

The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking
Double-blind, Peer-reviewed, and Open Access Journal in English



Vol. 5 Issue 2 Monsoon Edition 2025 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 421-431

www.literaryhrm.org
www.cavemarkpublications.com



A Study of Pre-Colonial and Post-Colonial Themes in Indian English Literature

Sumiyyah Arif

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0256-3143>

Corresponding Author: Sumiyyah Arif, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Saraswati Higher Education and Technical P.G. College, Ayar, Gahani, Varanasi, (Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapeeth, Varanasi, India, sumiyyaharifugc@rediffmail.com)

Article

Keywords:

Repository,
Indigenous,
Colonization,
Contemporary,
Hybridity,
Perspective

Article History

Received:

June 15, 2025

Revised:

June 30, 2025

Accepted:

July 1, 2025



Abstract

Aims: This paper aims to provide an overview of pre-colonial and post-colonial themes in Indian English literature. It examines how Indian literary traditions reflect indigenous cultures, histories, values, and forms of storytelling, while post-colonial writings engage with identity, resistance, cultural hybridity, and the continuing effects of colonialism.

Methodology and Approaches: The study adopts a literary and comparative approach to examine major themes and changing perspectives across different literary periods. It considers pre-colonial Indian literary traditions, including Sanskrit epics such as The Mahabharata and The Ramayana and classical Tamil poetry, alongside selected Indian English writings. The works of writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Chetan Bhagat are considered to explore changing representations of culture, identity, history, and society.

Outcomes: The study finds that Indian literature has undergone significant thematic and cultural transformation across the colonial divide. Pre-colonial traditions emphasize indigenous knowledge, cultural values, myths, and storytelling, whereas post-colonial literature increasingly addresses colonial experience, identity, resistance, cultural conflict, hybridity, and social change. Contemporary writers continue to engage with these concerns while addressing emerging issues in Indian society.

Conclusion and Suggestions: The study concludes that examining pre-colonial and post-colonial literary traditions provides a broader understanding of the development of Indian literary expression and its relationship with culture, language, history, and identity. It suggests that further research should explore the connections between indigenous traditions and contemporary Indian English literature, particularly through the perspectives of language, cultural hybridity, resistance, and decolonization.

***Correspondence:** Sumiyyah Arif, sumiyyaharifugc@rediffmail.com © (2025) All rights are reserved with the author (s) published by CaveMark Publications. This is an Open Access Article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any form or medium, provided that the original work is appropriately cited or acknowledged. This paper is available online at www.literaryhrm.org, and CaveMark Publications, India, published it.

The word post-colonialism could be divided into post colonialism, with post meaning ‘later’ in terms of chronology or ‘delay, in term of deference. The word colonialism must be understood in connection to the word imperialism. The term colonization is derived from the Latin word Colonia meaning “settled land, farm, landed estate.” The root word throws light on the practice of transporting farmers from one place to another for farming. The root brings to the fore the conflict between two territories, those between the original landowners and the settlers. The migration could also pass off the settled land as the native from the Latin word imperium meaning “to command.” Imperialism is understood as a system of military domination and sovereignty over territories. Both the terms, colonialism and imperialism are political and power- oriented. But imperialism exercises absolute subjugation of one country over the other. However, both are often used synonymously.

Colonialism is defined as “a broad concept that refers to the project of European political domination from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries that ended with the national liberation movements of the 1960s”.¹ Though Jean-Paul Sartre coined the term ‘neo- colonialism’ in 1956, its origins were found in Leninism defines neo-colonialism as a new hidden colonial policy administered by the imperialist countries over the other countries for monetary, political and military gain. This is mainly done by strengthening and reinforcing capitalistic ideologies². For those who think that the years of colonial rule is over, neo-colonialism is a new kind of colonialism which reinforces the survival of the colonial system which dominates/controls the once colonized countries in an indirect way, using new forms of political, economic, social, military and technological systems. For example, sole interest of USA in the 2003 invasion into Iraq was monetary - for oil. The politics of oil was not merely to extract oil but to control the resource-dependent countries, like China and Russia, which might emerge as super powers. Under the influence of American officials, the newly formed government of Iraq has changed their policies on oil, which is, ironically, beneficial to America.

The traditional definition of decolonization is that it is a process in which countries become legally independent of the colonizers and be known as

sovereign nations. This would mean the possession of a constitution, a flag and an equal status among other countries in the United Nations Organization ‘Defining Decolonization’. It is labelled traditional because the definition is narrow and focuses only on the system of political change independency. It does not include the economic, social, cultural and literary implications of these changes. Decolonization could also mean a conscious denial of all imperial consequences be it political, economic, social, cultural or linguistic ‘Defining Decolonization’. This definition is more acceptable because it includes the colonizer and the colonized in some respects. To explain the idea, there are economic, political, social and attitudinal transformations that took place with both the colonizers and the colonized. The definition provides a broad methodology to analyze both the perspectives in an equal space. However, the definition gives a wrong impression – that history can be reversed or to be specific, colonial history can be completely erased. So, decolonization is not the removal of all the colonial remnants in the cultures of the colonized. Instead, it is the conscious understanding and awareness of the evolution of cultures.

Post-colonialism can be summarized broadly as a study of the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies. It is concerned with both how European nations conquered and controlled ‘Third World’ cultures and how these groups have since responded to and resisted those encroachments. Post-colonialism, as both a body of theory and a study of political and cultural change, has undergone and continues to go through three broad stages:

1. An initial awareness of the social, psychological, and cultural inferiority enforced by being in a colonized state.
2. The struggle for ethnic, cultural and political autonomy.
3. A growing awareness of cultural overlap and hybridity. (post-colonialism)

Literally, ‘postcolonial’ is a term used to demarcate the period during and after decolonization. However, a strict historical demarcation is not possible when locating post colonialism. Post colonialism could be seen as a continuity of colonialism. In literature, ‘Third World’ literature is identified as postcolonial. This is so because many third world countries have been former colonies of the

European powers. When these former colonies have attained nation status, they are referred to as postcolonial, even though they have remnants of the coloniser. The entire field of studying the literature and culture of formerly colonized nations is categorized as postcolonial studies.

Edward Said builds on the premises of Michel Foucault, especially about knowledge and power, in his book *Orientalism*. Said uses the term ‘discourse’ to develop his idea of *Orientalism*. Foucault defines the complex term discourse as ways of constituting or containing knowledge which is subjective in nature, rooted in culture and displays power. Discourse reflects the thought, mind and experience of the person involved, and makes meaning of the subject in discussion³. Foucault’s ‘discourse’ brings in a sense of history and society and focuses on the shifts in power. The core of Said’s *Orientalism* (Orient+ism) is the shift of power between the colonized and colonizer. Countries of the East especially East Asia are generally called ‘oriental.’ In *Orientalism*, said discusses the common Western misconceptions about the East. He believed that these misconceptions clearly exist in the Western minds/consciousness. Said uses Jacques Lacan’s terminology, ‘*The Other*’ to describe the Western fascination with the orient. To clarify the idea, the identity of oneself is defined by a contrast with the identities of the other. For example, an Indian is an Indian because he/she is neither an American nor a European. Here, the Western is identified as the ‘Self’ and the non-Western as the ‘other.’ The ‘other’ could also be seen as a stereotype that exists in the Western ‘self’ about the non-Western ‘other.’

Said means several things by *Orientalism*. To him, anyone who teaches researches or thinks about the orient is an *Orientalist*. “*Orientalism* is a style of thought based upon a ... distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’ Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on.”⁴

Homi Bhabha was instrumental in developing the area without actually mentioning the term post colonialism. He popularized the terms, ‘ambivalence,’ ‘mimicry’ and ‘hybridity.’ Ambivalence is the ambiguous way in which colonizer and colonized regard one another. The colonizer often regards the colonized as both inferior yet exotically other, while the colonized regards the colonizer as both enviable yet corrupts. In a context of hybridity, this often produces a mixed sense of blessing and curse (‘ambivalence’). What is the meaning of the word mimicry? Mimicry is the way in which the colonized people adapt the culture, language, education and clothing of the colonizers. It is not mere imitation but a process in which what is adapted is being changed in such a way to suit the cultural context of the colonized (‘mimicry’). Mimicry also involves the imitation of the mind of the coloniser’s, which begins a deep-rooted affectation of the psyche. Mimicry paves way to hybridity. Now, what is hybridity? Hybridity is a new culture that is formed from a cross-cultural exchange. Hybridity is affected in many ways – social, political, cultural and religious (‘hybridity’). The terms point to the deeper understanding of the relationship between colonizer and the colonized.

Take for instance Daniel Dafoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), where Crusoe represents the colonizer and Friday, the colonized. Crusoe strives to civilize the native. Analyzing Friday’s experience, he is seen mimicking Crusoe after submitting himself to Crusoe. Bhabha considers mimicry as the most effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge. The ambivalence in the relationship between Crusoe and Friday is two dimensional. We do not know if Friday has fear or respect towards Crusoe. Another text which could also be seen in this context is Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. The play discusses the conquest of an island - keeping as the backdrop the conquest of the Caribbean island by the Western powers. Prospero, who represents the Western power, colonises the island and Caliban, the heir to the queen who is referred to as a witch. Caliban learns the language of the master which he, in turn uses to curse the Master. Shakespeare strives to show the adverse side of colonising through his play. There is ambivalence in the relationship between the master and the slave - Crusoe and Friday; Prospero and Caliban. On the other hand, we do not know if

Crusoe sympathizes with Friday or considers him a mere fool. But we could see that Caliban is unhappy with Prospero. Post colonialism has given a new method of reading texts and understanding the power relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. It would also be worthwhile to mention another version of Robinson Crusoe which was rewritten from the perspective of the colonised by J. M. Coetzee titled *Foe*.

In defining post colonialism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak “focuses ... our attention on the continuance consequences and power of colonial discourses, practices and mindsets on the present”⁴. Spivak argues that the lives of women in the third world countries cannot simply be expressed or represented using vocabularies of the western critical theory Morton or even the language of the male. To Spivak, this is an ethical and a political issue of the oppressed groups. She believes that in such a case women or any other minority groups for that matter will be silenced and the western critical theory is simply incapable of representing this phenomenon. Spivak upholds Said’s idea of ‘marginality’ and discusses inability of women to express (speak) for themselves as She (the woman) is a subaltern (the term, from Antonio Gramsci, is used to refer to groups that are outside the power structures, disenfranchised and disempowered). In her seminal essay titled, “Can the Subaltern Speak,”⁵ she mentions that the problem is that knowledge is nothing but a commodity that is created and constantly modified by the west and transferred to the rest of the world for financial benefits. These kinds of communities/people exist within the postcolonial society. In fact Spivak proposes that research is always colonial because it etherizes, objectifies the subject. Spivak brings-up the example of the practice of Sati and argues, in this case, that women were merely the subjects of men. It is primarily this gender parity that restricted them to articulate to the British or to their own society. This silences the women quite systematically and effectively. The marginality created is an effect of the lack of communication.

Post colonialism has significance in various issues that bring to the fore the connection between power and people; Power is an intense kind of an experience, which according to Foucault, circulates in a particular society and takes into control many different subjects. Among them the postcolonial

understanding of nation, nationhood, racism and cosmopolitanism are discussed in the next few sections.

The struggle between the colonized people and the colonial forces be it ideology or power structures, results in the resistance of the colonized people against the colonial people. This struggle is apparently translated to political, economic and cultural institutions, in fact to the lowest unit. There seems to be a rejection of anything colonial and the focus shifts from global to the local. This kind of political engagement is called anti-colonial nationalism. Anti-colonialism took different forms such as liberation from the racial and class struggles. It also often turned out to be a demand for political and cultural recognition of differences between ethnic, indigenous and local identities. Colonial ideology brought about a perspectival change in understanding cultures. Binarism was the new order. Binarism is a binary or duality seen in entities for examples there is a binary between colonizer and the colonized; white and black, civilized and primitive; advanced and retarded; good and evil, beautiful and ugly, teacher and pupil; doctor and patient powerful and powerless, civilized and uncivilized; ability and inability and so on. The binary became a taboo. Texts and cultural institutions began to be read from the binary perspective. There was even attempt fix the binary ideology as the reason for all struggles, be it racial or gender.

The dynamics of language and power in pre- colonial Indian English literature are complex, reflecting diverse cultures and traditions. Literature of this period often portrays the influence of local languages, showcasing a rich tapestry of narratives. Power dynamics are narratives. Power dynamics are evident in the representation of rulers, social structures, and the impact of regional languages on the evolving English literary landscape. Writers navigated these intersections, shaping a unique literary identity that blended indigenous perspectives with the English language.

Impact of colonization on Indian English literature is Colonialism significantly influenced Indian English literature, shaping its themes, perspectives, and language. Writers during the colonial period often depicted of British rule on Indian society, and the struggles for identity and independence. This period produced literary works that reflected the socio- political realities of

colonial India, contributing to the rich tapestry of Indian literature. Authors like Rabindranath Tagore and Raja Rao, for instance, explored the complexities of cultural hybridity and the quest for selfhood in the colonial context.

An Introduction of Post – Colonial Indian English Literature Postcolonial Indian English fiction in literature emerged as a significant genre in the mid- 20th century, reflecting the complex aftermath of British colonial rule. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and VIKRAN Seth explore themes of identity, cultural clash, and the legacy of colonialism, offering diverse perspectives on India's History and social dynamics. These narratives often blend traditional techniques, creating a rich tapestry that captures the complexities of postcolonial India.

In my current research paper objectives are, to explore how pre- colonial Indian English literature reflects indigenous cultures, trading's, and oral storytelling. Contrastingly, analyses post- colonial literature to uncover how it grapples with identity, hybridity, and the impact of British colonialism on language and themes. Emphasize the shift in narrative perspectives and socio-culture themes over theme. Literary Analysis, conduct a close examination of Pre- Colonial Indian English literature, focusing on linguistic nuances, culture symbolism, and indigenous storytelling techniques. Analyze the evolution of themes and motifs. Historical Context, provide a historical backdrop for pre-colonial literature, delving into societal structures, belief systems, and major events that influenced literary production. Connect these aspects to the works of the time.

Comparative Study, Compare the themes, styles and cultural representations Pre- colonial and post-colonial Indian English literature. Identify shifts in narrative strategies and the impact of colonial experiences on literary expression. Authorial Perspectives, Investigate the perspectives of authors in both periods, examining how their cultural identities and responses to colonialism are reflected in their works. Consider how writers negotiate socio- political landscape. Language Dynamics, Explore the impact of British colonialism on language use in Indian literature. Investigates how linguistic elements have evolved or resisted change over the two periods reflecting the influence of

colonial languages. Post- colonial critique, apply post- colonial literary theories to analyse post- colonial Indian English literature. Examine how writers respond to colonial cultural identities, and engage in processes of decolonization in their works. Reader Reception, investigate how pre-colonial and post-colonial literature are received by readers, both contemporary and historically. Explore how these works contribute to shaping cultural consciousness and national identity.

Archival Research, if possible, consult archives, letters and historical documents to gain insights into the socio- cultural context of literary production during both pre- colonial and post- colonial periods. Interviews /Surveys, Conduct interviews or surveys with scholars, writers, and readers to gather contemporary perspectives on the significance and impact of pre- colonial and post-colonial Indian English literature. Conclusion and Reflection Summarize findings, reflecting on the continuity and changes in Indian English literature across the colonial divide. Highlight the enduring themes and the evolving nature of literary expression in response to historical shifts. In pre- colonial English Literature, indigenous cultures often express their stories, myths and traditions orally. Post – Colonial literature reflects the impact of colonization, exploring themes of identity, cultural clash, and resistance. In present times, writers continue to address these themes incorporating diverse narratives. The evolution showcase, shaped and historical landscape, shaped by historical shifts and cultural reclamation.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "New Racism, Colour-Blind Racism, and the Future of Whiteness in America." *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, edited by Ashley W. Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Taylor and Francis, 2003, pp. 345–346.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Random House, 1970.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Harvard UP, 2000.
- Matsuda, Mari. "Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations." *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, vol. 22, 1987, p. 323.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. 2nd ed., Viva Books, 2013.
- Morton, Stephen. *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Routledge, 2003.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson, 2008.
- Peller, Gary. "Race Consciousness." *Duke Law Journal*, 1990, pp. 758–840.
- Said, Edward W. "Orientalism." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2008.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*. Routledge, 2006.
- Sniderman, Paul M., et al. "The New Racism." *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1991, pp. 423–447.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule." *Colonialism and Culture*, edited by Nicholas B. Dirks, University of Michigan Press, 1992.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "Race and Racism." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2008.
- Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Blackwell, 1987, p. 108.
- "Black Nationalism." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2014.
- "Critical Race and Postcolonial Theory." *Routledge*, 2014.
- "Diaspora." *Oxford Dictionary*, 2014.

“Hybridity.” *Key Terms in Post-Colonial Theory*, 2010.

“Mimicry.” *Key Terms in Post-Colonial Theory*, 2010.

Sumiyyah Arif

Dr. Sumiyyah Arif is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Saraswati Higher Education and Technical P.G. College, Ayar, Gahani, Varanasi, affiliated with Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapeeth, Varanasi. Her academic interests include Indian English literature, colonial and postcolonial studies, and literary and cultural studies.