

Free critical thinking on post-colonial criticism: major ideas

[Government](#), [Colonialism](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the wake of the height of colonialism and imperialism on the world stage, in which it was socially acceptable for more powerful social and economic powers to control less powerful nations, post-colonialism as an academic discipline has risen. Here, the issues surrounding colonialism and their effects on modern society are investigated in depth, emphasizing the human consequences of these cultural legacies. Through the help of theorists such as Chinua Achebe, Barbara Christian, and Henry Louis Gates, post-colonial criticism seeks to investigate exactly why certain subcultures (usually pertaining to race and gender) have certain connotations attached to them, and how those communities react to those connotations.

Certainly one of the most important aspects of post-colonialist theory is to investigate the colonialism that is preset in literature, and how it affects depictions of those being colonized, In Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'", Achebe takes umbrage to the depiction of Africans as 'noble savages,' exoticizing Africa and its inhabitants in order to make them seem less intelligent and more pliable to the whims of the more technologically advanced European imperialist.

Essentially, Achebe believes that Conrad is "a thoroughgoing racist" who shows Africa to be "the other world" instead of a living, breathing part of the real world (1610). Achebe's work is a scathing reply to a work that can most certainly be perceived as racist, as it depicts almost literally the hazards and dangers of colonialism.

Achebe's work as a postcolonialist author is to examine the subtexts and messages that underlie these colonialist works to determine whether or not they actively damage perceptions of already-oppressed minorities - in this

case, native Africans. In this respect, Achebe believes that Conrad fails as a postcolonialist, his work instead falling into colonialist trappings: “Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth” (1623). Achebe also notes that “Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts. Sometimes his fixation on blackness is equally interesting” (1623). The tendency for white audiences to simplify their ethnic subjects for the sake of exoticism is something that is of great concern to a postcolonialist critic; this points to continued racism and prejudice that makes it even more difficult for minority communities to survive and thrive in a post-colonial world.

Postcolonialist criticism does not extend merely to race, either; women’s studies and feminism can also be examined through this lens. Barbara Christian, in her essay “The Race for Theory,” talks about the intersectionalism between third-world feminism and black feminism – often, progressive movements like the Black Panthers would ignore black women’s specific societal struggles in favor of pitting white men against black men. Christian, like other postcolonialists, wishes to examine the very fabric of literary criticism itself – she believes that many white critics insulate themselves so much in scholarly reduction of ‘blackness’ that they do not make room for black criticism. Meanwhile, black critics also form their own formulas that become stagnant, creating arbitrary definitions of ‘blackness’ that can be just as racist as white institutions. As it relates to feminism, Christian warns against feminist theory pigeon-holing itself into a single definition (usually egalitarian feminism).

Chastain's focus cuts to the heart of post-colonialist criticism and studies: the need to advocate for literature of oppressed communities so that their voices might be heard. " My concern, then, is a passionate one, for the literature of people who are not in power has always been in danger of extinction or of co-optation, not because we do not theorize but because what we can even imagine, far less who we can reach, is constantly limited by societal structures" (Christian 2137). This is how Chastain chooses to focus her criticism - on finding the right ways to advocate for all voices and perspectives, regardless of popularity or prevalence.

According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his article " Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Times," he emphasizes the growing need to recognize and appreciate black literature, as it was a burgeoning and important field during the 1980s. Furthermore, he argues that African-American literature must be given just as much appreciation as white literature. This follows along with the postcolonialist perspective that the body of work of minority fiction has been historically de-emphasized, something which must be compensated for in more enlightened times. Not only does Gates argue that black literature should be looked at with equal measure, he believes there should be a specific way of looking at black literature: " We must redefine theory itself from within our own black cultures, refusing to grant the racist premise that theory is something that white people do" (2432). According to Gates, critics analyzing African-American literature through white perspectives and schools of thought are actually practicing a form of intellectual discrimination, imposing their own biases and viewpoints on the work to an unfair degree.

Gates also argues that African-American critics have yet to find a way to accurately describe black culture, as the frameworks have not been established yet. African-American literature is said to often have the underlying subtext to defend itself against racial discrimination, but because of this lack of framework, it merely causes more racist perspectives to be perpetuated. To that end, Gates' perspective is that post-colonialist studies has an obligation to view minority literature from its own contexts, in order to level the playing field against mainstream literature that already has the benefit of time and existing dominance in the field of intellectual discourse. In conclusion, post-colonial studies and criticism deal mainly with the need to allow minority communities (black, women, etc.) to create, disseminate and analyze their own literature on their own terms, leaving the patriarchal and patronizing majority perspective out of it. These types of theorists and critics seek to understand minority culture and discourse without resorting to mistaken and misguided white platforms for understanding. Furthermore, post-colonialist studies also take a look at the lingering racist and patriarchal attitudes stemming from colonialism and privilege, and try to find new ways of considering these perspectives. Through the work of people like Achebe, Christian and Gates, postcolonialism seeks to break down the social and political realities of a world that has been sculpted to benefit white men the most, leaving little for African-Americans, women and other minorities. Through their work and the work of others, the way in which cultures are viewed and classified is evaluated, recording human relations within colonial nations and in the third world to see if there are better platforms by which to examine society and literature.

Works Cited

The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism 2nd Ed. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch.

New York: WW

Norton, 2010. Print.