



# Postcolonial Criticism

Nicholas Harrison

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# **Postcolonial Criticism**

History, Theory and the  
Work of Fiction

Nicholas Harrison

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# Postcolonial Criticism

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# Introduction:

## Postcolonial Criticism and the Work of Fiction

‘it was a beautiful piece of writing. ... It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence – of words – of burning noble words.’

Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)

Fiction as a way of ‘thinking’, a place, a territory, a continent: this does not mean, it would seem, writing something purely fantastical, I was going to say a fantasy or a *fantasia*.

Rather it means rediscovering, thanks to an imaginary construction (be it a plot, intertwined situations, or dialogue, dangerous or banal), thanks to a *fiction*, then, inhabiting, populating or repopulating a place, a town, starting from its ghosts and at the same time, from your own obsessions...

Djebar, *Ces voix qui m’assiègent* (1999)<sup>1</sup>

This book is intended for readers who are interested in literature, and its relation to colonialism and its wake. It is structured around a series of case studies and explores diverse strategies and examples of reading and historicization in response to particular texts. Like most books in this area, it contains much that is non-literary, and engages with various issues in history, politics and critical theory. In choosing to centre my discussions on literary fiction I do not wish to *assume* anything much about the value or nature of literature – or of literary studies – or about the place and the ultimate significance or insignificance of works of fiction in the broad historical and ideological schemes with which postcolonial criticism connects them. Rather, I want to raise questions about those very issues.

Historicizing literary texts may seem like the bread and butter of postcolonial criticism, but I will be trying to show that this task is more intricate and multi-faceted than postcolonial critics generally



allow. When confronting a work of fiction they encounter two demands that can be difficult to reconcile: on one hand they must give adequate weight to the text in its individuality and 'literarity'; on the other they must apprehend it in the socio-historical context from which it emerged and in relation to which it needs, at some level, to be understood. I shall be trying to 'work through' this difficulty, but what will become apparent is that, when one brings together different forms and levels of historicization, or different modes of attention to fiction's specificity, they may interfere with one another rather than combining into one definitive, richly historicized picture.

At the literary end of postcolonial studies there have been, broadly speaking, two main strands of work. For the first, a seminal moment came when Chinua Achebe, lecturing at the University of Massachusetts in 1975, declared that 'Joseph Conrad was a bloody racist.'<sup>2</sup> Achebe was not the first person to raise the issue of racism in relation to Conrad, but his paper brought it to the forefront of critical discussion, where it has subsequently remained. Achebe's iconoclastic insistence that Conrad be judged in relation to the imperial history, and especially the imperial and racial 'discourse', with which he and his writing were entangled, helped launch postcolonial studies, and has proved one of the characteristic gestures of postcolonial critics. (I will discuss the term 'discourse' in chapter 1.) Recognizing that a 'beautiful piece of writing' may be shot through with delusions and brutality, those critics have sought ways in which texts, especially canonical texts from the colonizing nations, bear the traces of or get to grips with the ideology of colonialism/imperialism, and have interpreted them as challenging or promoting orthodox views of colonialism's purposes and justifications.

Readers already familiar with postcolonial studies may be despondent to see that in this book I give a fair amount of space to *Heart of Darkness* and the argument over its alleged racism, territory that is far from unexplored. I do so partly for the benefit of those who are new to the field: one aim of my two opening chapters is to trace a path through a debate that is exemplary of that first strand of postcolonial critical practice. Beyond that, I try to clarify the theoretical and historical *basis* of any such debate, and to bring to light the tensions within it that allow it to run and run without reaching any final resolution. These tensions, I will argue, arise around different, perhaps incommensurable, notions of what literature is and does, and around competing accounts of what critical practice should be.<sup>3</sup>

In making that argument I will assume that it more or less goes without saying that, by today's standards, Joseph Conrad was, in fact, racist, in ways that were all but inevitable given that he lived when

and where he did. As I will suggest in chapter 3, moreover, 'racial' categories still have a certain tacit currency even among those opposed to racism; will power alone is not enough to remove oneself from a history of discrimination that makes Conrad's thinking less alien than one might wish. This has at least two important implications for how Achebe's charge should, in my view, be treated, about which I will make some preliminary remarks here to give a sense of the kind of approach I am going to adopt. The first is that, to assess any particular historical instance of racism meaningfully, one needs to recontextualize it, rather than measure it by anachronistic standards, or by absolute standards by which *anyone* would be found lacking. The second is that, in this instance, the debate properly concerns Conrad's text, rather than Conrad himself.

Many critics – most recently Róbert Young – have assumed or maintained that it is to Conrad's shame that *Heart of Darkness* never names the particular place, the Congo Free State (CFS), that is in some sense the story's subject as well as its setting, and clearly it is possible that this omission stemmed from timidity or indeed a certain racism.<sup>4</sup> If one frames the issue in the way I am proposing, however, to condemn Conrad on such grounds appears cursory both historically and literarily. From a historical perspective, as I will show in chapter 2, the text's 'failure' to name the culprit cannot be equated with a lack of specificity or pointedness. When one asks if a person or a policy is racist, one is concerned fundamentally with attitudes and effects; what my discussion of *Heart of Darkness* will show is that the decision not to name the CFS may have had positive rather than (or as well as) negative motivations and implications. For anyone thinking in literary-critical terms, meanwhile, establishing the 'attitude' or effect of a literary text such as *Heart of Darkness* appears a precarious, speculative task. Evidently it contains racist remarks, as might a history book on racism, but in each case it is crucial to consider how such remarks are presented – 'literarily', in this case. And whereas a historian, or indeed the author of a report such as Kurtz's (as described in my first epigraph), is under an obligation both to be accurate and to make his or her perspective clear, the obligations of the author of fiction – towards the reality he or she depicts, and towards his or her readers – are less clear-cut.

My chapters on *Heart of Darkness* try, then, to convey the full complexity of the dialogue, so to speak, between a fictional text and the experiences, discourses and debates it brings into play, or brought into play for its first readers in the era of high colonialism. Chapter 1 offers further introductory material in the form of reflections on the notion of colonial discourse, and a consideration of the CFS as an

example of imperialism. Against that background, and with the aid of various key literary-theoretical concepts (including ‘realism’ and *vraisemblance*), chapter 2 pursues in detail the question of Conrad’s alleged racism that I have begun to consider here. It is probably already apparent that the famous ‘haziness’ of Conrad’s story will be matched, in a sense, by a certain hesitancy in my conclusions; both risk irritating those who fear that when we read *Heart of Darkness* we silently imbibe racist attitudes and colonial ideology and so prolong their life. By the same token, clearly, the sort of criticism that emphasizes the work’s literarity or ‘autonomy’ may allow it to do its ideological work all the more effectively, if it exempts literature from practical and political considerations. I take such anxieties seriously, and go on to address them at some length in chapter 3, which, through a sustained consideration of issues of ‘identification’ in relation to Camus’s *The Outsider* (*L’Etranger*, 1942), raises further questions about how readers actually read, how fiction actually works and what its impact, politically and emotionally, may be.

Those questions, I shall argue, again need to be considered historically, which implies that the responsibilities of the critic may also vary historically and contextually. That both *Heart of Darkness* and *The Outsider* are canonical texts makes them fitting objects for what I have characterized as the first strand of postcolonial criticism. The second strand, which has evolved partly in response to the accusation of continued academic Eurocentricity even within postcolonial studies, has been part of a broader trend extending literary studies beyond its traditional canons. At a certain point, this means that the very definition of literature, and of what it is appropriate to study in a literature department, is necessarily called into question: this may have many consequences, but at the very least it usually means that those devising literary syllabuses today see reasons to include writers from former European colonies, such as Achebe, who was born in Nigeria when it was still under British rule, or Assia Djebar, born in Algeria, from whose work my second epigraph is drawn.<sup>5</sup>

In the newer subcanonical areas, the critical stakes seem different. Critics working on ‘postcolonial’ writers have frequently found in their work a previously ignored perspective or unheard ‘voice’, and a means of breaking through the artificial confines of ‘national’ literatures. To some extent, chapters 4 and 5, which centre on writing by Driss Chraïbi and Assia Djebar, are meant as instances of this second strand of postcolonial criticism. (I should note that the texts on which I focus have all been published in English translation and both authors are reasonably well known, but to a degree that I felt unnecessary with *Heart of Darkness* and *The Outsider* I try to allow

for readers who are unfamiliar with the material.) In this critical context, it appears crucial that the ethnic origins of Chraïbi and Djébar put them on the other side of the colonizer/colonized divide – and their writing indeed offers novel and challenging perspectives on issues around colonialism and cultural identity.

As in the earlier chapters, however, I see part of my task as being to question certain critical reflexes, to explore the relation between various forms of ‘specificity’, and to test the fit between some general theoretical/political models of interpretation and particular texts and contexts to which they might apply. On one level this will mean considering colonial history’s relation to social divisions *other* than the split of colonizer and colonized, including divisions of class, gender and language. On this last issue I will argue that the significance of ‘choice’ of language has often been misrepresented and even overstated, and that it is a mistake to see the use of French by Chraïbi or Djébar – or, to take a different example, of English by various Indian writers – as somehow inherently ‘compromising’. Nevertheless, it may be worth pointing out in passing that none of the principal figures in this book writes in a non-European language. It should go without saying that, for anyone wishing to form a general picture of North African or Indian literature, or indeed North Africa or India, the advantages of knowing languages other than French and English are immense.

On another level, among the histories with which I will be dealing in chapters 4 and 5, as in the earlier chapters, are histories of representation, reading and criticism. Both Chraïbi and Djébar have tried, as we shall see, to position their writing in relation to the dominant tradition of reception that they have encountered, a tradition that postcolonial studies, at least in one of its versions, may sustain.<sup>6</sup> Crucial here is the sort of context that is captured ambiguously by Rushdie in his controversial anthology of Indian writing or by Deleuze and Guattari in their influential essay on ‘minor literature’: both help crystallize the problems involved in turning to ‘postcolonial’ fiction, or even autobiography, for what I have referred to as ‘a previously ignored perspective or unheard “voice”’. Chraïbi’s first novel, *The Simple Past* (*Le Passé simple*, 1954), a literarily innovative work that was published on the cusp of Moroccan independence, was read in precisely that way by contemporary critics: and it was on that basis, as we shall see, that the author ended up receiving death threats.

In such a context, and in the face of the ‘burden of representation’ borne by the postcolonial writer who is perceived as a member of a ‘minority’ (a term analysed in chapter 4), *some* notion of literary ‘autonomy’ – even if that term will turn out to be unsatisfactory – clearly

has something to be said for it. It may be argued, consequently, that the first responsibilities of critics responding to Chraïbi's and Djebbar's work are currently towards the specifically literary facets of the text with which any sense of literary autonomy is associated. What this might mean – what the 'literary' *is*, or how it should be understood – will return as an issue throughout the book and will be at the centre of the Conclusion. Throughout the book, then, I try to demonstrate the importance to 'postcolonial' literary studies of theoretical questions that arise more commonly in other literary-critical contexts; accordingly, the theorists that I draw on and discuss include figures such as Derrida, Blanchot and Genette alongside those who habitually feature more prominently in postcolonial studies.

A certain level of abstraction may be both the precondition and the result of the sorts of comparative and theoretical approaches adopted here, especially in the Conclusion and the Afterword. The latter, focused on *theoretical* writing by Fanon (and, briefly, Freud), is intended to add a final twist to the questions of textual historicity and 'voice', and explores the notion of relativism – a crucial concept in comparative or intercultural academic work. The tendency towards abstraction of postcolonial critics could also be seen as the result of murkier pressures, however, including those exerted by publishing and academic job markets. McClintock, for one, expresses her distrust of a certain 'theoretical' vocabulary on these grounds, writing that 'Historically voided categories such as "the other", "the signifier", "the signified", "the subject", "the phallus", "the postcolonial", while having academic clout and professional marketability, run the risk of telescoping crucial geopolitical distinctions into invisibility.'<sup>7</sup>

Such terms are also part of what may make postcolonial theory off-putting to newcomers to the field, of course. In this book I apply theoretical tools and extrapolate general, 'transferable' lessons where I think it appropriate, and should confess now that I use some (though not all) of the terms that McClintock mentions. Any that may be unfamiliar I try to explain as I go along, either in the main text or in the notes. I do not provide summaries of the work of those eminent postcolonial critics and theorists who by now have been more or less canonized, however, and will make just a few brief remarks, in the remainder of this Introduction, about the definition of the 'postcolonial'. One reason for this decision is that other critics have already done a very good job of offering such summaries, along with some telling criticisms.<sup>8</sup> Another is my view that what is most interesting and often most important in postcolonial studies – at least postcolonial literary studies – remains tied up in textual and historical detail,

as McClintock's remarks may imply. Indeed, if one takes these points seriously, it is no longer clear to what extent there *is* a field of the sort susceptible to systematic exposition. This, in a sense, is my starting point, and it is why I believe that working through specific case studies provides as good a way as any to enter the broad area to which the label 'postcolonial' points.

The terms colonialism, imperialism, and the postcolonial are used differently by different writers, and it may be useful for some readers if I say a little more about them here. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said works with a distinction between imperialism, by which he means 'the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory', and colonialism, which 'is almost always a consequence of imperialism' and means 'the implanting of settlements on distant territory'.<sup>9</sup> These definitions are reasonable, but 'colonialism' is often used by other authors in ways that make it close to imperialism in Said's sense – to describe, on the one hand, a set of attitudes or an ideology and, on the other, forms of exploitation and conquest of foreign lands. The latter case includes but is not limited to the history of 'settlement', of the sort integral to the French colonization of Algeria, say.

The examples of the Roman empire and the Ottoman empire make it clear that Said's terms could be applied to many different contexts. Postcolonial studies has been concerned mainly with European colonial expansion since the Renaissance, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In focusing on this later period many postcolonial critics have considered imperialism as a stage in the development of capitalism. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, for instance, write:

Colonialism, the conquest and direct control of other people's lands, is a particular phase in the history of imperialism, which is now best understood as the globalization of the capitalist mode of production, its penetration of previously non-capitalist regions of the world, and destruction of pre- or non-capitalist forms of social organization.<sup>10</sup>

By this point it is becoming clearer why the notion of 'postcolonial studies' has been so loose. The adjectives postcolonial and post-imperial were originally used to designate the post-independence period of former European colonies, but the economic emphasis of a description such as the one offered by Williams and Chrisman calls into doubt the neatness and the significance of the break between the colonial/imperial and the 'post-'. As Raymond Williams noted back in 1976 in *Keywords*,

If imperialism, as normally defined in late 19th century England, is primarily a political system in which colonies are governed from an imperial centre, for economic but also for other reasons held to be important, then the subsequent grant of independence or self-government to these colonies can be described, as indeed it widely has been, as 'the end of imperialism'. On the other hand, if imperialism is understood primarily as an economic system of external investment and the penetration and control of markets and sources of raw materials, political changes in the status of colonies or former colonies will not greatly affect description of the continuing economic system as imperialist.<sup>11</sup>

To talk of a culture as 'postcolonial' may then carry misleading implications concerning the cessation of imperialist influence and interference after the formal acquisition of independence by former colonies (influence that is sometimes termed 'neo-imperialist' or 'neo-colonialist', words connoting influence exercised by means other than colonial settlement). This problem is exacerbated by the fact that, in 'postcolonial' studies, what is discussed is often, necessarily, not only the period *after* a given country gained its independence, but the entire period of contact between the countries or cultures in question, from the 'precolonial' era through to the present.

Such considerations in turn raise the question of whether a 'post-colonial' perspective on colonialism and the 'colonial era' is liable to treat colonial phenomena as more self-contained and coherent than they were (or are), to attribute too great an importance to them, and indeed to continue to define former colonies in relation to the colonial powers – liable, in other words, to be drawn into and reinforce the globalizing, self-mythologizing and ethnocentric tendencies of colonialism itself. Numerous writers have criticized postcolonial studies on these grounds, adding the related charges that it tends to neglect factors such as class and gender that cut across the colonial/postcolonial division (in ways that, as I have already indicated, will be discussed in chapter 5), and to lump together cultures that are highly diverse in numerous ways, including in their relation to colonialism.<sup>12</sup> To take the example of the French empire, the colonial 'legacy' evidently means very different things in countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Senegal, Vietnam and Quebec: each may be dubbed postcolonial, but each has its own history beyond colonialism as well as its own particular relationship to French culture, French government, the French language, and so on. Comparable points could be made about the British empire and the English language in relation to Ireland, India, Nigeria, the United States, and so on.

Clearly, many postcolonial critics and theorists have been sensitive to such distinctions and have duly focused on the particularities of



different cultures. The issues to which they have turned their attention have included power relations and patterns of (mutual) influence between colonizer and colonized; the question of subjective and political agency; nationhood, nationalism and anti-colonial resistance; Eurocentrism, universalism and relativism; 'race' or ethnicity, gender and identity; and many more besides. Partly because the field is so eclectic and partly because it has consisted to a notable degree, and for good reasons, in cutting the ground from under its own feet in ways I have begun to describe, I can see no point in talking as if consensus about what postcolonial studies 'is' might eventually emerge, or in pursuing such consensus, or in *arguing* about distinctions between postcolonialism, postcolonial studies, postcolonial criticism and postcolonial theory (even if working distinctions along these lines are sometimes serviceable), and least of all in getting involved in the sporadic sideshow argument about the relative merits of the terms 'post-colonial' and 'postcolonial'. Postcolonial theory is not an identifiable 'type' of theory in the same (limited) sense as deconstruction, Marxism, psychoanalysis or feminism, on all of which it sometimes draws: it does not have foundational thinkers playing a role comparable to that of Marx or Freud; and whereas feminism, say, is first, both conceptually and historically, a political movement and a theory of gender relations in society, postcolonial studies as such seems to have emerged specifically within the English-speaking academic world, particularly in literature departments. Like Marxism and feminism, though, it has evolved in response to political and historical issues of vast importance and scope, such as anti-colonial militancy, and its deeper origins and many of its ends lie outside academic study.<sup>13</sup>

For the purposes of this book, postcolonial studies in general may be characterized broadly and simply in terms of an attention to the history of colonialism/imperialism and its aftermath, and may in many instances be distinguished from traditional historical or political writing on the colonial or post-independence era by the particular attention that is paid to the role within that history of 'representation' or 'discourse'. To approach colonialism, and the questions it raises, in such terms – and through literature in particular, as I will here – is to lay oneself open to the accusation (from literary critics, discourse theorists and others) that one has inflated the importance of discourse and literature, and has missed what is important about colonialism. Overstating the dangerous consequences of this may be part of the same inflation, of course, but to clarify the scope of this book I should stress that, while it aims to cast light on key aspects of the relation to colonialism of literature, and especially fiction, it does not claim to



cover all aspects even of that topic, and still less to offer a full understanding of colonialism. In a sense, to put it another way, this book mimics the evolution of the field in that it starts within the discipline of literary studies and explores ways of moving out into other disciplines, or of describing and theorizing the connections between literature/literary studies and the (rest of the) world – connections that the work of literary criticism may itself not just mediate but modify.

If, from a certain political perspective, that movement occasionally seems meandering and the distance travelled eventually appears modest, this is the corollary not just, I think, of my limits and the limits of what I feel competent to talk about, but of the kind of work that this book seeks to undertake. Although their writing often turns on the historical embeddedness and weight of particular actions and forms of representation, or how contexts shape texts, postcolonial critics sometimes seem wilfully oblivious to what are, in practice, the relatively narrow bounds of the field in which they are operating and who they are actually writing *for* – even though they may make a point of telling their audience where they are writing ‘from’, so to speak, in terms of their geographical location, institutional affiliation, and so on. That particular ratio of self-consciousness and its lack often seems to me the wrong way round; and, at the risk of pre-empting a point that I will develop more fully in due course, it may be worth signalling here that I do not consider it legitimate or meaningful *criticism* of a text to point out that it is about one thing rather than another, or that it was written by someone living in a former colonial nation, or of a certain gender/class, or for that matter in a literature department. A sense of such things may help you locate areas in which that person *may* rely on certain unjustified presuppositions, but it does not tell you that he or she has done so, nor does it constitute an engagement with the work as such. I would argue, then, that although the literary affiliations of many postcolonial critics may lead them to overestimate the importance of literary texts, they need not. Indeed, it is partly because they have been repeatedly questioned and linked to imperial ideology by postcolonial theorists that traditional conceptions of the value of canonical and other literature have lost much of their authority. Literary critics may respond to this in various ways, all of which have something to be said for them. They may abandon criticism altogether, if they think their time would be better spent in other ways. Alternatively, they may write theoretical, political or historical essays that simply leave literary considerations behind – and attempt to reach an audience outside their original professional field. Finally, they may write about literature with due awareness of and attention to the limits of the subject. This, in any case, is what I hope to do.