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### Criticisms of Postcolonialism

The world of the twenty-first century is in a never-ending state of development. With new technologies breaking preconceived notions annually and medical research at a level the human race never even imagined, it is easy to forget that there are also a number of intellectual developments in progress at the moment as well. The field of literary criticism known as Postcolonialism is one such intellectual development. "Postcolonialism" is a genre of modern literature concerning the relationships between identity and culture in peoples affected by colonialism. As a field in constant evolution, there is a lot of room to analyze works with any possible relevance to colonization, from the colonizing countries to the colonized people around the globe that are still affected today. Colonial authors Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad also impact the field of Postcolonialism, and Chinua Achebe's criticisms highlight a number of important factors connecting their colonizing perspective to the perspective of the colonized people. Across the board, there is a large quantity of criticisms found in all aspects relative to Postcolonialism, from the field itself to the literary figures relevant to the discussion.

As a developing field of literature, Postcolonialism is in the midst of a constant critique. One criticism of this field is that it is too ambiguous and ill-defined. This is due to the confusion that arises from the difference between the historical time period "post-colonialism" and the literary field "Postcolonialism" (Chambers 242). Rather than the designated temporal indicators associated with post-colonialism, the literary field instead strives to define Postcolonialism by the

content rather than the era. This creates complications for the classification of Postcolonialism. By this explanation, works created during the “colonial” historical era—or earlier—may in fact be “Postcolonial” literature because the content includes issues of identity and culture that are influenced by colonialism.

A second criticism is that Postcolonialism is a Eurocentric creation that essentially revisits Western history with a new approach in order to critique Western philosophies (Chambers 248-49). This in itself is a very Eurocentric way of thinking, because it assumes that others outside of the Western world cannot agree and contribute to the field or that there is no higher purpose for Postcolonial literature. Along this path, a third criticism of Postcolonialism is that it is applied universally without acknowledging individuality (Chambers 245). It is argued that Postcolonialism is an attempt to homogenize the peoples affected by colonization into a single group, therefore assigning a given identity and taking away their experiences as individuals. Without doubt, different countries are experienced colonization differently. As Stewart Hall exemplified, “Australia and Canada, on the one hand, Nigeria, India, and Jamaica on the other, are certainly not ‘post-colonial’ *in the same way*. But this does not mean that they are not ‘post-colonial’ *in any way*” (Chambers 246). It would present an inaccurate depiction of the effects of colonization if various communities with diverse experiences were portrayed as a single group. However, in that same vein, literature that portrays a single perspective is still relevant to the field of Postcolonialism, such as the works of Kipling and Conrad.

The impact that Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad have on the field of Postcolonialism is that they provide insight into the perspective and identity of the colonizer during the colonial period. Above all, they provide insight into the colonizers’ justification for colonialism. Kipling’s steadfast belief that it was the onerous duty of the Western world to assist the peoples of distant

lands, who he called “half-devil, half-child,” become more civilized, is shown in his poem, “The White Man’s Burden.” This appears to be Kipling’s justification for the cultural overhaul of what he viewed as lesser cultures. In Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the Western perspective of the protagonist was the only point of view presented to the reader. Through that perspective, Conrad included different types of individuals, but never from the perspective of the people who were colonized.

This leads to a major issue with the works of Kipling and Conrad—their vision and interpretation of events in that period are the only message relayed to younger Western generations. Kipling and Conrad, despite having noted literary talent, only presented the colonizers’ perspective—that of the Western man. This means that new readers assigned their works only see through the lens they wrote from, which perpetuates a single, biased portion of the entire story. Kipling and Conrad may provide useful insights into the justification used by the Western world during the colonial era, but there are still many significant criticisms concerning their famous pieces.

Perhaps the most infamous criticisms were made by Chinua Achebe. Achebe holds an important role in the field of Postcolonialism because his works are among the first English novels written from the perspective of an African man, which gives credibility to his criticisms against Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. In that context, his personal attacks against the book and its author are more understandable. One of the major aspects of *Heart of Darkness* that Achebe criticizes in his speech are the artificial characters created by Conrad. Achebe compared Conrad’s depiction of black savages with the description of artistic masters that inspired cubism in European artists (156). Both portrayals described the same individuals from communities

surrounding the River Congo, which lead Achebe to suggest that Conrad's description is especially inadequate.

In defense of Conrad, Achebe points out that it may be argued that the voice of the protagonist is not necessarily Conrad's own perspective; as Achebe says, "a narrator behind a narrator" (254). However, Conrad never offers another perspective at all. Achebe states that this is an indication of Conrad's own racist disposition, because there is never even an attempt to offer an honest perspective from the colonized peoples. In addition to this, Achebe also points out that Conrad eliminates the humanity from the African people due the dismissive quality of merely using Africa as a "backdrop" to the protagonist's mental deterioration (255). This criticism is especially important because *Heart of Darkness* continues to perpetuate this message of inhuman Africans to younger generations as a part of the literary canon, entirely misrepresenting their identity and culture.

Critique is an integral part of the literary community, from the criticisms of a single person on another's work, to the overall discussion about the faults of Postcolonialism as a literary field. Critique on Postcolonialism is interesting because of its current state of development and evolution, which means there are certainly a number of kinks to be worked out. However, more often than not, thoughts about critique and criticism appear after something is completed, such as Achebe's criticisms on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. It is also interesting to note that the ambiguous definition of Postcolonialism, one of its criticisms, is what allows for Kipling, Conrad, and Achebe to be relevant in this discussion anyways. Despite all the criticisms and conversations, perhaps the most important aspect of Postcolonialism is that the examination of identities and cultures all over the world has brought up the topic of the so-called "literary canon." With the advent of Postcolonialism and the exploration of identity and culture, maybe

the literary canon will finally move beyond strictly classic European authors and begin to include the works of the colonized peoples.

The literary works of this semester can all be considered examples of Postcolonialism literature. The first book, *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah, is a representation of Postcolonial work because the author is writing about the terrible aftermath of Sierra Leone after its release from colonial rule. His story of survival through the civil war expresses the perspective of the colonized people in a country whose identity is insecure from the upheaval caused by colonial occupation. The reader can gain an understanding of the Postcolonialism field from *A Long Way Gone* due to Beah's struggle for identity—child, soldier, or man?—in a country with an changing culture.

In the book *Absurdistan*, written by Gary Shteyngart, Postcolonialism is represented in the fictional setting and storyline. Set in an imagined country that was once a part of the Soviet Union, the main character Misha Vainberg encounters the struggle between the people of “Absurdistan” and their relation to the rest of the world. Shteyngart draws parallels between real countries and issues within the fictitious Absurdistan, such as the world's lack of awareness to Absurdistan's internal strife and the difficulties of immigrants' identity beyond their homeland. These are all issues of Postcolonialism in the real world as well. Readers can gain an understanding of Postcolonialism by reading *Absurdistan* because the experiences of Misha are similar to the experience of a real individuals struggling with identity and culture in a Post-Colonial world.

Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*, the final novel of the semester, represents Postcolonialism because the story follows the lives of Chinese villagers during a time of Japanese colonization. Their perspective of life under Japanese portrayed a constant struggle and a resentment toward

the Japanese, which would have been a very different story if the novel was from the Japanese perspective. The reader can gain an understanding of the importance of perspective and identity Postcolonialism from *Red Sorghum* as well as the lasting effects of a colonized people due to the multi-generational nature of Mo Yan's storytelling.

Works Cited

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