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Making the Canon: Whose Postcolonial Literature is It?

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Making the Canon: Whose Postcolonial Literature is It?

Abstract

The presenter argues that post-colonial literatures are increasingly "culturally" appropriated by Western literacy critics and institutions. Their so-called incorporation into the category of World literatures has had little impact on North/South political and economic relations and Western representations of non-western cultures in popular culture. Moreover, the process of decolonization needs to be re-activated by African scholars from the South living in the North as well as within African universities.

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The thought that multiculturalism in the American education system holds the answer to racial understanding and harmony still lingers in the minds of many educators of different ethnic backgrounds; unfortunately, they fail to see the superficial results achieved by the so-called multicultural approach as their students get ready for college, or the workforce. Furthermore, the challenges of enforcing the totally new worldview befall scarce and under-funded Black Studies. "Things Fall Apart, Beloved and Native Son" are some of the works skimmed over in a handful of high schools. Very few of these students will be given the opportunity to re-visit these texts, thus shattering the idea - now in vogue among some postcolonial scholars - that these texts now belong to the Western literary canon.

In this article I will attempt to show how Third World Literatures and, in particular, those produced by past and present writers of African descent, have never truly gained recognition as culturally and nationally self-sufficient literatures, but have been systematically extrapolated out of their legitimate contexts and used as appendages of Western literatures in "European" postcolonial literature courses. Cultural appropriation is not new: it can be traced back to prehistory; however, it becomes a profound ethical problem in the age of patents, copyright policies and human rights. Fundamental questions pertaining to the guarantee of the human dignity of Africans in postcolonial theories and their academic utilization need to be addressed. For instance, how can certain Western scholars place the cultural productions of peoples of African descent on a pedestal, when the producers and representatives of these cultures continue to be wronged economically, politically and socially, in local, international and global contexts? Educators claiming theoretical knowledge in postcolonialism have, at times, deconstructed otherness by creating new hegemonic forms of discursive control which monopolize the whole post-colonial discourse. Is there such a thing as British Postcolonial Literature? If there is, it should be discussed with all the formerly colonized producers of African descent and not presented as a legitimate and necessary part of world literature, as I have witnessed more than once. The odds at stake are extremely high, but so are the responsibilities of educators. Regardless of their race and cultures the latter need to re-visit the hegemonic ways in which they mentally operate, before pouring their anthropological findings over students.

Linked to these important questions of accountability is the difficult matter of the ideological and political implications of Third world fiction which subtly inscribe

themselves in the subtexts but are left "unseen" by Western postcolonial practitioners. Finally, one of the most recent consequences of the development of postcolonial theories in education has been the flourishing of studies about whiteness as a cultural and historical identity. Critics of different sensibilities have sought to problematize this "not so new" notion (DuBois' "The Souls of White Folks.") So far this phenomenon can be construed as an ideological backlash to the rich body of African cultural life and works (from oral to written). It is true a few prominent white scholars have produced valuable investigative historiographies of white superiority (Ignatiev, E.G Hale to name a few); they have produced these in the wake of the renewed academic interests in ethnic studies. Naturally, we need to differentiate all these views on whiteness as well as their political agenda. As we begin looking at ways in which multicultural policies may be affected, the need for new critical readings of Black and White identities will arise, hopefully taking into account the struggles of Postcolonial Criticism to de-colonize itself (Chinweizu and wa Thiong'o).

Presenter

Sonia Delgado-Tall is an Assistant Professor at Roosevelt University in Chicago, where she teaches African and African-American Literatures and French. Prior to Roosevelt, she taught at the Universite' Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal. She received her Ph.D in English at the Universite de Paris-Sorbonne. Her current research is on gender and development in Africa and African Women. Her articles on African Drama, African Cinema and the Harlem Renaissance were published in the "Revue des Etudes Anglaises," the "Literary Griot" and the "Journal of Black Studies."