power relationship between the two unequal groups makes integration of the country a difficult proposition.

### **The Theory and the Theorists**

History bears out that where there is power there is resistance. The questions of power and resistance provide two different directions to postcolonial theory. Among the figures who have focused their attention to resistance, the names of Mohandas Karam Chand Gandhi and Algerian writer and revolutionary Frantz Fanon are very important. Gandhi's concept of non-violence, his use of religious-

spiritual vocabulary, his idea of renunciation and his radical critique of Western civilization provide an interesting narrative in postcolonial theory. Fanon, on the other hand, was no votary of non-violence. A psychoanalyst by training and a revolutionary by conviction, he is a major presence in postcolonial theory.

Fanon's two influential books *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952/1986) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961/1967) put the focus on the effects of colonialism on the colonized people. The effect of the gaze of the colonizers turns the colonized from subject to object. Fanon reports how the names given to him by the white man, the description bestowed on him, the negative epithets like negro or nigger used by the white man "made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men (quoted in McLeod 2007:20)." What Fanon painfully learnt was that his identity was being made by somebody else. It is the white man who was defining his identity. He ceased to be a man like other men and became an object instead.

Fanon sees Hegel's concept of self and other and identity formation in terms of race and observes its disastrous consequences for the black native. The person with the black skin, as Fanon ruefully learns, "wants to be like the master. Therefore he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. In Hegel the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object (1967, 221 note/ Quoted in Gandhi 1998: 20-21). In other words, the slave's existence depends totally on the master. He has internalized his master's personality to such an extent that he has lost his own.

The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is generally considered to be the key moment in the history of postcolonial studies. It is truly a study of the power of colonial discourses. This book received a lot of critical attention, both positive as well as negative. Said defined orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident(2)." In other words, the binary opposition between the East and the West presents the East as the West's contrasting idea and its other. The othering of the Orient has taken place through West's representation of it especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Said further defines Orientalism as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient(3)." The Orient, as Said argues, has been a Western construction and is defined by its despotism, splendor, cruelty and sensuality. The people in the East do not have individual characteristics. They rather fall into predictable types. The East has also been timeless and unchanging. It has also been a Western fantasy. It has helped define the West as democratic, liberated and enlightened.

Said acknowledges his debt to Michel Foucault's concept of discourse in his analysis of the Western representations of the East. But whereas Foucault's focus was on power transforming knowledge, Said's concern, as Leela Gandhi argues in her book *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (1998) was in critiquing the conditions "under which knowledge might be transformed and vitiated through the contagion of power...Said takes Orientalism as a paradigmatic instance of institutionalized and 'degraded' knowledge to be opposed through an adversarial or oppositional counter-knowledge

(Gandhi:75-6).” The book is written in a poststructural context though it presents its complex ideas in very lucid language.

Said’s book was a major influence on the study of marginality, a fact affirmed by no less a critic than Gayatri Spivak. Suddenly marginality became a buzz word, a literary fashion in literary studies. Different marginal groups, and they included not only ethnic groups but also women, in different parts of the world could be studied using insights from Said’s book.

Said has often been criticized for not sufficiently highlighting the issue of resistance in his account. Marxist critic Aijaz Ahmad has especially been a very bitter critic of Said for not taking note of the reception of the Western representations by the colonized people. In the same way even the West appears a monolithic category in Said’s work, say his critics. Said’s inadequate attention to the Western women’s representations of the Orient is also noted by his critics.

In his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) Said addressed the issue of resistance. He introduced the postcolonial concept of contrapuntal reading of texts. A contrapuntal reading takes into account “both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded—in *L’Etranger*, for example, the whole previous history of France’s colonialism and its destruction of the Algerian state, and the later emergence of an independent Algeria (Which Camus opposed) (Said {1993}1994:79).” Said’s reading of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, in which he uncovers the novel’s relationship to colonies and the Empire, is a classic example of contrapuntal reading. He demonstrated a method of reading which was picked by other critics.

Fanon and Said are not the only influential figures in postcolonial theory. Indian critic Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak are the other important names in postcolonial theory. Mention must also be made of the highly talked about book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Triffin.

### **Postcolonialism, Nationalism and the Woman Question**

Any history of colonial domination will not be complete without mentioning the history of resistance against colonial rule. In most countries with a history of colonialism there has also been a phase of a struggle against colonial rule. We are familiar with the Indian freedom struggle which gradually developed momentum in the early twentieth century. The main idea which would gradually unite people in their battle for independence against the colonial rule was the concept of nationalism. It should not come as a surprise that nation and nationalism are the concern of a great number of postcolonial poets, novelists, critics and theorists. As noted by many commentators, the concept of nation is of a fairly recent origin and is related to the phase of industrialization and imperialism. The idea of the nation can also be inculcated in people. The role of many symbols, traditions, narratives and heroes in forging a sense of national identity has been stressed by many commentators. At times this process can be considered very selective by the critics of nationalism. Thus we consider some traditions and some heroes from the past more important than others. These traditions and narratives are



rehearsed on different occasions to develop a sense of national identity. In other words the idea of nation is just not there; efforts are made to develop it, to nurture it and to strengthen it.

The concept of nationalism has also been critiqued from a number of perspectives. Nationalism itself can become a form of domination and can perpetuate many aspects of colonialism. It can claim to speak for the whole nation while in truth it may speak only for the dominant groups in the nation. A nation, especially in our post-colonial phase, can consist of diverse groups. People belonging to different ethnic, linguistic, sexual and cultural identities can live in a country but nationalism often speaks the language of the most dominant group. While discussing *Orientalism*, we noted the critics' interest in marginality studies. The dominant voices in the nation can marginalize many weaker groups.

This has implications for women. Nations have often been represented in terms of motherhood. We are familiar with expressions like 'Mother Britannia' or 'Mother India'. The narrative of the freedom struggle has often been presented in patriarchal terms and the contribution of women to it or the process of decolonization has not been sufficiently acknowledged. More recently work by many feminist historians has tried to highlight the narratives of women.

John McLeod summarizes the 'feminist critique of nationalism' offered by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis in their book *Woman Nation-State* (1989). Women appear in 'five major ways' in nationalist discourses:

1. As biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
2. As reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;
3. As participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
4. As signifiers of ethnic/national differences;
5. As participants in national, economic, political and military struggles. (Anthias and Yuval-Davis cited by McLeod:116)

In other words these five categories celebrate women's role as mothers who produce children, especially sons, and their role in passing on the nation's culture to their children. Women are forbidden to marry or have sex outside their religious/ethnic group. Any disrespect to women is considered a disrespect to the entire group because they mark the boundary between groups.

### **Feminism and Postcolonialism**

Both feminism and postcolonialism are concerned with the question of marginality. The colonized native in postcolonial theory and the woman in feminist theory are both marginalized figures. As such both theories, which have developed separately, share some formal patterns. If the woman in feminist theory is replaced by the colonized native in postcolonial theory, the discourse would still retain its form. Both feminism and postcolonialism are oppositional discourses: they have an enemy; they display a tone of anger and an acute sense of historical wrong; and they demand a new historiography.

But whereas feminism made its appearance in the humanities and the social sciences after the second wave feminism, the relationship between feminism and postcolonialism (which became

an academic subject in the nineties) exposed many blind spots in the two perspectives. Feminism looked at through postcolonial lens appeared divided and vulnerable to criticism. Similarly feminism points to many gaps in postcolonial theory. The history of the freedom struggle in India seen through a feminist viewpoint, for example, would appear a little different.

Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (1986) talk about 'a double colonization' of women in colonialism and patriarchy. Double colonization refers to two orders of reality: women are victims of colonial representations and they are equally oppressed by patriarchal norms. Colonialism celebrates male myths like the explorers, empire builders and missionaries. To just take the example of empire builders, great champions of the British Empire like Rudyard Kipling emphasized the importance of physical fitness for the empire-builders.<sup>1</sup> Rana Kabbani's book *Imperial Fictions: Myths of Orient* (1994) argues how the eastern woman, as she appears in the genre of travel writing, is an object of lust who arouses desire. Colonialism and patriarchy combine forces to turn her into an exotic figure. Not that she is any different in the writings of Western women travelers. Western women writers were equally guilty of perpetuating colonial-patriarchal attitudes about the Orient.

Leela Gandhi(1998) identifies "three areas of controversy which fracture the potential unity between postcolonialism and feminism: the debate surrounding the figure of the 'third-world woman';...the 'feminist as imperialist'; and finally, the colonialist deployment of 'feminist criteria' to bolster the appeal of the 'civilizing mission'((82)."

The debate surrounding the 'third-world woman' has generated a lot of controversy. The category of 'third world woman', has been attacked for its ethnocentric bias, for hiding racial prejudices and for stabilizing an old hierarchy in neo orientalist terms. As 'first world' refers to the Western world, Europe and United States of America to be precise, 'third world' refers to countries in Asia and Africa. Said's *Orientalism* has established that the first world in most Western accounts is enlightened, liberated, democratic and rational, the third world is just its opposite. And since postcolonial studies generated a lot of academic interest in the concept of marginality, the figure of the third-world woman appeared to epitomize the very concept of marginality for the Western feminists. She was doubly colonized. However, there are problems in the simple notion of double colonization as critics like Trinh T. Minh-ha, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak have argued. The 'third-world woman' becomes an object which serves the intellectual and discursive interests of the Western feminism. She became a subject of study and a site for creating knowledge. She became a monolithic category. She became an interesting figure because she possessed an otherness which Western feminism demanded. She held the promise of a permanent supply of alterity/otherness for an all too adventurous Western feminism.

The relationship between imperialism and Western feminism has been probed by critics like Gayatri Spivak. In her incisive and truly postcolonial reading of *Jane Eyre* titled "Three Women's Texts and A Critique of Imperialism" (1985) Spivak finds problems in these classic texts at the level of narrative and representation. Jane Eyre can be celebrated in Western feminism for exercising agency, for making her choices, and for her feminism only by suppressing a Creole woman's voice in the novel. That Bertha Mason, the Creole woman, is imprisoned in her house

and she has to die for Jane to marry Edward Rochester reveals the novel's complicity in the imperial project. Western feminism is here blamed for denying agency and the power of representation to the native woman. There have also been some studies which have tried to highlight the contribution to Indian society made by the British memsahibs. Pat Barr's book *The Memsahibs* (1976) considers the role played by the English women in the tough conditions of India. "However, whereas Barr sees only a history of self-empowerment in the figures of the well-meaning memsahibs..., the postcolonial critic is prevented from such unreserved celebration by the recognition that these women's constitution as fully 'individual subjects' is, in the end, inextricable from the hierarchies which inform the imperial project... Their achievements/privileges are predicated upon the relative incivility of the untutored 'Indian female' (Gandhi: 93).

What is more important, the freedom and emancipation of women or the fight against colonialism? In our discussion of nationalist discourses we briefly discussed the patriarchal bias in nationalism. Thus many champions of nationalism were indifferent to the lot of the native women. However, when the colonial masters tried to talk about reform, they were greatly perturbed. Any effort at the Westernization of Indian women met with a lot of resistance. Any effort by the colonial masters to introduce reforms in societal affairs was considered an interference. In his famous work *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), Partha Chatterjee refers to the nationalists' tendency to divide culture into the material and the spiritual sphere. Leela Gandhi aptly sums up Chatterjee's argument: "while it was deemed necessary to cultivate and imitate the material accomplishments of Western civilization, it was compulsory to simultaneously preserve and police the spiritual properties of national culture. And in the catalogue of the nation's spiritual effects, the home and its keeper acquired a troublesome pre-eminence (96)." This explains why there was such an uproar when Catherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1997) discussed the question of the native woman, dwelling on all possible negative aspects like child marriage, the bad condition of widows, women's lack of education and the oppressive nature of Indian men. It was not a surprise that a number of books answered her arguments from a nationalist perspective taking the line that Indian women were the Indians' worry, not the western feminist's.

When the British government tried to ban child marriage, sati and other such practices which oppressed women, they encountered fierce resistance from the conservative elements in India who otherwise lent their voice to nationalism. Colonial feminism implied an interference in their beliefs and practices. As Robert Young says "cultural nationalists tended to define themselves not against modernity in terms of technology, but against its implications for women.... Women and modernity came to be regarded as antithetical entities, with the result that the goal of national emancipation involved a betrayal of all prospect of progressive change for women (2003:2006:97)."

It must be mentioned that feminism has provided imagery and motifs to many political movements in India both before and after independence. Gandhi's act of spinning, as Robert Young says, "was a traditionally feminine activity, as the term 'spinster' suggests (94)." In fact, Gandhi saw himself not only as both a Hindu and Muslim but also as both a man and a woman. His androgyny was a protest against the macho colonial aggression. Even his doctrine of non-

violence formed the basis of relations between men and women on terms of equality. The concept of non-violence together with his vegetarianism also provided a basis for what would later be known as ecofeminism.

A more concrete example of ecofeminism is provided by the Chipko movement which began in the early 70s in the Chamoli district in the present Uttarakhand. The movement got its name from women's hugging and embracing of trees to resist their cutting and felling. One important strand in postcolonial theory is the colonization of nature. The cutting of trees, the destruction of the flora and fauna of the colonized land and the planting of new trees for economic gains are all aspects of this colonization of nature. The contribution of women to the Chipko movement and also to some recent movements like Narmada Bachao Andolan has played a role in defining the nature of ecofeminism in India. Famous campaigners like Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy and Vandana Shiva are important names in these campaigns against deforestation, and 'maldevelopment' (their term).

More recently globalization has become the buzz word in literary and cultural studies. Postcolonialism shares a lot of ground with globalization. But that could be the subject of a separate module.

#### Notes

1. Thus Somerset Maugham's short novel *Up at the Villa* (1941/2004) beautifully presents the world of Sir Edgar Swift, an empire builder. Edgar is 54, unmarried, and has been in India for thirty years. "His unmarried bachelor status reveals the subtext of the social and sexual exclusivity of the British in India during their rule...The British saw themselves as superior race who should not commit the folly of having marital relations with a subject race (Siddiqui 2005: 66). As befitted empire builders, Edgar is in very good physical condition. "Edgar's physical fitness, his fondness for tennis and his distinguished gentlemanly demeanour is in conformity with imperial demands of character and physical strength (Siddiqui 2005:65)."

#### References

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McLeod, John, 2007. *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester:Manchester University Press).

Maugham, Somerset, (1941/2004). *Up at the Villa* (Vintage)

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Said, W. Edward, {1978}1995. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New Delhi: Penguin).

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Siddiqui, Mohammad Asim, 2005. "Imperial Attitude in Somerset Maugham's *Up at the Villa*". *The Aligarh Journal of English Studies*, pp 61—72.

Young, Robert J. C. {2003}2006. *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press)

#### Further Reading

Gandhi, Leela, 1998. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press). See especially the chapter titled "Postcolonialism and Feminism", pp 81—101.

McLeod, John, 2007. *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

Said, W. Edward, {1978}1995. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New Delhi: Penguin). See Chapter 1 titled "The Scope of Orientalism", pp 31—110

-----{1993}1994. *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage). See chapter two( "Consolidated Vision", pp 73—225) for the relationship between Imperialism and English Novel, especially the first two parts of the chapter: pp 73—116.

#### Learn More

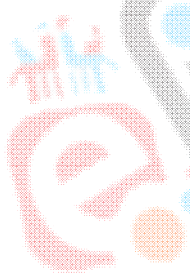
Decolonisation refers to 'the process of a colony or colonies becoming independent'. When a colonial power leaves control of a former colony—Britain leaving India in 1947 for example—

and the new country becomes independent in political terms, we use this term. Many former colonies in Asia and Africa underwent a process of decolonization after their independence from Britain and France. However, the effect of colonial rule is so deep-rooted that decolonization of mind (belief in colonial values and ideas) is not easily achieved.

Globalisation refers to businesses and other organizations moving beyond the boundaries of their country and developing an international character because of the advances in technology. The term also refers to social and cultural influences- trends, fashions, lifestyles- becoming similar all around the world.

Representation refers to the account, in words or pictures, of a person or place from a particular point of view. Representation is contrasted with reality. Some descriptions/accounts claiming to tell the truth about the world may simply be representations. Edward Said talked about the West's representations of the Orient. These representations presented the Orient as backward, irrational, and unchanging.

Ecofeminism believes that it is not only women but also nature that has been dominated by men. Ecofeminism links the concerns of feminism with ecology.



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