

Aula 2

INTRODUCTION TO POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

META

Introduce students to Postcolonial Theory.

OBJETIVO

Ao final desta aula, você deverá ser capaz de:

Prepare students to the study of postcolonial literature by making them acquainted with the theoretical debate that underpins it.

Develop students' critical thinking as to the complexity of what is frequently labelled "postcolonial"

Present some of the key concepts within Postcolonial Theory.

PRERREQUISITO

Notions about the historicity of the concept of literature;

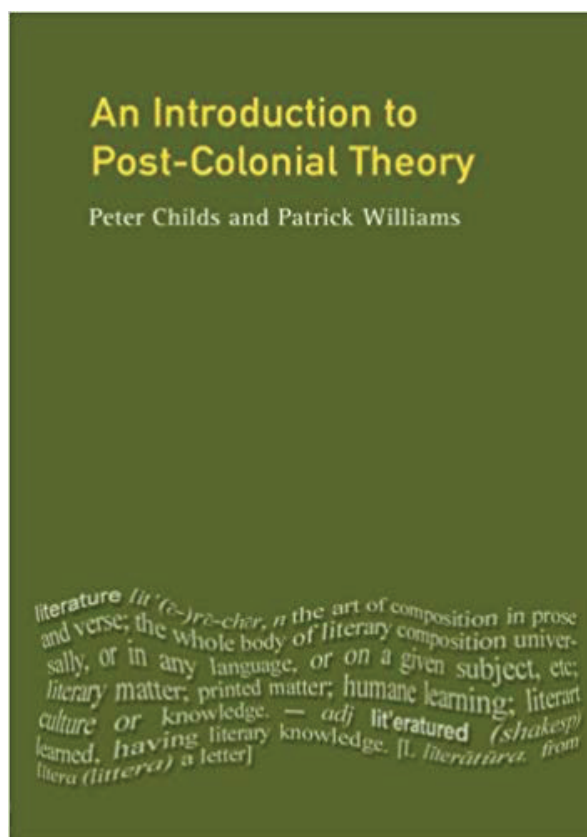
Notions of the process of formation and institutionalization of Literary History and literary theory as disciplines that have in Literature its object of study.

Notions of the relationship between Literary History and literature teaching.

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INTRODUÇÃO

The focus of this new series of lessons will rest upon the study of what is widely referred to as Postcolonial Literature. It is advisable, however, that before taking up such an arduous task, one should become acquainted with some of the questions that have been raised by those whose job has been that of theorizing on the nature of postcolonial literature. Some of such questions bring to light a number of complexities as well as paradoxes that the term “postcolonial” entails. That said, what you will see ahead is by and large based on what has been presented on a book entitled *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* by Peter Childs and R.J. Patrick Williams, in which they look into the plurality of meanings in the term “postcolonial” by asking about “when, where and who is the postcolonial?”.



Let us address the first question, shall we? Have you ever thought about when “the post-colonial is”? In other words, to which period/time does the term “post-colonial” refer? As you will soon find out, there are multiple answers to this question, which may vary in complexity. When faced with such an interrogation, one might readily reply that the expression alludes to “that which comes after the colonial”. And indeed there is some sense

to it, since the prefix “post”, if taken literally, means “after or subsequent to something”. This answer, however, presents a few limitations, one of which lies in its Eurocentric perspective. In fact, eurocentricism is a big issue when it comes to defining what the post-colonial is.

Childs and Williams raise the following question: if the post-colonial is that which comes after the colonial, when is the colonial? Or, to put it differently, to which colonialism one is referring? More often than not, if someone employs that term, they usually have 20th-century British and French empires in mind, an understanding that stems from a Eurocentric view of the world. What about other colonial periods, such as those of Spanish and Portuguese domination? Do they not count? Also, one could go even further and ask about those empires which preceded the modern age, such as the Roman that conquered vast territories all over Europe. Can you see how tricky it is to define an apparently unequivocal word?

Some critics argue, however, that European colonialism, given its range as well as effectiveness, has been an unprecedented phenomenon, for which reason the use of post-colonial as referring to “that which comes after European colonialism” would be justified. By accepting this point, a simple answer to “when is the postcolonial” would be “now”, since we have been living a moment that followed the dismantling of the European colonization.

Another answer is that which sees the “post-colonial” as a synonym for “anti-colonial”, i.e., a type of counter discourse, which aims to combat most of the biased assumptions European colonialism put in circulation. This is Stephen Slemon’s view, who writes:

Definitions of the post-colonial of course vary widely, but for me the concept proves most useful not when it is used synonymously with a post-independence historical period in once-colonised nations, but rather when it locates a specifically anti- or post-colonial discursive purchase in culture, one which begins in the moment that colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others and which continues as an often occulted tradition into the modern theatre of neo-colonialist international relations (1991, p. 3).

One of the implications of such an answer is that it dislocates the beginning of the “post-colonial” to the moment a “colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others”. In other words, when a colonizing nation starts to write about its Others, that is when the post-colonial discourse can come into existing. Perhaps, one might ask: is it really possible to colonize the Other in a symbolic fashion? The answer is affirmative, if one looks at what Edward Said writes about in his *Orientalism*. According to him, the Occident conquered the Orient way before sending its troops to enforce a domination which already existed discursively. This problematizes

the notion to which “now” is the post-colonial. Slemon’s point indicates that the post-colonial seems to resist a strictly chronological categorization, being more effective to take it as a discursive strategy. Therefore, “when is the post-colonial” could be answered with “now and then”.

There is still another meaning to the term “post-colonial”. At times, the prefix “post” is also employed to refer to something which has been conceptually superseded or transcended. In this sense, the post-colonial would be any discourse that has “gotten beyond” the colonial mindset. This view, however, also brings its particularities, one of which has to do with the impossibility of locating a definite ending in colonialism. To what extent have the once-colonized nations gotten beyond colonialism? Is it possible to say that they have gone past colonialism? Is colonialism something which was left in the past? Many are not convinced of it. Despite agreeing to the fact that many colonizing nations no longer have their armies in overseas territories, most critics from different fields of inquiry would easily grant that they still maintain indirect control of such regions economically as well as political. How is it possible to say we have gotten “beyond” the colonial if, as many have pointed out, we live in a neocolonial world?

If we decide to see things through this perspective, then the answer to “when is the post-colonial” would be “not quite yet”, since most will say that we have not quite supplanted colonialism, as it is still around under disguise.

There is yet one final remark that should be made about this matter and it will drive us back to the issue of eurocentricism already touched upon at the opening of this lesson. Why should the decolonized nations accept the conceptual categories/labels which were created by their former metropolises? The term “post-colonial” places “the colonial” (meaning European colonialism) at the center, rendering everything else as secondary, peripheral. For some critics, such labels belong to a history that has been made by the former colonizing nations, for which reason they should be rejected by those once under colonial domination. The latter should come up with their own terms to inform their own narratives.

WHERE IS THE POST-COLONIAL?

This is another question which begs different answers. Similarly to the previous interrogation, there is a simple, common-sense answer to it, on the one hand, and a less obvious one, on the other. The former consists of asserting that the location of the post-colonial are the regions which were once colonized by the European empires. From this perspective, it would be easy to geographically determine the post-colonial. Most of the African countries, for instance, would unmistakably go under the category of post-colonial nations, if one adopts such a criterion. There are, however, countries that, despite having been colonized by Europe, are usually grouped

with the once colonizing European nations, making it hard for one to see them as post-colonial countries. Perhaps, the most notorious case is that of Canada. Does it resemble a post-colonial nation? Other atypical cases are those of the United States of America and Australia.

There is yet another issue when it comes to “where the post-colonial is”. According to Said, colonialism did not affect all regions evenly. In fact, one of its main characteristics is its unevenness. That happens because every empire had its own needs, interests and trajectories, meaning that the penetration, control and exploitation of colonialism have taken place in different levels and took diverse paths, depending on place it installed itself. That is probably why regions such as China and the Middle East, despite never having been colonies, were more affected by colonialism than many countries that were. That also helps explain why some countries managed to decolonize themselves through a less violent process than others. Take, for example, Ghana and Nigeria whose independence processes were relatively swift and peaceful and countries like Algeria, where independence came at very high price.

And what about countries like Northern Ireland? Is it post-colonial? If you ask an Irish person, you will most certainly get a negative. Or, regions such as that of the Middle East? Is this a post-colonial territory? Many Palestinians will say that they still live under some sort of colonialism and it seems that there will be no solution in the near future. Not to mention those regions which still struggle with the claws of colonialism. Colonialism did not penetrate all regions in an even fashion nor did it disappear completely from a number of countries.

Another aspect that complicates the answer to our question has to do with a phenomenon referred to as “internal colonization”. It happens when large numbers of immigrants from former colonies move to their former metropolises. The migration of the colonized to the once colonizing power blurs the line between concepts such as that of center/periphery, metropolis/colony and, ultimately, affects the definition of where the post-colonial is.

WHO IS THE POST-COLONIAL?

Who is the post-colonial after all? Or who could call themselves that? An obvious answer would “the people who inhabit the former colony territories”. Yet, this is not a completely satisfying answer, given that there are still places which cannot be said to be completely free of colonialism. If this is so, one cannot say that all the people who inhabit countries that were once colonies are post-colonial. There is also another issue related to “the First People”, i.e., those who inhabited the place before the arrival of the colonizers. From which perspective, are Brazilians post-colonial, for example? What do indigenous peoples say about this? From their perspective, there is no such thing as post-colonialism. Think of the native inhabitants

in Australia or Canada. But there is more to it. What should we say about “internal colonization”? Are those immigrants who moved to their former metropolises post-colonial?

Things can get even more complicated if we think of post-colonialism as a type of discourse. A Post-colonial person, from such a perspective, would be that who adopted an anticolonial discourse or mindset. In other words, one could easily find someone who has never been to former colony that would fit such a label, as well as someone who came from a former colony that would not, i.e., someone, say, from Ghana who still maintains a colonial mindset or who endorses a colonial discourse. In this sense, you can find many people in Brazil, who, despite living in a once Portuguese colony, are definitely not post-colonial.

Lastly, there are also those who reject such a label, given its Eurocentric character. Therefore, another answer to “who is the post-colonial” would be “not me”. There are academics who are fond of such an attitude, one of whom is Carole Boyce Davies, who questions the relevance of post-coloniality to black women writers, and endorses their reluctance to be labeled.

CONCLUSÃO

As you could see, these are questions whose answers are much more complicated one might think at first. The purpose of this lesson, however, has less to do with making you come to a final answer than making you understand the complexity behind apparently unequivocal questions as well as the inadequacy of ready-made, unnuanced answers. Evidently, we will not (nor do we intend to) exhaust this subject matter here. Our intent consisted solely of informing you about some of the contentious issues which have been discussed by post-colonial theorists, without which knowledge you would have a shallow understanding of the term “post-colonial” – which names the type of literature you will be studying from now onwards – as well as the meanings it may assume.



RESUMO

In this lesson, you will be introduced to a few important questions that have been raised by some theorists as to “when, where and who the post-colonial is”. Such an introduction is relevant as it will prepare you to the study of post-colonial literature per se. It will also provide you with a less simplistic view of the “post-colonial”, by problematizing some of the meanings that have been assigned to it. You will notice that for each question there will be at least two different answers, which differ from each other in their level of complexity.



Write a short text (at most two pages), using 12-point font size, Times New Roman, and 1.5 line spacing, summarizing the main points of this lesson.

ACTIVITY COMMENT

This activity aims at building a text-synthesis of the main points addressed in this lesson. It will also allow the student to develop his/her text-making skill as well as better assimilate what was discussed throughout the lesson.



PRÓXIMA AULA

THE TERM “POST-COLONIAL”

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