

The Cultural Factors in Postcolonial Theories and Applications

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Abstract—This article focuses on the introduction of postcolonial theories and applications, aiming to stress the close relations between literature and cultural studies. The definitions of imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, and postcolonialism are discussed one by one in order to highlight the cultural factors of postcolonialism. Then Edward Said's Orientalism, Gayatri Spivak's subaltern voice, and Homi Bhabha's hybridity are mentioned together with the cultural factors in their postcolonial theories. Finally the author takes George Bryon's *Don Juan*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, and Vladimir Nabokov's diasporic literature as specific samples for the three respective postcolonial theories, with the purpose to demonstrate the importance of cultural factors in literature studies.

Index Terms—culture, postcolonialism, orientalism, subaltern, hybridity

I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the appearance of Birmingham School in England, cultural studies have become more and more popular for literature scholars. In the context of cultural studies, the idea of a text includes not only films, music, mass media, photographs, fashion, but also social classes, races, gender, and cultural identities in written languages. Therefore, literature and culture are closely connected with each other. It has been widely recognized that the intercultural dimension is an important component in literature learning and teaching. In the study of literature, culture plays many important roles. It serves either as illustration or a starting point for the study. And it is usually understood as part of a specific domestic or foreign civilization. Thus, literature researches can be carried out from cultural or intercultural perspectives by exploring the social, historical, linguistic and other cultural phenomena in literary texts or critical theories. In this article the postcolonial theory will be taken as an example to show how the cultural factors are related to literary study and demonstrate the importance of cultural research for the literature field.

II. CULTURE AS A FACTOR TO DEFINE POSTCOLONIALISM

Postcolonialism has nowadays become a popular and important theory for literature research. It “plays a significant part in the growing culturalism of contemporary political, social and historical analysis” (Young, 2016, p.7). Culture is a key factor to define this literary theory as well as an essential point to distinguish postcolonialism from its forefathers: imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism.

Imperialism derived from the word “empire”. It generally means a strong or large empire's direct territorial acquisition over a weak or small country. Imperialism is characterized by “the exercise of power either through direct conquest or (latterly) through political and economic influence” (Young, 2016, p.7). Colonialism means more direct control by aggressive and military subjugation. It is mainly about the establishment and expansion of colony in one territory by a powerful country. Both imperialism and colonialism involve forms of subjugation of one people by another. Some of the clear distinctive features suggested by Robert Young (2016) are:

Colonialism functioned as an activity on the periphery, economically driven; from the government's perspective, it was at times hard to control. Imperialism, on the other hand, operated from the centre as a policy of state, driven by the grandiose projects of power. Thus while imperialism is susceptible to analysis as a concept (which is not to say that there were no different concepts of imperialism), colonialism needs to be analyzed primarily as a practice. (p.17)

Though it is often difficult for some scholars to tell the differences between imperialism and colonialism, we know one thing for sure. That is, imperialism and colonialism concern more about politics and economy.

The term neocolonialism appeared on literary contexts since the decolonization took place after World War II. It is like “a continuation of traditional colonial rule by another means” (Young, 2016, p.7), for the formerly colonized territories still had to endure the economic hegemony from the world powers though the political sovereignty had been returned to them.

From the above three terms that appeared earlier than postcolonialism, it is not hard for us to find that the mark of the imperialism and colonialism is that the colonized countries were fully controlled by the colonists in politics and economy. As for neocolonialism, the ex-colonized countries still could not be free from the ex-colonized countries in politics and economy. But when it comes to the postcolonialism, the stress tends to be different. Postcolonialism concentrates on the cultural, intellectual and spiritual realm.

Postcolonialism, as a critical theory, came into existence at the end of the 1970s in the USA; then it extended to Europe and became a cultural trend in all over the world. Postcolonialism claims “the right of all people on this earth to the same material and cultural well-being” (Young, 2003, p.2). According to postcolonialists, it may be easy to break away from the colonists politically and economically, but it is much too difficult to uproot the tangible or intangible control of culture. This is just what postcolonialism is primarily concerned about. In fact, we can go so far as to claim that postcolonialism is actually a cultural colonialism. And the adoption of postcolonialism in literature research in turn shows the importance of cultural phenomena for literature.

III. CULTURE AS A CONCEPT FOR POSTCOLONIAL CRITICS

As we know, postcolonialism is mainly concerned about the study of cultures formerly (or currently) colonized power, struggle between cultures, and intersection of cultures. Culture has been an important concept for the study from the very beginning of this literary theory. Postcolonialism has three pioneers and important theoretical basis. Namely, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and his cultural hegemony, Franz Fanon (1925-1961) and his voice of racist culture, and Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and his theory of power and discourse. Gramsci’s cultural hegemony claims that a culturally-diverse society can be ruled or dominated by one of its social classes. Fanon’s personal experience as a black intellectual in a whitened world, especially the disorientation he felt since his first encounter with racism decisively marked his psychological theories about colonial culture, mostly expressed in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). And Foucault’s power and discourse theory often serves as a foundation for one culture’s dominance over another, which is extensively used by Edward Said in his *Orientalism and Cultural Imperialism*.

The three pioneers obviously inform us that postcolonialism is also a symbol of race, ethnicity, culture and human identity. Apart from them, there are three other influential representatives most active in the postcolonial arena of contemporary period. They are Edward W. Said(1935-2003), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak(1942-) , and Homi K. Bhabha(1949-), who, being of either Indian or Islamic background, experienced differently from their compatriot and those Western natives. These three giants also take culture as their primary concept for literature study and criticism.

1. *Said and Orientalism*

Edward W. Said is a Palestinian American literary theorist, cultural critic and political activist who is famous for the creation of the Oriental Studies, drawing on the basis views of Marxism (Gramsci), Adorno’s negative dialectics, and more markedly Foucault’s analysis of power and discourse, and exposing the nature of the hegemony of the Western imperialist culture. At the same time, Said’s voice cultural imperialism established a relatively complete system of postcolonial cultural theory, which had a great role in promoting the development of the postcolonial theory research and a profound impact on the development of the post-modern literature and cultural studies. Edward Said’s pivotal book *Orientalism* marked the historical breakdown of a disfigured socio-cultural discourse and it “established a template for studies alert to the culture of imperialism” (Jacobs, 2002, p.13). First published in 1978, it sought to rebuild the current academic debate addressing cultural misrepresentations of “The Orient”. Undoubtedly speaking, Said’s *Orientalism* started a new academic field, that is, the colonial discourse. The term Orientalism means several things: an academic term, a style of thought, and the corporate institution for the Orient, who are actually interdependent. Orientalism describes the “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture” (Warraq, 2007, p.301). Said (2003) wrote in the book, “Western representations of the Orient, no matter how well intentioned, have always been complicit with the workings of Western power. Even those Orientalists who are clearly sympathetic of Oriental peoples and their cultures can not overcome their Eurocentric perspective, and have unintentionally contributed to Western domination” (p.6). After all, “Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 2003, p.4) .

Orientalism depends on a culturally constructed distinction between the ‘Occident’ (West) and the ‘Orient’ (East). Said pointed out that Orientalism actually occupied three overlapping domains. “ It designates first the 4000 year history of and cultural relations between Europe and Asia; secondly the scientific discipline producing specialists in Oriental languages and culture from the early nineteenth century; and thirdly the long-term images, stereotypes and general ideology about ‘the Orient’ as the ‘Other’” (Selden, et al., 2004, p.223). Noted for the “Western knowledge of the Eastern world”, Orientalism is just like the Westerner’s fantasy, regarding the east as a place of backwardness, irrationality, and wildness. It is a political and cultural doctrine made by the west, trying to control the east politically or culturally. The scope of Said’s scholarship established Orientalism as a foundation text in the field of postcolonial cultural studies. Said’s further bibliographic production features *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature: Yeats and Decolonization* (1988), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (1994), *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), and *On Late Style* (2006). Most of his works hold a postcolonial point of view and attempt to highlight the inaccuracies of those wrong assumptions of cultural imperialism.

2. *Spivak and the Subaltern Voice*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian literary critic and theorist, is famous for deconstructive interpretations of imperialism and the struggle for decolonization. The essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1983) and the book *In Other Worlds* (1987) are her best representative works; Spivak’s theories drew quite a lot for Marxism and feminism; and cultural identity and woman discourse become Spivak’s major focus. She is famous for broadening the concept of

“subaltern” put forward by Gramsci. In “Can the Subaltern speak?”, Spivak talked about the suicide of a young Bengali woman who failed to “speak” outside normal patriarchal channels. But she questioned the possibility if the Gramscian “subaltern” could have a voice when the identity of the subaltern is different and their voice is heard through the academic discourses of Western metropolitan culture.

In postcolonial theory, the term subaltern describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society. They cannot represent themselves and their voices have to be represented by others. According to Gramsci, the subaltern is the lowest class, or the lowest strata of the urban sub-proletariat, being ignored seriously by the capital society. In Spivak’s opinion, the term subaltern is a synonym of proletariat when applied to postcolonial theory. It has a broad and specific meaning: the poor, the oppressed and the exploited who has no right to speak out what are in their minds, not to mention getting their voice heard. Spivak actually “seeks to affirm and empower the subject-position of subaltern peoples suppressed by colonial regimes” (Lopez, 2001, p.22) Here again, we find the obvious cultural hegemony and cultural imperialism in Spivak’s subaltern voice.

3. Homi K. Bhabha and Hybridity

Homi K. Bhabha, a Persian descendant born in India, is now teaching in Western higher institutions. Bhabha has coined a number of the field’s neologisms and key concepts, such as third space, hybridity, mimicry, difference, ambivalence, etc. Such terms, according to Bhabha’s theory, describe ways in which colonized peoples have resisted the cultural power of the colonizer. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha wrote about hybridity and third space from a postcolonial perspective.

Homi Bhabha developed the hybridity theory in *The Location of Culture* (1994) which analyses hybridity as a paradigm of colonial anxiety. Bhabha’s cultural hybridity stresses the mixture of different cultures and describes the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism. Bhabha (1994) wrote in his *The Location of Culture*.

For a willingness to descend into that alien territory—where I have led you— may reveal that the theoretical recognition may split the space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing of international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space— that carries out burden of meaning of culture. (p.38)

Bhabha’s statements clearly demonstrate his idea on cultural hybridity rather than differences, which paves the way for the topics of cultural identities and multiculturalism in many literature researches.

IV. CULTURE AS A PERSPECTIVE FOR POSTCOLONIAL READINGS

Postcolonial criticism in general draws attention to questions of cultural identity. Since the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, postcolonial theories also had a significant impact on the study of multiculturalism and English and American literature, which also “promoted links between culture and the construction of collective identities” (Lauter,2010,p.112). Postcolonialists often rethink conventional modes of reading, reinterpreting canonical literature in order to examine if past texts perpetuated or questioned the latent assumptions of colonial discourse. They tend to enquire into the representations of colonized subjects in a variety of colonial texts. For postcolonialism, culture has always been the major topic of reinterpreting the canonical literature. Of course postcolonialists do not degenerate the traditional values of those literary works. They just want to bring out new perspectives for the literature studies from a cultural point of view. In the following parts, let’s take three different works to briefly analyze the cultural phenomena in literature researches.

1. Orientalism and Byron’s Don Juan

Although the postcolonial meaning of Orientalism was put forward by Said in 1978, Orientalism as a traditional term had been mentioned by western scholars since the 19th century. At that time “Orientalism” was widely used in art to refer to the works of the many Western artists, who specialized in “Oriental” subjects. The oriental tendency of George Gordon Byron and his works are often discussed by postcolonial scholars. Byron used to pursue an exotic life because of the repressed cultural environment in Britain and his own emotional distress. From 1809 to 1811, Byron’s travel to Portugal, Albania, Greece and Turkey was an important phase for him to experience different kinds of life in other parts of the world, which are “Orient” compared with England. The rich oriental experiences laid the solid foundation for Byron’s writing. As one of the poets that most closely devoted link with Orientalism, Byron devoted most of his literary activity to writing about the Islamic Orient, or the Levant as he called it. From 1765-1859, this time was a period of all-round development of Orientalism and nearly everyone was infatuated with the Oriental things. More importantly, Byron’s oriental travel provided him with a new point of re-reading the Orient. The true eastern ways of life was different from the bookish knowledge at that time. Besides, due to the oriental visit, large number of memories, genuine Oriental words, proper names and adventures were presented. It also reshaped Byron himself and the culture he belonged to. In this way, his truly oriental experience assimilated himself into that culture. His famous Work *Don Juan* can be interpreted culturally from an Oriental point of view.

Don Juan is a long but great epic satire about abuses of the contemporary of society. It is on the romantic adventures of a legendary Spanish youth who has many love affairs with different kinds of women. During his adventure, Don Juan is made to participate in different historical events. Thus a broad panorama of social life of the time is presented. In *Don Juan*, the Orient appear in almost all cantos, and the Eastern cantos are structured in four parts: Don Juan’s adventures

on Haidee's island (I-IV), in Turkey's harem (V-VI), at the Siege of Ismail (VI-VIII), and being a favorite of Empress Katherine (mostly V-VI, and referred to in VII-VIII). The seraglio, the symbol of Eastern power, the corruption and the most powerful aspect of the Muslim East were the focus that Byron's involvement with the East in *Don Juan*. But in almost all this parts of the long epic, the East is not considered an equal continent for human living, but a place of evil and darkness. The vast continent of the Orient is created as a 'place of savages', filled with 'superstitions', and is held in contempt by Westerners. The Orient is barbaric, primitive, poor, wild, dangerous, and full of horrors, while the West is civilized, modern, rich, safe, and so on. People who live on the Orient are depicted as brutal animals in contrast to the Western people. In Westerners' eyes, the Orient in every way is inferior to the West and can only be used by the West to indicate its powerfulness, its distinctive civilization, and its exclusive superiority. Not only is the Orient like an unknown primitive planet, but also native Oriental people's behavior is odd and funny. Let's take two women in *Don Juan* as examples.

At the beginning, *Don Juan* is seduced by a married woman named Julia. She is a wanton woman who can hide her lover in a nest and then play plausibly when her husband is searching her bedroom. Here we notice such a description in her appearance.

The darkness of her oriental eye

Accorded with her Moorish origin.

Her blood was not all Spanish, by the by;

In Spain, you know, this is a sort of sin. (Byron, 1986, p.60)

Byron first depicted her mixed blood to emphasize her humble birth, and then reached his goal to completely separate this wonton woman from gentle Spanish. Though in the "The Isles of Greece" of *Don Juan*, we find the description of "Where burning Sappho loved and sung, Where grew the arts of war and peace, Where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung, The Scian and the Teian muse, The hero's harp, the lover's lute", which are the glorious culture of Greece, yet the civilized country was tortured by the barbarous Turks. Although *Don Juan* loves Haidee very much, she is still a snake with the same character as a snake in the eyes of *Don Juan*. Without resisting the deadly allure of the snake, people live in a corrupt life, "but her eyes were black as death, their lashes the same hue, of downcast length, in whose silk shadow lies deepest attraction... Tis as the snake late coiled, who pours his length and hurls at once his venom and his strength" (Byron, 1986, p.131). These all provided the readers or critics with some hints to study Byron's tendency of Orientalism from a cultural point of view.

2. Subaltern Voice and Jane Eyre

As we know, postcolonialism can be applied not only to analyze direct cultural domination; it can also be used to explore abstract cultural meanings in some literary works. Another typical example appeared in Spivak's discussion of the novels *Jane Eyre*, *Wilde Sargasso Sea* and *Frankstein* in the essay "Three Women's Texts and a critique of Imperialism". Spivak in the essay saw in *Jane Eyre* "otherwise a class text for Anglo-American Feminism, an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism" (Selden, et al., 2004, p.226). According to Spivak, Bronte's novel may well uphold its protagonist as a new feminist ideal; but it does so at the expense of Bertha, Rochester's Creole bride who functions as a colonial subject of "other" to legitimate Jane's simultaneous ascent to domestic authority. These opinions brought a new topic for the study of *Jane Eyre* from such a cultural point of view.

In this story, echoing Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?", *Jane Eyre* is a subaltern who dares to break the oppressive silence and utters her own voice and finally changes her status as a subaltern. Although Jane is born as a subaltern, she dares to speak out and gives out her own voice-- in the series of struggle and resistance against the power that oppresses her voice. In the eyes of the Reeds, Jane is not their relative but a subaltern who is no better than a servant and must bear harsh treatment. The Reeds family always requires her to remain silent, "Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent"(Bronte 1992:8). However, Jane does not want to remain in oppressive silence, instead, she always tries to break it. Her battle with the Reeds takes place most profoundly on the level of language. When her cousin John Reed, who always claims to be the master of the family, hurls at Jane and pushes her to the end of her patience, Jane erupts. "Wicked and Cruel boy!" Jane shouted. "You are like a murderer. You are like a slave-driver. You are like the Roman emperors!" (Bronte, 1992, p.11). Later, when Jane is interrogated by Brocklehurst, Mrs. Reed banishes her once more to silent confinement in her room. Jane again retaliates with words, "Speak, I must". In other words, she can break the oppressive silence. Therefore, Jane has changed her subaltern status in her world.

But unlike *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad wife, is a forever silenced subaltern, who has been deprived of the right of discourse and has no means to break the oppressive silence and remains a silent subaltern forever. Bertha is a silenced victim, who has always been suffering in the dark attic. The only sign of her existence is her laugh through which she expresses her dissatisfaction and complaints to the outside world. All the adjectives Jane used to describe her laugh shows the repressed inner self of a confined woman, "...while I paced softly on, the last sound I expected to hear in so still a region, a laugh, struck my ear. It was carious laugh; distinct, formal, and mirthless... it passed off in a clamorous peal that seemed to wake an echo in every lonely chamber..." (Bronte, 1992, 108) When Jane is alone, she frequently hears Bertha's laugh "the same peal, the same low, slow ha!ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me; I heard, too, her eccentric murmurs; stranger than her laugh" (Bronte, 1992, 111). At the night of Mason's arrival, Jane hears a cry, "What a cry! The night- its silence- its rest, was rent in twain by a savage, a sharp, a shrilly sound that ran from end to end of Thornfield Hall" (Bronte, 1992, 207-208). Through this simple example of the two characters in *Jane*

Eyre, we see how Spivak's writing of "the subaltern" offers a relatively new perspective of literature and cultural studies.

3. *Hybridity and Nabokov's Diasporic Literature*

A hybrid is something that is mixed, and hybridity is simply mixture, or a cross between two separate races or cultures. The term "hybridity" has been seen as a cultural effect of globalization. According to Bhabha's theory of hybridity, on the process of intercultural communication and literary inheritance, people do not refuse other's culture, but borrow and identify it, and further enrich and renew one's self-culture. It is an embodiment of multiculturalism or even cosmopolitanism. In the age of globalization, the diasporic literature in which there are characters moving from one culture to another already has attracted many postcolonial critics' attention, for which Jessica Langer (2011) even claimed, "It is impossible to conceptualize postcolonialism without recognition and analysis of the diasporic movements that have been inherent to colonization" (pp.56-57). In this case, many American diasporic works can be studied from the perspective of cultural identity and hybridity, which again shows the relation between literature and culture. Let's briefly take the Russian-born American writer Vladimir Nabokov as another typical example.

Vladimir Nabokov is famous as a 20th century Russian exile intellectual representative in world literature. From Russia, England, Germany, France, America to Swiss, Nabokov was exiled in many countries all his life. The pain of losing his motherland and homesickness aroused his strong cultural identity anxiety. But because of his years in exile between heterogeneous cultures, he formed unique creative methods and broad culture mind. Nabokov's literature has a multicultural identity, either Russia's, or the world's. For example, in his famous work *Invitation of a Friend*, the protagonist Timofey Pavlovich Pnin is a Russian-born professor living in the United States, teaching Russian at fictional Waindell College, which possibly originated from Cornell University or Wellesley College, where Nabokov himself taught. In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote declares that he used to be a king and was later exiled to America. In *Lolita*, Humbert is a European who goes to America and becomes a literature teacher after divorce. It is true that Nabokov also described about nostalgia and cultural shocks in these works, yet we can clearly find multiculturalism and the characteristics of hybridity in them, which has already become a hot topic for the world study of Nabokov.

V. CONCLUSION

Postcolonialism, as a literary criticism, is different from imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism for the major focus on culture. It is a combination of literary research and cultural studies, which offers new perspectives to re-read literary works from the cultural point of view. With the advancement of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and globalization, more and more scholars will follow the path of Said, Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. Postcolonialism will continue to be an important topic for literature studies. And the adoption of postcolonialism, especially the cultural factors in it, will in turn influence the study of world literature for a long period of time.

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