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## Postcolonialism Literary Theory Revised Version

Postcolonialism is the literary theory which describes works of literature which were written by individuals during or after their country was colonized by a western country. These people would use literature in order to combat the oppression that they were feeling by those who were coming to their country and trying to conquer and spread their beliefs all over the area. The reason why Postcolonialism began was because those who were being oppressed wanted their voices to be heard and literature was one of the few outlets which allowed them to do this. The three ways in which colonialism negatively affected the people native to the land was that it took away the place they considered home, imposed their “superior” cultural beliefs over that of the native country’s, and it revised aspects of history to better fit the colonization agenda. Those who were from the area being colonized witnessed those three events occurring and decided to write with three distinct goals in mind. The first was to write descriptions of their country that were more accurate to the place and the people. The second was to use the colonizer’s language and incorporate aspects of their own language, in turn creating a whole new style and words which better represent their new identity. Lastly, they would blend colonial forms of art and their own native art forms to create a whole new way of expression creativity. Through the Postcolonialism theory, those who were oppressed regained their voice and identity.

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, people of color are described as similar to savages who were unintelligent and often happy to be submissive to the white people. Conrad was confused by those people he considered to be strange like animals and would often describe them as something more akin to animals rather than human (Conrad, 1988). Of course Conrad's thinking and beliefs were a product of their time, but the fact that his work is considered to be one of the greatest works of literature is harmful towards the people that it describes. For years, Conrad's story was the only exposure to African people that western people had so it created an image that was incorrect. As Chimamanda Adichie explained in her TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," it is dangerous to expose to people just one point of view of a particular country or people. She goes on to explain how many people have stereotypes or prejudices when talking to her, and are surprised to learn that she is educated and sophisticated (Adichie, 2009). She is attempting to overwrite these stereotypes by exposing many people to different perspectives through her writing and speeches, hoping to educate people to the fact that there is usually more than one story to each country.

Chinua Achebe also attempted to overwrite the stereotypes which were laid out by Conrad and by Rudyard Kipling in his poem, "The White Man's Burden," which describes the necessity of white people to guide the poor black people who were lost (Banton, 1975). Achebe describes an encounter he has with a white person who expresses his surprise to learn that Africa has such a deep and meaningful history, since he did not think African people capable of having that. In the criticism which he wrote regarding Kipling's "The White Man's Burden," Achebe describes his best efforts to combat this harmful stereotype by conducting presentations and

doing speeches in which he teaches the audience the extensive culture of his country and how it is not limited to simple depictions of savages.

Another example of how authors chose to combat colonialism is through the way that the colonizer's language is used and played with to create a whole new form of expression. The best example of this would be Junot Diaz's *Drown* which is written mostly in English, yet there are Puerto Rican words all throughout the novel. The author does not provide with definitions for these words and it often leaves the reader confused as to what is happening in the story, The fact that Diaz chose to write in English in the first place is already interesting since it would have made much more sense to write his story in his native tongue and target it to people who would be able to relate more. However, the fact that his target audience was people who did not know anything of his culture or his language shows how he was hoping to expose them to something new. Also, by including the occasional words in Puerto Rican, it allowed to reader to briefly experience how it might feel for an individual to be suddenly exposed to a language that is unfamiliar to their own. Diaz's characters felt this same confusion when they first arrived in America and were suddenly thrown into an environment in which they were surrounded by a foreign language. There was nothing else they could do to survive but to quickly adapt to their surroundings and learn as quickly as possible regarding this new language or else they would constantly feel lost in their new country. The novel is also interesting because we see how the characters adapt to the English language to something unique by mixing aspects of their own native language as well. By doing this, it shows how language is constantly evolving and can be used to represent one's identity (Diaz, 1996).

In contrast to Diaz's *Drown*, Yan Mo's *Red Sorghum* was initially written in the author's native language of Chinese and then translated into English. This is especially beneficial to the reader when it comes to a piece of literature which was originally written in Chinese, as the grammar structure is completely different from English. Even the way that the characters is difficult for the Western readers to understand as they are simply called "Father," "Mother," "Grandma," etc (Mo, 1993). If it was written in English the characters would have been addressed by their given name, but by keeping the story relevant to the respectful aspect of Chinese culture, it gives the reader deeper appreciation to it. Although it may be confusing to read at times, the different grammar structure often adds impact to how the story is told. It gives the foreign reader appreciation for Chinese literature and allows for the reader to contrast the different writing styles between each country.

Yan Mo also often included short poetry or songs throughout *Red Sorghum*, which is not something which is usually done in Western literature. An example of one of these songs being that which was about the red sorghum which was usually sang in instances of tension in the story (Mo, 1993). The songs add a dramatic flair which are not normally added in Western literature, but allows the reader to appreciate Chinese literature much more especially since do not have much exposure to it because of the heavy censure laws in China. The general word usage throughout the novel is unique as well, as it focuses on nature and animals a lot more than in what is usually read in Western literature. A lot of the times the exact phrases that were used are confusing and do not make any sense to the Western mind, but they are a portrayal of Chinese culture and it shows the differences between what each culture considers to be significant and what they appreciate the most.

Postcolonialism literary theory expresses how individuals attempt to regain their voices after having it taken away by a western country. Their country was taken over and they felt like their voices were being washed out by the voices of those who were much stronger and had the resources to influence other countries. One of the countries most affected by this was Africa, as it was often taken over by western countries who deemed them to be savages simply because of the difference in the color of their skin. People had no choice but to be submissive in order to survive, and would often agree with what they were made to do. While westerners might have believed that introducing these “savages” to English or other western inventions was a method to keep them under control, the opposite came to be true. By introducing English to them, the West gave a voice to those who would not have been heard anyway. Many of these oppressed people would go on to tell and write their experiences in English, exposing how they were treated by western hands to those same westerners. There were many negative affects to the colonization of underdeveloped countries which even affected many generations after. However, the postcolonialism literary theory could be considered to be one of the few positive aspects to come from it as it did introduce people an outlet to tell their story which would never have been heard. It did not just introduce to them writing styles, but also different forms of expression such as art, poetry, spoken-word, and even music. This theory also encouraged the spread of different cultures as it allowed for readers from other countries to read about an authentic experience from an individual who is the most knowledgeable concerning the subject. Through this, many westerners now have exposure to new and different country’s cultures. While the fact that postcolonialism theory was created simply to correct people’s mistaken assumptions of a country

is regrettable, the outcome is positive as it is spreading the value of learning of new cultures all over the world.

## Citations

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*A Long Way Gone* Essay Revision

As a soldier, there are many traumatic experiences that an individual can go through which are likely more traumatic for children than adults. Throughout the novel, Beah went through a variety of experiences which affected him as a person. The reality of losing his family, being constantly surrounded by death, and having to commit crimes overwhelmed Beah. There was no other option but to alter how he felt and processed emotions. If had not done this, he would not have been able to cope with the matter of his changing state of mind. Each of these experiences affected him in different ways and this is reflected in the emotional transformation that Ishmael is described as going through. In the span of the two years in which this story takes place, Beah was constantly adapting to his environment in order to survive. Depending on the situation, these emotional adaptations were either healthy or harmful to his overall well-being. He would adapt to fit into different roles and act accordingly to what would enable him to survive. There were three instances in the novel which exhibit this transformation in Ishmael's character: the first was when his village was attacked by the rebels, the second was when he joined the child army, and the third was when he was rehabilitated (Beah, 2007).

In the beginning of the novel, Ishmael's actions and thoughts were described as those of a normal child. Ishmael's actions and thoughts were that of a normal boy his age who did not have any great worries. At this point of the story Ishmael was playing with his friends, laughing along



with his family, and practicing the dancing that he loved so much. It was not until Ishmael hears stories of the raids that the calmness that he knew before began to disappear. Although he used to preoccupy himself solely with normal trivial problems, Ishmael found himself increasingly worrying about his safety and his family's well-being as well. The scene in which he witnessed the death of the man who had trying to drive his family to safety in a van depicted how Ishmael is only just a child. Despite there being a man bleeding profusely and throwing up in front of him, what was most impactful to Ishmael was the fact that the man was crying. He had never seen an adult male cry "like a child" before (Beah, 24). As a child, it must have been difficult to see an adult, who was supposed to be strong and composed at all times, crying in that way must have been shocking to Ishmael. This is the first indication of Ishmael's changing emotional state (Beah, 2007).

After the RUF attack on his city, Ishmael goes through his first major emotional transformation. It is at this point in the story where he his no longer able to act in the same way as he had before. He begins to act like and have the mindset of a survivor as opposed to that of a normal child. This emotional instability is represented when Ishmael and his companions attacked a small child for the ear of corn that he had been eating. There were no feelings of sympathy or compassion towards the young child who cried at having his food stolen. Ishmael described this act as being inevitable since this was the only way to survive. Even after the mother of the boy they stole from gave them food, Ishmael stated that they were not interested in asking for the name of the people who had helped them or even what the town name was. This is an indication of how little they began to care for things that were not connected to their personal survival. While he does express some sort of remorse for watching that child cry, Ishmael's

emotional changes were becoming more and more evident as the environment around him went into more chaos. Just before this scene, Ishmael and his companions had faced disappointment as they attempted to purchase food only to be turned away without being able to buy anything. Their feelings of frustration were becoming overwhelming and it was forcing the children to think of themselves as “survivors” as opposed to normal children (Beah, 2007).

It is not until Ishmael joins that RUF as a soldier that he completely abandons all of his inhibitions. At this point in the novel Ishmael began to use succinct and blunt manner in describing his actions of violence. This gives the impression that Ishmael is attempting to distance himself from his own behavior by not injecting his emotions into his telling of the story. By completely shutting of his emotions Ishmael was able to cope with all the violence he committed during this time. Beah began to write more succinctly and bluntly when he described the crimes which he committed as part of the RUF. He was no longer the pure, innocent child who felt uncomfortable when he saw a grown man cry. As a child soldier, Ishmael was forced to attack and be violent towards others in order to be given the necessary assistance to survive. The scene in particular where Beah describes plainly how he was asked to slit the throat of a man and he did exactly as he was told. The RUF also supplied them with copious amount of drugs which would numb them from the reality they were living. By doing so, he was able to do all that was asked of him without feeling guilt or empathy towards his victims. During this time, it was necessary of him to do this as he would not have been capable of surviving outside of RUF protection. In order to live, Ishmael sacrificed his emotions and discarded the feelings that a normal boy his age should have (Beah, 2007).

Ishmael's final emotional transformation occurred during his time in the rehabilitation center. Before arriving at the center Ishmael had shut down his emotions, but after he began to slowly open himself up more he was able to regain some of those emotions which he had tried to rid himself of. After Esther once again exposes him to rap music and begins to treat him like a family member, he allows himself to feel without guilt. When he first arrived to the rehabilitation facility, the staff would always remind him that "it is not your fault that you did such a thing" and Ishmael detested it (Beah, 169). The reason for his hatred is because he did not consider himself a victim who needed to be excused for his actions. Through the rap music and the meeting of Esther, the emotions which he had been desperately trying to rid himself of once again appeared. The exact scene in which this occurs is when he dreams of his family eating at the dinner table while he sits covered in blood and is unable to eat. Before this, Ishmael had considered his actions to have been as a result of his own decisions as opposed to his being under the control of others. Beah still considered himself to be a soldier and not a civilian, and he had been told that soldiers were not supposed to feel any emotions. It was not until he had had the dream with his family that Ishmael came to understand that during his time at the RUF he was manipulated and that he in fact was nothing more than a child who had been taken advantage of. It is at this point that he allowed himself to open up to more natural emotions, and he begins the slow process of rehabilitation (Beah, 2007).

Ishmael's story expresses the emotional transformation of a young child who goes through extreme events. At the beginning, Ishmael is portrayed as a playful child who would often get in trouble along with his older brother. Slowly, this portrayal began to be less and less relevant as the need for survival outweighed any other emotion which he felt. Ishmael's emotional state was

heavily influenced by what was going on around him even if he was not aware of these changes at the time. At the end of the novel, Ishmael Beah had regained most the characteristics which made him a normal person. He was able to feel happiness with his new family, even have a romantic connection with a girl he happened to meet. Once again Ishmael was influenced by his surroundings but this time it resulted in only positive effects. Despite his occasional flashbacks to the time that he was a soldier, Ishmael gained his sense of sympathy and affection which he had lost. Having met people from all over the world who were compassionate or were in similar situations as his, Ishmael finally felt comfortable enough to open himself up and became more in tune with his emotions in return (Beah, 2007).

The fact that this book was written in English is a good example of how the Postcolonialism literary theory affected the countries which were colonized by western powers. Through this colonization, Beah was introduced to hip-hop music which came to be one of the things which helped him survive through difficult times. Although he did not understand the English words at first, he felt a deep connection through the music and dance moves which he would later come to associate with his brother. His affinity to hip-hop music was innocent and he did not actively see it as something which was “western-made.” To Beah, it was simply music that happened to be in a different language. Later on, this music is what saved while he was in the rehabilitation center as it was a catalyst for him opening up to the nurse working there. Hip-hop music became a form for him to express himself and Beah would often do this by performing his rap and dance routine to others at the center. Although it was just music, it came to be something which comforted him in his times of despair and which eventually helped with his recovery as well (Beah, 2007).

It is not until Beah is given the opportunity to visit New York that he realizes that it is also possible for him to express his experiences through stories. Under the guidance of his mentor, Beah begins to discover the importance of having his story be told as it is what is most authentic to what children usually experience living where he is from. He first realizes the importance of his voice when he is interviewed for the chance to go to New York and he states that he should be chosen because he actually has gone through the experiences that people should know about. His mentor was an author herself, and she gave him advice and provided him with opportunities to have his story heard by a western audience who were not aware of what they had indirectly caused in his country. Through this postcolonialism theory, Beah ensured that an authentic account of the life of an ex-child soldier was told.

## Citation

Beah, I. (2007). *A long way gone: Memoirs of a boy soldier*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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## Red Sorghum Final Paper

In Mo Yan's novel, *Red Sorghum*, the lives of four generations of families are described as the narrator recounts the experiences of his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents during war time with Japan. The war affected each of these family members differently and the narrator would often switch point of views in order to more accurately tell the story of each of their individual experiences. As a result of point-of-view-switching, the reader was able to see the different perspectives that each of the characters had concerning the events that unfolded in front of them. Through this, the reader would often be exposed to the same scene but the story would change depending on who's perspective they were viewing it from. One of the most significant factors that determined to what degree the perspective would change was the gender of the person who the reader was seeing it from, in particular what role they had within the family. While in society men and women had distinctly roles to fulfill, even within the family the roles and relationship of each member is complex and unique. In *Red Sorghum*, the reader can see how each individual family member's role is unique through the Father's family consisting of Grandma and Granddad. In the novel, Grandma is portrayed as a daughter, wife, and mother with a distinct role to play as each of them. On the other hand, Granddad has only two sides to his

character: a husband and a father. Father is simply portrayed as a son, but because he is the first son it is an important role (Mo, 1993).

In the beginning of the novel, Grandma is described as being a strong-willed and independent woman who is the admiration of her son who looks up to her. As his mother, Grandma always made sure to protect her child which is why he had such a strong image of her. It is not until Mo introduces Grandma's backstory that the reader realizes that she was not always the powerful character that Father knows her to be. It is eventually revealed that Grandma is the only child to a poor couple and as the daughter, it is her duty to listen to everything her parents tell her to do. Her parents are who decided to bind her feet and then later on who decided who her husband would be depending on his financial status. Despite the fact that Grandma was unhappy and expressed her unhappiness with being married off to a man with leprosy, her parents ignored her and thought only of their own gain with her marriage. In the end the marriage to the man with leprosy falls through and she cut off contact with her parents, but she then found herself in the equally restrictive role as wife. As a wife, she had to go along with everything which her husband told her to do even if it was something she did not want to do or made her unhappy. The best example of this is the arrangement that Grandma and Granddad had with Passion, his mistress. The arrangement was that Granddad would alternate houses every ten days, which upset Grandma because she felt that Passion "robbed [her] of half of [him]," yet she agreed to it simply to ensure that her husband was happy and did not leave her (Mo, 345). As a daughter, wife, and a mother, Grandma would often have to sacrifice her wants and needs to appease to others.



In contrast to Grandma, Granddad was completely free to do as he wished because he was a man. He was admired by Father because he was a strong and well-respected commander who saved his family and village many times. Because of his strength, Father found Granddad to be intimidating but still yearned for his approval and did everything in order to gain it. For the majority of the novel, Granddad was portrayed as a very masculine man, but it was not until the death of Grandma and he spirals into despair that his weaknesses began to show. He later regains his previous strength as he commands his army, but from then on Mo introduced more and more instances which showed Granddad's kindness despite the image of masculinity which he portrayed. One of these contrasting images was that of the player which he tried to be and the devoted husband which he actually was. When he cheated on Grandma with Passion, he did not feel show any remorse for it rather he left Grandma to live with Passion instead. It was not until he learned that Grandma was sleeping with someone else that his jealousy caused him to confront both of them which in turn led to Grandma returning to him. Granddad may have considered himself to be a player but he genuinely cared for both of those women, which was evident by how devastated he was with both Passion's and Grandma's death. Despite the fact that he was tried to carry himself as a heartless and masculine man who did not allow trivial matters to bother him, he was a lot more emotional and sensitive than what would have been acceptable for someone in his social status (Mo, 1993).

Although he was also male and as the first son, Father's role in the family was different from Granddad's. While Granddad was the leader of the family, Father needed to remember his standing in the hierarchy within the family. Similar to Grandma's childhood experience, if Father was told to do something he would have to do it without complaint. An example of this is when

he and Granddad dug up Grandma's body in order to give her a proper burial and Granddad demanded Father to pick up the skeleton. At first Father was repulsed, which angered Granddad since Father was disrespecting Grandma by thinking that his "mom's bones are too dirty to touch" (Mo, 275-276). The son's role is to always be respectful of his parents and do as he is told, but Father's role was especially significant as he was the first son. As the first son, it was expected of him to continue the bloodline and continue the family's legacy. Since males are the only ones who can do this, it is important to have a son within the family. Granddad was a well-respected commander and he cherished and protected Father with the expectation that he in turn would have a son to keep his legacy alive throughout the generations. The readers realize the significance of this when Father injures one of his testicles while fighting the dogs, and Granddad is grief-stricken to discover the type of injury his son has sustained. After being told by the doctor that there could be a possibility that Father would not be able to have any children with the injury he sustained, Granddad declares that "he may as well be dead if that thing's useless" (Mo, 234). This excerpt shows the key role that Father plays within the family as the first son.

In *Red Sorghum*, each individual family member had a significant role to play within the family that is necessary in keeping peace within the society. Even if it makes them unhappy, to all of the family members it was most important keeping the status quo rather than being happy with the situation. The reason why they went along with it even if it personally made them unhappy was because they were fighting against a common enemy and believed that they needed to band together to defeat the Japanese. The fact that China has such a long and traditional history and practices is another reason as to why the idea of individual family roles is so

successful. To them, it was normal and expected behavior so it is difficult to go against something which was engrained into them. However, this novel provided with unique and interesting perspectives which go against the usual gender stereotypes which people hear from China. Instead the reader is introduced to multi-dimensional characters who prove that one's own identity is not simply defined by gender (Mo, 1993).

## Citations

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