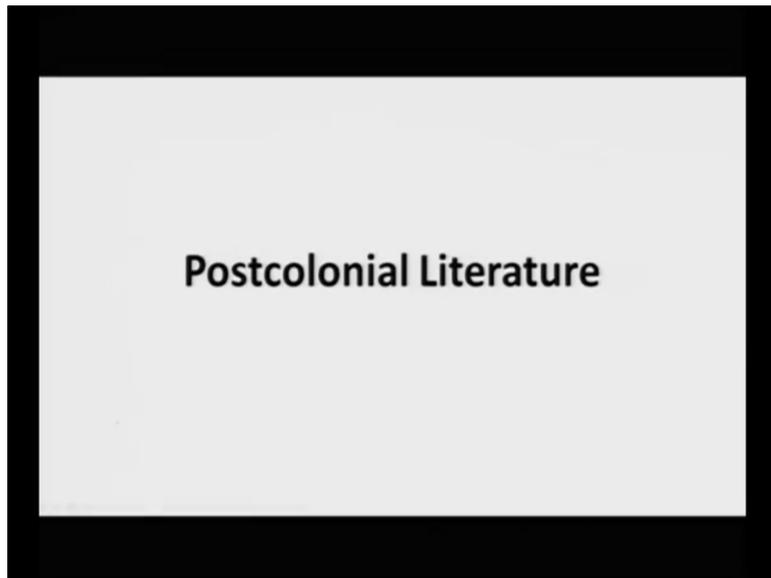


**Postcolonial Literature**  
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**Lecture No. #01**  
**Introduction – What is Postcolonialism?**

Hello and welcome to this course on postcolonial literature.

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Conventionally the study of English Literature in Indian universities and colleges has meant primarily a study of British literature. Or at most we include the study of American literature. In this new category, postcolonial literature, we encounter a fascinatingly wide array of literary texts that come from parts of the world as varied as India, West Indies, Africa, Canada, Australia, South America. And therefore, I think that, though this course is primarily aimed at graduate students of English literature, anyone who is interested in literature in general should benefit from this course.

And since this particular course is going to read the wide variety of literary texts that I just mentioned against the backdrop of colonialism and resistance to colonialism, it should also appeal to students who are interested to know more about the cultural legacies of colonialism as well as those who want to actively engage with the process of decolonisation or think through the process of decolonisation.

Postcolonial literature, as some of us will know, is a fast expanding field of literary studies and just the numbers of academic journals, of books, of monograph series, of conference proceedings that are regularly brought out with the word postcolonial or postcolonialism in their title, that very number is now mind-boggling. This course will try to map some of the exciting possibilities as well as challenges that this new area of literary studies has thrown up and it will do so by discussing literary texts as well as critical texts which have come to form the canons of postcolonial literature. But even before we try and do that, we try and discover the kind of literature that this category contains, we should try and understand in depth the meaning of the word postcolonial or postcolonialism because at the end of the day this is the term which holds the literary category together and gives meaning to it.

But an attempt to understand the meaning of the term or to answer the question what is postcolonialism is fraught with difficulties. It is in fact a challenge. And I refer to it as a challenge primarily because for the past four decades now, this term postcolonialism has been used to mean various different things. In fact there is also no general consensus as to how the term postcolonial or postcolonialism should be written. Should it be written with a hyphen separating post and colonialism or should it be written as a single word? So our first task therefore would be to know how to navigate through this rather confusing warren of meanings as well as spellings of this term postcolonialism.

Now if you look at the word “postcolonialism” carefully, you will notice that it is composed of two different elements. The major element or the major component is of course the word “colonialism” but there is also a very important prefix that is attached to the word which is “post”. And that prefix adds an important dimension to our understanding of the term. Now if we go to the dictionary and look up the prefix “post”, we will see that generally it means “after” or “behind”. So if we attach the prefix “post” before a noun which denotes a particular event, then “post” indicates something that happens or comes after the event, that is indicated by the noun.

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So for instance, if we are looking at the word post-graduation, for instance, which also uses the same prefix “post”, then we will see that by adding the prefix post, the word post-graduation signifies something which comes after or happens after the graduation. So if we are talking about post-graduation degree, for instance, if I am doing a post-graduation degree in English, that will mean that I have already completed my graduation and I am now studying for a degree which can be obtained only after graduation.

If we try to decode the term postcolonialism using this same logic, then the term should mean the period that comes “after” colonialism. If you try and understand this particular meaning from within the Indian context, then we are almost inevitably directed towards a certain date and that date is of course 15th August 1947. As we all know, India till 1947 was a British colony and on 15th August 1947 we ceased to be a colony and we became a sovereign nation-state. Now this should mean therefore that the period in the history of India that comes after the date of our political independence is the history of postcolonial India. Now there are certain problems if you understand the term postcolonialism in this sense and I am going to come to these problems soon enough. But let me state here that this is not an altogether wrong understanding of the term postcolonialism.

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Indeed, the word postcolonial, used with a hyphen separating “post” and “colonial”, has often been used to refer to the post-independence history of states which were once politically part of large European empires. Which means that this equation, postcolonial means post-independence, is not an altogether wrong equation. But nevertheless this is not the mainstream understanding of the term postcolonialism within the field of postcolonial

studies, and to mark this difference, the word “postcolonialism” is used without the hyphen



by most scholars of postcolonial studies.

But what is the problem if you use postcolonialism to mean post-independence? Well even without a very well-rounded definition of colonialism at our hand, we are going to discuss that later, but right now even without a definition of colonialism, I think we all agree that colonialism has a number of different facets, different aspects. And the political aspect, though an important one, is not the only aspect of colonialism. To try and understand this further let us look at the date 15th August 1947 more closely. What exactly happened on that date? Well on that date we ceased to be politically governed by the British parliament or British monarch. They ceased having any direct political control over our affairs. But this political power which Britain exercised over India till 14th August 1947, till the date before independence, was only part of what we understand as British colonialism. Indeed, apart from the political domain, British colonialism also exerted a large amount of influence on the social, cultural, and economic spheres of India and those influences did not come to an abrupt stop when we achieved our independence on 15th August 1947.

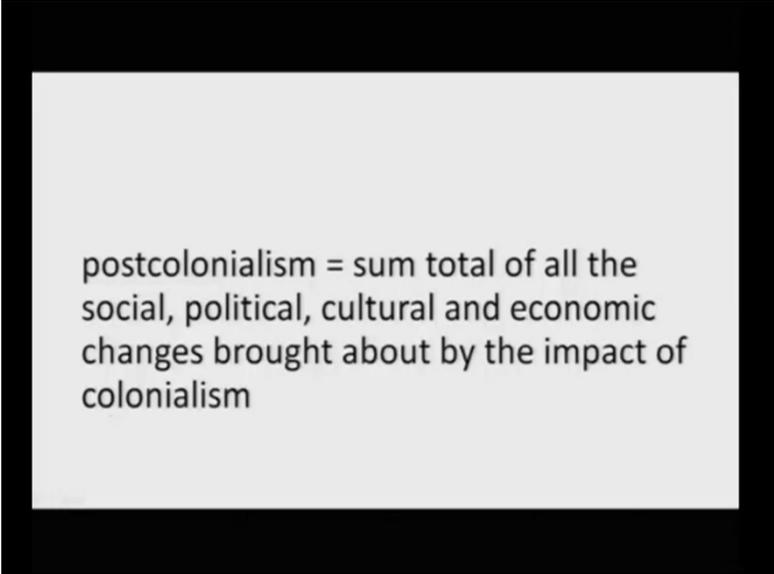
So even today, if we look around, we find ourselves surrounded by legacies of British colonialism which range from the miles and miles of railway tracks that criss-cross this country to the English language in which I am now communicating with you. Perhaps the most profound impact of British colonialism in India was economic. Because it was with the advent of colonialism that India became thoroughly integrated within a global network of capitalism and even seven decades after gaining political independence we are still very

much integrated within that global network of capitalism. So clearly not everything that constituted British colonialism in India has come to an end. Therefore, as far as understanding postcolonialism within the Indian context is concerned, a date like 15th August 1947 does not prove to be very useful.

Is there then any other way of understanding the term postcolonialism? Well there is. And if you think about the discussion that we have had so far you will realise that we have been trying to understand postcolonialism as signifying things which come after the end of colonialism. And that end is apparently signified by the date 15th August 1947 as far as India is concerned. But as we have seen, many aspects which constituted the process of colonialism, at least in the context of British Raj in India, has survived well beyond our date of political independence. And therefore it is not practicable to talk about the end of colonialism. But we get a new insight into things if we think of postcolonialism as a word that signifies not something that comes after the end of colonialism but as signifying things that come after the beginning of colonialism.

Now I can understand that this sounds slightly confusing. But to help us understand this better, and this is crucial, let us again use the familiar context of Indian history. Now if rather than the end of British colonialism in India, we have to look for its beginning, then we will see that we are pushed as far back as the 18th century when the Mughal emperor Farrukhshiyar issued a firman allowing the East India Company, the British East India company, there were in fact, a number of East India companies, the British East India company duty free trading rights in Bengal. And since the first quarter of the 18th century when the firman came into effect, the British colonial power started expanding their economic and political influence in India which was soon coupled by a strong socio-cultural influence as well. Now the impact of this colonial influence was such that the India that emerged after the first impact of colonialism was felt, was markedly different from the India that was there before the impact of colonialism.

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postcolonialism = sum total of all the social, political, cultural and economic changes brought about by the impact of colonialism

Postcolonialism in this Indian context would therefore mean the sum total of all the various social, political, economic and cultural changes that started being perceived after the first impact of colonialism was felt. And if you notice here in the slide, I have spelt postcolonialism without the hyphen. So chronologically, postcolonial India is not the India after 1947 as far as the field of Postcolonial studies is concerned, rather it is the India which started emerging from the 18th century onwards as the colonial power, British colonial power, started spreading its influence across the land.

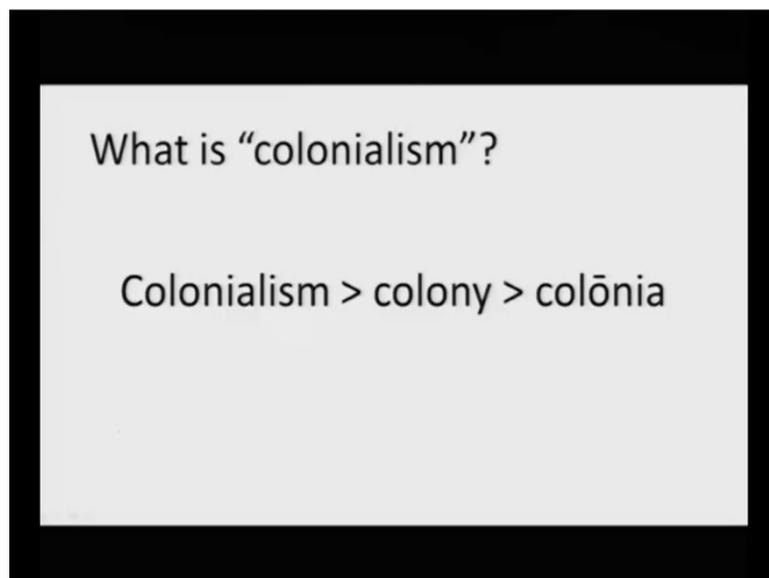
Now at this point, let us stop for a while and think about this new definition of postcolonialism that we have arrived at. If postcolonialism is the sum total of the social, economic, political, cultural changes that are brought about because of colonialism then are these changes relevant only for the colonised society and not for the colonising society? In other words, when we are talking about the British colonialism in India, can we only talk about the emergence of a postcolonial India and not about postcolonial Britain? Well that is a wrong assumption. Why? Because even a cursory acquaintance with the British history of 18th-century and 19th-century and even 20th-century would tell us that the British society was as deeply impacted, as deeply influenced by the process of colonialism as the Indian society.

And in fact this is not very difficult to comprehend if we keep in mind that colonialism is ultimately a two-way traffic, a two-way traffic of ideas, goods and people between the colonised and the colonising country. Therefore, it is implausible to think that colonialism

only affects the colonised people and not the colonisers. Thus, if we can talk about a postcolonial India, we can also with equal justice talk about the emergence of a postcolonial Britain.

Now so far, we have been talking about colonialism without really trying to explore its definition, its meanings but now let us look at it more closely. And if we want to understand what is colonialism, then the historical origin of the word provides us with a very interesting clue.

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The word colonialism has at its root the word colony which in turn is derived from the Latin word "colōnia". The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "colōnia" as "farms" or "landed estates" which were located in newly conquered territories of the Roman empire, and were originally given as gifts to Roman citizens who are mostly veteran soldiers. And establishing such Roman colonies in an otherwise hostile territory ensured that the occupied land remained under control and among the various colonies that Roman had, London was a very prominent one.

Now this understanding of colony and colonialism, via the root word "colōnia", throws up a number of interesting points. The first point is that colonialism or the process of establishing colonies is essentially a violent process because it involves forcibly occupying the land and using the territorial resources that originally belonged to someone else. Colonies are therefore sites of hostility and violence. As we will see in this course, the colonial violence that I just

mentioned makes itself felt at several different levels - social, economic, cultural. But these more abstract kinds of violence are almost always coupled with the brutalities of physical violence. And we see this for instance in Peru, via during the early decades of the 16th century, Spanish conquistadors reduced the native population from about half a crore, to around three lakhs.

We again see this more recently in the 1893 war against the Matabele kingdom, which is in present day Zimbabwe, where the British forces almost mowed down their African opponents like grass using the newly invented Maxim gun, which is a special kind of a machine gun. So, though in this course we will talk a lot about the cultural violence perpetrated by colonialism as well as resistance to this cultural violence, we should not become blind to the physical violence, to the gruesome physical violence which almost always underlines the process of colonialism.

The second point to note in the dictionary definition of the Latin word “colōnia”, which informs the present day use of the word colonialism, is that though Roman colonia were settlements away from the heart of Italy which was the centre of the Roman empire, they were nevertheless inhabited by people who still retained their rights as Roman citizens and who represented the political and economic interests of their mother country in the distant territory of the colonies. Therefore, when we are talking about colonialism which derives from this Roman model, we are always talking about this relationship between a mother country, which is otherwise called metropolis and from where the colonising people come, and the conquered country which is transformed into a colony so that its resources can be siphoned off.

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If we look at this world map of 1921, here the shaded areas represent the British colonial empire. And here you can see that the comparatively small island of Britain is acting as the colonial mother country or metropolis over a huge territory that includes South Asia, which of course contains present day Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka. There is also Burma. It contains vast stretches of Africa, it contains Canada, it contains Australia, it contains New Zealand.

Now it can be argued that such territorial conquests and expansion, as this map shows, was always a part of human history. As we have seen, even the British capital of London, which acted as a centre of the metropolis of this entire huge colonial empire, was itself once a colony of the Roman empire. So doesn't this make the history of colonialism really the entire history of humanity?

Well it may be so but as far as postcolonial studies is concerned, the focus is on the kinds of colonialism that emerged since the sixteenth century and that were driven primarily by the profit making motives of capitalism. We will be discussing this relationship between colonialism and capitalism later on, but before that we will have to try and understand postcolonialism and its relation to literature. This will be our topic for the next lecture. Thank you.