

Using a Postcolonial Theoretical Frame to Teach African Literature in High School

By

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Senior Honors Thesis

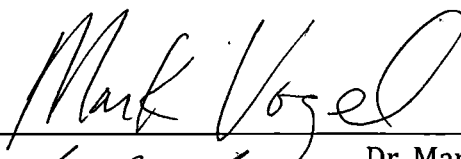
Appalachian State University

Submitted to the Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science

May, 2017

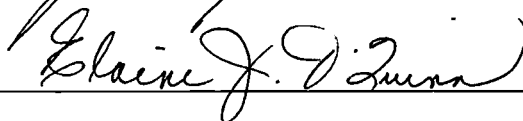
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Abstract

The paper explores techniques and important concepts related to the teaching of African literature through a postcolonial lens. The author uses active implementation of activities in a high school classroom as a base of research to support pedagogical theories and approaches that best adhere to the needs of Western students. The postcolonial education concepts included are compositional application, gender dynamics, language exploration, geocriticism, and cultural diversity. The purpose of this research is to aid other teachers in integrating this information into their classrooms.

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Introduction

Applicability in a real-life classroom setting reinforces theoretical work in the field of Education. The research that supports the ideas in this study comes primarily from my experiences as a student teacher. During this time, my cooperating teacher gave me the opportunity to implement a unit on African Literature that thematically focused on postcolonialism. This is something I had been particularly interested in during my coursework, and I was eager to put my ideas to the test. The classroom is an unpredictable environment. In that respect, working with real tenth grade students enabled me to adjust my pedagogical approach to postcolonialism in African literature. This content is incredibly important to bring into schools. With my experience, I have a better understanding of how to do so with realistic and applicable techniques.

As a beginning teacher, I have noticed an increasing gap between America and developing countries as well as an increasing amount of prejudice towards those represented as lesser in the media. This gap and ensuing otherness manifests itself in racial slurs casually used in the classroom, descriptions of cultures outside of America as primitive or “backward”, and a lack of materials educating people on the reality of life outside of America. Therefore, I consider it of the utmost importance to integrate within our teaching of literature a concentration on correcting misconceptions about other countries and peoples. Postcolonial theory requires students to question what they have come to understand about social spaces and history; it forces them to break down the colonization of their own interpretations of social dynamics and otherness. In the current academic climate, “across all disciplines, a growing awareness of the importance of minority and subjugated voices to histories and narratives that have previously excluded them has led to widespread interest in postcolonial theory” (Lunsford 1). Making room

for these theoretical discussions in the classroom provides a constructive space for students to explore diversity, identity, language, and social justice. These are all topics of conversation that should always hold importance and presence in the content we teach.

These social discussions come more easily when analyzing our own American classics, but it is perhaps more critical that we remind students that these same discussions can happen in the context of literature from other places and with other people. Teachers and students alike often overlook this concept of similarity, as there is a lack of focus on non-Eurocentric literature. Does one ever question why American literature and British literature often have their own courses, while every other origin gets crammed into World Literature? The compacted nature of world literature studies in high school means students are only afforded a cursory display of the “classics” that most readily present the world issues deemed most pressing to global knowledge. Admittedly, the time I spent as a grade school student led to a potent distaste for World Literature. From the material provided, I gathered that literature originating from outside of America primarily consisted of either really old texts in a language I was unfamiliar with or graphic stories of war and poverty that existed so far outside of the life I knew that it felt completely of another time or world. In effect, World literature did not pertain to the world in which I lived. It is because of this misconception that I believe we must alter our teaching of World Literature to include more diversity; only then can we begin to correct the otherness that has invaded students’ feelings towards other cultures and their history. An area of literature that has been done quite an injustice in the American high school curriculum is African literature. American education largely misrepresents literature originating from Africa, which contributes to the tension and discomfort concerning relations between African and American cultures. It is this very type of literature that I began my teaching career so excited to present and discuss with

my students, but I only encountered severe unfamiliarity and cultural misconceptions. The African literature, or more appropriately the literature about Africa, that teachers previously expose them to had a colonial focus and taught rather limited and racist depictions of the cultures there. I set out to address these deficiencies and am convinced that teaching African literature through a postcolonial lens enables teachers to address problems of denigration, power structures, and social spaces in terms of both global awareness and the shared experience of human individuals.

Postcolonialism in Terms of African Literature

In teaching African Literature, many historical and social themes arise that can prove very difficult for students to grapple with if not done properly; however, these are often the most essential themes for them to understand. My experience with teaching postcolonial literature to high school students and the research integrated into my planning process has led to the formation of an applicable, holistic definition of postcolonialism that I use to build a strong approach to the concept in a classroom setting.

Postcolonialism is a term that carries historical, literary, and social significance. It is not just an era, one plot point on a timeline, and it is not just a theme in a book. As critic Gerald Gaylard phrases it, “Postcolonialism is not just a period, it is an idea; a transnational and transhistorical idea.” (Gaylard 4). He is referring to the idea that led to the foundation of a reactive conversation between the language of colonization and that of its victims. The emergence of postcolonial theory, specifically in the area of African literature, set the stage for a debate questioning the Western understanding of the historical and social terms of colonization. The colonial literature that took precedence in the Western canon at the turn of the 20th century,

like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, had previously determined many general assumptions and misunderstandings about African cultures and history; therefore, "African Postcolonialism not only rejects the 'father' of Western canon, but regularly displays contradictory [ideas and narratives]" (Gaylard 4). The idea of postcolonialism and the dialogue it created transcends the boundaries of periodic timelines; it is a way of thinking, a critical lens that people should apply to every moment in history and every word ever written. This is how educators can present theoretical postcolonialism to students.

A crucial part of pushing students to read through the postcolonial lens is encouraging them to question the history of literature that came before the reactive works of the postcolonial era. Like all written works, colonial literature was created with a purpose. Chinua Achebe theorized that "the last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and Africans in very lurid terms. The reason for this had to do with the need to justify slave trade and slavery." (Bacon). When there is a purpose and a motive behind the creation of literature, especially one fueled so entirely by prejudice, there will always be a significant amount of bias present. Because of this, it is important to teach the historical context of literature as a debate and not a consensus. I allowed students to think about what images and ideas they hold about Africa or our history pertaining to Africa, and then I generated independent research opportunities where they specifically address those ideas and misconceptions they might have. Essentially, I encouraged them to argue with what they have been taught to believe. Going beyond just teaching what the author wrote, encouraging students to ask themselves why an author may have portrayed an event in the way they did will allow them to better understand the implications of what was written and the relation it has to what came after it. When teaching through a postcolonial lens, it is important to

bring in the differing narrative of colonialism to illustrate how the opposing narratives converse. Furthering his comment on the purpose of colonial literature, Achebe also touched on the essential motive of postcolonial literature by saying that “the Africans themselves, in the middle of the twentieth century, took into their own hands the telling of their story” (Bacon). The surge of voices and stories that came out of Africa in response to European colonial texts provides the other half of the debate that colonial historians and writers started. Providing students with the context of this colonial conversation heeds the best results for a postcolonial theoretical discussion based on African literature.

Diversity in Canonical Literature

The unfamiliarity students have with African literature means that every book they pick up brings new information and a new perspective for them. With this in mind, the more diversity of perspective that a teacher integrates into their literature selections, the better. This approach to reading lies at the heart of the postcolonial movement, since its purpose is to tell stories previously untold and voice a variety of experiences covered up by colonial generalization. Therefore, teaching literature in a postcolonial nature inherently means stepping away from the familiarity of the Western canon and exploring the depths of literature from African writers.

There are fifty-three separate and incredibly diverse countries located in continental Africa. However, if one were to listen in on conversations among Western students, one would think there must only be a single village. Even as a teacher, because I am a product of Western education, I find myself saying the word “African” with the implication that things are uniform across the entire land. Referring to “African culture” and “African customs” in this way is detrimental to a young learner’s overall understanding of the context of their postcolonial

reading. For this reason, I suggest that educators preface any lesson or unit regarding a specific postcolonial work or idea with a survey of several postcolonial texts from different regions and writers. To accomplish this, when I teach postcolonialism using African Literature, I find as many relevant works as possible and have my students pass them around and write any interesting elements they notice. In *Yellow Brick Roads: Shared and Guided Paths to Independent Reading, 4-12*, Janet Allen explains the basic methodology of such an activity as being “a quick and easy way to get a variety of books into secondary students' hands and introduce them to authors, titles, and topics that they may not be inclined to seek out on their own” (Allen). The focus of this is to bring in texts that the average American high school student would not normally encounter during their everyday educational experience. Passing around and analyzing a variety of postcolonial African texts introduces students to the topics of colonization, European relations with Africa, social violence, etc. while also displaying the diversity with which these topics have been written about. Most commonly, one of the only African texts a student experiences during the course of their education is *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. By integrating a simple survey of literature, the teacher will have expanded this limited exposure, potentially in the mere course of an hour; furthermore, this exposure will begin to familiarize Western students with certain aspects of African literature with which they may be uncomfortable. For instance, names of authors and characters that exist outside of the boundaries of modern English and stem from the many indigenous and regional languages of African countries. Diving into and exploring as many examples of African literature as possible will submerge students into the contextual reality of the Postcolonial African world.

Outside of the United States, many education systems integrate global literature early and consistently. In fact, many African postcolonial writers will claim that they were just as familiar

with Western and British stories as they were with their own. Ben Okri, Nigerian poet and novelist, said in an interview:

“All of [the stories] were intermingled. I didn’t separate one thing from the other. Aladdin was as African to me as Ananse. Odysseus was just another variation of the tortoise myth. Literature depends first and foremost on the fact that one person can write something that another wants to read. How is it possible, if it weren’t for the fact that essentially there’s something that’s shared” (Wilkinson 78).

The effect this creates for students in other countries is a limited feeling of otherness between their experience with literature originating from their own country and that of other countries. Teaching the “shared experience” of reading and writing, as Okri puts it, is an essential concept of Postcolonialism. Actively including a diverse selection of literature allows teachers and students alike to break down cultural barriers and recognize the similarities and connections of human experience. Therefore, counteracting the otherness presented to us in colonial literature. As educators, we need to stop looking at African literature, or even any literature outside of their own origins, as something foreign or unknown. Often, teachers subconsciously stick to what they know best and fear extending the horizons of instruction beyond their comfort zones because it is so alien to their own cultural identity. Admittedly, as a student teacher, diving into African literature with students for the first time felt uncomfortable. I feared that I would say or interpret something incorrectly. When I brought *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe into the classroom, I had armed myself with notes on African history and pronunciation of terms and names. They did not turn out to be very useful. I wound up avoiding saying the names of characters or talking about their culture at all, crippled by my own insecurity about how unfamiliar I was with the context; however, exploring other materials from African writers broadened my personal ability

to teach the reality and complexity of world literature. In these books and poems, I saw more names like the ones I was having trouble with and more references to cultures unlike my own; I became immersed in the language and uses of characters and my comfort levels grew. This is the very experience we need to be bringing to our students.

For many students, diverse literature will benefit their education on a personal level because representation in literature matters. Students who do not see themselves in literature will feel less motivated and less secure when it comes to reading, writing, and embracing the learning experience. Western classrooms harbor the existence of many potential student identities, and this includes students with a familial or cultural connection to Africa.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, author of *Americanah* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, said of her own experience with representation, “because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized” (Adichie). She had an education largely influenced by British intervention. She goes on to say, “the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are” (Adichie). Socially, this has severe consequences for the experiences of these underrepresented people in and outside of the classroom. Introducing a diverse array of postcolonial African characters provides an opportunity for students with personal or genealogical connections to Africa to discover positive representation in a way that they may not have experienced before.

When talking about representation and diversity in literature, it is also important to consider a student’s general ability to connect and relate to a novel. For this reason, I urge

teachers to consider young adult African novels. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is often the go-to canonical African novel for Western classrooms. Though it is an important and well-written novel, it is also around fifty years old and contains a lot of outdated language. With the limits I faced as far as resources and what texts my cooperating teacher had planned, I used Achebe's novel for my unit. However, these concepts would work just as well with young adult novels like *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie or *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* by William Kamkwamba. Since African literature and language already poses an unfamiliar landscape for students, it would prove beneficial to provide literature that relates more to their level.

The Denigration of African Culture in Western Education

Zeroing in on and exploring many different accounts of the postcolonial African experience benefits a student's cultural competency. Upon approaching an African novel in the classroom, likely for their very first time, one of my students asked, "Is this going to be about some African kid starving in a hut?" This may seem a comical exaggeration, but the reality is that most American students hold a denigrated image of the African story. Chinua Achebe, in discussing the teaching of his novel *Things Fall Apart*, noted that there is one fundamental understanding that Americans must have to appreciate African issues:

"Africans are people in the same way that Americans, Europeans, Asians, and others are people. Africans are not some strange beings with unpronounceable names and impenetrable minds. Although the action of *Things Fall Apart* takes place in a setting, with which most Americans are unfamiliar, the characters are normal people and their events are real human events. The necessity even to say this is part of a burden imposed

on us by the customary denigration of Africa in the popular imagination of the West.”

(Lindfors)

Misconceptions and racist language perpetuated by colonial texts, like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, have culturally disfigured both Africa and Africans in the minds of westerners.

Teaching African literature through a postcolonial lens aids in the reconstruction of Africa in the eyes of students in the United States. Postcolonial African writers have created a sect of literature that responds to colonial texts and their subsequent disfiguration of what it means to be African.

Author Bessie Head said of her work and the work of other African authors, “I think that many writers, in reaction against the humiliation of the colonial era, would like to build up an image of Africa, other than the humble humility of the sparsely furnished hut” (Head). The colonial era, as she puts it, simplified and chipped away at the intricate and illustrious histories of the many cultures in Africa to create an image of uncivilized people living in undeveloped areas. Though this may be the reality of a few areas, one could say the same about any other continent.

Colonial authors like Conrad effectively “humiliated” an entire people by painting an image of Africa like the one in the following passage from *Heart of Darkness*:

“We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly as we struggled round a bend there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming

us -- who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse... The earth seemed unearthly.” (Conrad)

Words such as “prehistoric” and “incomprehensible” have since become cultural tags that the entirety of Africa is still struggling to shake. It is the responsibility of educators to introduce this language and perception to students using a rhetoric of criticism. Western students must not fall victim to the inaccurate and racially charged portrayal of African cultures; instead, the focus of study should be one that actively changes these attitudes and negates the notion that Africa is “unearthly”.

Adichie, when speaking on her experience with an American roommate, said, “She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my ‘tribal music,’ and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.” Many American students hold these very same misconceptions. When I showed this Ted Talk to my students, I had them write down anything the video taught them about people from Africa. Assessing these notes led to the discovery that many of them held very primitive versions of Africans without even realizing it, claiming to have been shocked that “Africans could speak *our* language” or that “Africa had any universities.” Adichie continued:

“What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility

of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals. If I had not grown up in Nigeria, and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner.” (Adichie)

Upon hearing this, my students responded with confusion. They asked, “Well then, what is Africa?” This is the likely response of any average U.S. high school student. However, as Adichie explains, they are not wholly to blame for their misunderstanding of Africa’s many differing realities. Western and British literature, like Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, spread these misconceptions with their wildly inaccurate depictions of early Africa. In 1561, upon sailing to West Africa, John Lok recorded an observation of the people there that simply said, “They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts.” British explorers, authors, and colonialists have constructed this illustration of African peoples as a product of darkness and differences. These stories must be combatted just as often, if not more so, than they are taught in schools.

Geocritical Lens

Analyzing setting is a critical component of the most basic literary elements that we must teach our students. Therefore, by the time they reach high school, they are very familiar with the concept of location and setting. However, they are often familiar only with the Western colonial understanding of location. Setting plays a unique role in postcolonial African literature because “as a means to understand and counter the material and discursive efforts of imperialism, postcolonialism has introduced into literary theory a host of spatial concerns, concepts, and

metaphors: center/periphery, globalization, Global North/South, nationalism, localism, and many others...” (Crowley 4). When studying African Literature through a postcolonial theoretical lens, it is necessary to consider geocriticism because “one of the commonest postcolonialist images is that of the land outside of time, the nowhere land, the magical land.” (Gaylard 145). For many students, discussing place and setting in terms of postcolonial African literature will be a challenge. Many of these authors do not determine spatial boundaries for their stories, but instead leave the location up to conceptual interpretation and application. Chinua Achebe often intentionally waits until the end of his novels, specifically in *Things Fall Apart*, before he suggests that his setting would have any concrete connection to a real time and place. Tying the narrative to a specific plot point on a map is only detrimental to the motive of most postcolonial themes. When asked what nationality he most identifies his writings with, Kenyan author Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o responded:

“Basically as a writer I am interested in human relationships and the quality of human relationships and indeed the quality of human life...I feel that African people struggling against imperialism and for the national independence and democracy are in the same position as all Third World peoples from South America, from Southeast Asia, struggling against the same phenomenon. And I feel that those people in the Third World – whether from Africa, South America or Asia – struggling against imperialism are in the same battle as, let’s say, European peoples struggling against the system of exploitation in their own countries. So, in that sense, I feel that the struggle of Kenyan people, African people, Third World people, is not in contradiction with the democratic forces of peace in Europe today...[I belong to] all peoples struggling against economic exploitation and social oppression, those in the world struggling for human dignity.” (Wilkinson 131).

Concerning readers with spatial details and limitations with setting distracts them from, in their own minds, applying everything they read to the struggles of all people in similar situations. When teaching African literature centered on postcolonialism, one must encourage students to embrace the “nowhere land” concept and not get too hung up on pinpointing a locale. This way, it will be easier to avoid the mental blockade of thinking, “This book is about East Africa,” for example, and not considering how the themes reach into other spaces. This is especially a danger when reading postcolonial literature, specifically African postcolonial literature, because there is already that feeling of otherness and separation for American students.

This is not to say, however, that nationalism and identity have no place in postcolonial African literature. In *Postcolonial Spaces*, Andrew Teverson and Sarah Upstone wrote, “Place plays a significant role in how one defines one’s own identity and, equally, how that identity is defined by others.” (Crowley 4). Though setting is often not a focus, culture and identity are crucial themes to postcolonial readings; therefore, it is important to consider how the characters are defined in part by their own space and apply that to how we as readers are defined by our many spaces. Setting contributing to the development of characterization is a more familiar concept for students, so this concept should transfer more easily. Since elementary school, they have heard stories like the well-known Aesop fable *Town Mouse and Country Mouse*, in which two mice reveal different tastes based on different surroundings. This concept is not a unique one and appears in many tales, including those of African literature. When talking about how the setting in these books affects the identities of the characters, I asked them how their own surroundings have influenced their character. For instance, students who grew up in farming areas, and most of my students did, tend to have more of an immediate appreciation for land resources. I encourage them to consider how these characters are a product of their environment

in a similar way. It is surprising how quickly they go from describing a character as primitive for eating the locusts that fall annually to praising them for their resourcefulness. When we consider the geographical influence on a people's culture, we understand more about the differences between characters and ourselves. In that way, students are more able to connect with characters on a human level. It is a commonality among humans for the space we occupy to form our identities. Reading and assessing the identities in these books with that in mind makes us less likely to think of spaces and the people in them as lesser.

Language Exploration

An important responsibility of English teachers is to expose students to a range of language use and dynamics. These dynamics, or the ways with which language changes within a story and interacts with a changing plot, are often the central focus of analyzing literary techniques. That is, how texts use strong language or contrasting language to evoke certain images and thematic elements. The development of Postcolonial theory, specifically in terms of African literature, relies heavily on language and communication. Postcolonialism presents an opportunity for students to study the power of language, in terms of exploring how language has affected history and how detailed language can emphasize images.

Before mid-Twentieth century, as Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o explains in *Decolonising the Mind*, "The literature [the petite bourgeoisie] produced in European languages was given the identity of African literature as if there had never been literature in African Languages. Yet by avoiding a real confrontation with the language issue, it was clearly wearing false robes of identity: it was a pretender to the throne of the mainstream of African Literature" (Ngũgĩ 22). For years, European literature had a way of speaking over genuine African literature because English was more widely distributed among learners of the Western world and other developed

areas. Therefore, the very history of postcolonialism emerging shows the power of language. It was not until African writers began writing in English that the majority of American people even became aware of the ability of African peoples to produce large and diverse amounts of literature.

Ngũgĩ also states in *Decolonising the Mind*, “some are coming around to the inescapable conclusion articulated by Obi Wali with such polemical vigour twenty years ago: African literature can only be written in African languages...” (27). This belief stems from the idea that “literature written by African writers in European languages” exists as its own “hybrid tradition” called Afro-European Literatures (26). Ngũgĩ himself decided to start exclusively writing in his own regional languages, Gikuyu and Swahili, after writing this book. The debate between the merits of utilizing English as a vehicle of communication or loyalty to one’s African languages as support for a Postcolonial culture is one that has been going on for years, involving authors like Achebe, Ngugi, and Wole Soyinka. Achebe, though commonly using Igbo for his poetry, determinedly stuck with writing in English because he believed that writing in African languages was not “practicable” and deterred him from the “international stage” (Omotoso 115). Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian playwright who penned *Death and a King’s Horseman*, attempted to stay more loyal to his Yoruba culture and tried to get Swahili to replace English as Nigeria’s national language (116). English will always hold a controversial place in the arena of global literature. While reading and teaching postcolonial literature, it is important to consider, then, how the imperialist and colonial English language interacts with the languages of those it has often impeded. Asking students about how English and African languages co-exist while reading these novels will encourage them to consider the historical and social implications of language.

In looking at this relationship between languages, teachers can draw attention to “Achebe’s famous Africanization of English through the importation of African proverbs and idioms in *Things Fall Apart* (examples of which might be shared with the students through photocopied passages)” (Desai 281). The inclusion and discussion of cultural language used by writers like Achebe “can reveal to students the ways in which African writers denaturalize the English language. At its most successful, such denaturalization makes it possible to go back to novels like *A Passage to India* [by E.M. Forster] and ask fresh questions” (Desai 281). In the American classroom, the English language takes precedence. It is with this language that we teach and students learn; therefore, when reading books of other cultures and places in English, it is easy to centralize English and forget that English would be out of place in this setting. African Authors like Achebe, who write in English but integrate words that are a natural part of the characters’ language, remind students that colonial English is the foreign object in the context of these novels; furthermore, it is a reminder that English is being used as a tool to speak to American students. In discussing postcolonial African literary techniques, we must urge students to question how language is used within the book and by the author. Reading while considering how one’s own language has constructed our understanding of communication is a skill that will help students experience literature in a new way.

Postcolonialism often brings about socially critical and unsettling themes and images, as the very nature of the movement is to question what we have come to understand about history and societal structures. Looking at the work of African writers, students will see strong language use that enhances and accompanies these themes and images. Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, for instance, paints a picture of social and moral decay by consistently describing images of rot, filth, and human excrement (Hay 37). For instance, the following

philosophy: “White would certainly grow to be encrusted with green and yellow muck, and then drop off leaving a mouth wholly impotent, strong only with rot, decay, putrescence, with the smell of approaching death. Yet out of the decay and the dung there is always a new flowering.” (Armah 85). Furthermore, the main character describes the rotten nature of a home and how the “smell of dead wood filled his nostrils and caressed the cavity of his mouth” (101). The imagery emphasizes the horrid quality of life left behind after years of oppressive and traitorous colonialists ruined Ghana. This book is a great example for students to see the vivid language that African authors often use to describe and characterize postcolonial concepts. Armah’s language, in particular, creates an incredibly distinct image of contemporary West Africa. It is an image, though, that is unique to the historical and social context of the novel. That is the beauty of postcolonial language; the focus on differences and honest story telling creates a space in which words and imagery play a critical role in the reading and writing process; therefore, postcolonial African literature allows teachers the opportunity to explore strong imagery and expose students to a vast array of descriptive language use.

Approaching Postcolonial Social Spaces through Composition

It is not enough merely to read through a Postcolonial lens from a distance. To ensure that students thoroughly understand the broader global and cultural concepts presented to them in postcolonial African literature, I accompany this reading with inquiries for their own writing. It is through individual composition that we can see how they process these complex ideas and apply them to their own lives and their own environment. When designing and implementing these writing assignments, the central theme I focus on is how postcolonialism relates to our own social spaces and contact zones.

Andrea Lunsford defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths, as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Lunsford 86). Additionally, establishing relationships in these contact zones usually involves “conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Lunsford 86). Most postcolonial African literature takes place in these contact zones and reading through a postcolonial lens means focusing specifically on the conflict and power structures that exist within them. This is perhaps one of the most crucial real-world applications of postcolonialism that students can make. Addressing these social dynamics through compositional studies will help students relate matters to their own social spaces. Though the social spaces created by the main conflict of European-African contact in postcolonial African Literature may seem foreign to modern American students, these dynamics are strongly “related to an encounter with the Other” (Lunsford 86). Therefore, studying and responding to the implications of these contact zones and social spaces with a postcolonial perspective helps students build transference skills in terms of understanding how they interact with “the Other.”

Composition in reaction to and in the context of postcolonial literature inevitably encourages student analysis of ethical questions. The purpose of postcolonial discourse is “to analyze and articulate the dynamics of systems of domination and oppression, to highlight ‘difference’ as an important, even central, aspect of political relations...to focus, that is, on the crucial importance of otherness” (Lunsford 87). Postcolonialism in African literature foregrounds this otherness, involving extensive discussion of gender and race dynamics. Teachers play the difficult but necessary role of student response to these dynamics so that they “are learning to engage the world in substantive ways, to think and write about issues of

importance to themselves and others.” (Lunsford 85-86). The way we go about this is crucial to the development of critical thinking skills related to how students understand the power structures present in their lives. Improper composition “deemphasizes systems of oppression and attempts to flatten out differences in order to strive for some mythical, elusive harmony” (Lunsford 87). Our desire as educators to promote harmony within our classroom environment can mean we avoid discussing the implications of differences, but then we are only teaching our students to ignore the presence of discord and otherness in their lives; therefore, we must use composition to encourage confrontation of how differences play a role in their social spaces. One of the key goals of this pedagogical strategy is to “find the sites of power and resistance” and address them (Lunsford 372). For my students, I often highlighted the instances of power and oppression that exist extensively throughout postcolonial African literature and asked students to respond directly to them. More importantly, I urge them to relate these ideas to the contact zones in Western society and draw parallels to consider the role power and oppression play in their lives. Spurred by the buzz phrase “oppressive forces”, these students often readily connect their own power struggle with parents, teachers, or even their own peers. Thoughtful and reactive composition of this nature keeps both teacher and student from “engaging in cultural and intellectual tourism” (Lunsford 88). Intellectual tourism refers to a cursory approach to world literature in the classroom. One that presents many different cultures to students but only with the goal of identifying the existence of these cultures, rather than actually analyzing the major issues and themes relevant to the context of the works. Responsive composition stresses conversation *with* the text, rather than *about* the text.

Postcolonial composition that analyzes social spaces also allows students a chance to further recognize their own identity. More specifically, “defining others (students? members of

other social, ethnic, or racial groups?) as different is a strategy of self-definition, in that by holding up to ourselves a contrasting image, idea, personality, experience we thereby carve out what we are not and, thus, what we are” (Lunsford 93). Development and awareness of self-identity is not only a critical component of postcolonial theoretical discourse, it is also crucial to the personal growth of high school students. Thematic issues of otherness in postcolonial African literature creates an opportunity for teachers to include composition that inspires students to think about the existence of otherness and differences in their own social groups. Therefore, they are able to identify factors of self-definition and build a better understanding of their own identity.

Gender Issues and Power Structures

Gender is a social space that is particularly, universally applicable in Western education. The dynamics and power structure surrounding gender identity in today’s society play a larger and larger role in classroom behavior and discourse, as students get older. Female students begin to understand the pressure of sexualization, body and tone policing, and perceived ability limitations. Male students must deal with the expectations of masculinity and being discouraged from participating in the arts. Therefore, high school students are often very receptive of the presence of gender themes in novels they read for class. These reflected roles most immediately relate to their everyday experiences. Additionally, gender roles play a significant part in the structure and contexts of most postcolonial African novels. As one of the most apparently relatable themes in global literature of any sort, it is essential for teachers to prepare their understanding of postcolonial theories surrounding gender dynamics and ready themselves for how students might respond to reading about these dynamics.

The cross-cultural concept related to gender that will most likely stand out immediately when reading these novels in any classroom is the separation between tradition and modernity in gender roles. An often internationally common experience for women is the struggle against traditional notions of domesticity and the lack of emphasis on formal education. Students who present a feminine identity in the Western classroom may relate, for example, to the oppression and subsequent journey of a character like Tambu in *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga. Tambu's parents are more traditional and conservative, often repressing Tambu's rebellion and "modernizing trajectory" (Hay 101). Not only is it important to present characters and themes like this in the classroom, but we must also allow students the opportunity to relate in terms of their own experience of gender roles and power structures.

Francisco Varela once said, "It is as though the ontology of the world were very feminine, an ontology of permissivity, an ontology of possibility." Decolonizing gender is a crucial component of the postcolonial lens. Language surrounding women and the reality of permissivity that often conflates womanhood and femininity is very much considered a colonizing dialect. Just as the relationship between ethics of femininity and masculinity relies solely on permissivity of womanhood, "an ethics of the colonized may differ from an ethics of the colonized" in just the same way. (Rooney 126). South African author, Bessie Head, wrote in her novel *A Question of Power* that the female role is often reflected as "passive" and "submissive", and that "we are born into subordination and it is in subordination that we learn our emotional responses" (Head 302). Gender dynamics in many postcolonial African novels, like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Isidore Okpewho's *The Victims*, demonstrate in social terms the very power structures created by colonization. These same power structures can be applied to gender dynamics and social spaces in the lives of American students.

In terms of power structures as they relate to gender, it is important to push students to think about where power comes from and how this power contributes to defining the oppressed. Taking note of the history of colonial literature, we can tell that controlling the story of a group of people is the most efficient way to define that group. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in speaking on the danger of a single story said:

“It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is ‘nkali.’ It’s a noun that loosely translates to ‘to be greater than another.’ Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.” (Adichie)

When discussing, for example, the way women are treated by their husbands in *Things Fall Apart*, students will often question why the women do not question the injustice of being treated so harshly. In this case, it is important to have them consider the reality that the women may not see any injustice or harsh treatment. A teacher might encourage students to consider power structures and what “single story” women have been told for them to accept this treatment. In the simplest of terms, they have been told that masculinity is violence and femininity is permissivity. Adichie goes on to say:

“Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, ‘secondly.’ Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with

the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.” (Adichie)

Teaching African literature through a postcolonial lens compels students to question not only the power structures within the stories they read, but how these translate to the stories they hear in their lives.

Conclusion

I cannot stress enough the social importance of bringing African literature into the classroom, along with concepts of postcolonialism. Teaching African literature through a postcolonial theoretical lens means considering and implementing strategies that expose students to the stories, culture, language, and issues present in diverse works from African writers. This breaks down barriers and diminishes the worldly otherness that cripples the education of American students. Due to the previous influence of colonized literature in their education, students may be uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the setting, the characters, and the words themselves; however, it is our duty as educators to integrate these concepts into our teaching and familiarize them with the story and words of people from Africa. Only then will they be able to correct their misconceptions and begin to understand the broader idea of the postcolonial movement: narratives have the power to shape our knowledge, our differences, and our own identity.

Postcolonial theory, of course, is not something solely applied to African literature. Following the path of European colonization will uncover many other cultures that have emerging voices telling their own stories to the world. Because of this, teaching multi-cultural

and global literature is perhaps one of the most crucial responsibilities we have in terms of content knowledge. English teachers should never consider World Literature as a course to be merely a cursory survey of other countries, but rather, as an opportunity to explore the reality of other peoples' stories. If postcolonial African literature has shown us anything, it has shown us the sheer diversity of experiences that can exist in a place previously defined by one colonial narrative. As I have thoroughly enjoyed immersing myself in these narratives while studying African literature to prepare myself to teach these concepts, I am excited to continue my teaching career in a way that encourages students to do the same. I know I will always meet that same initial reluctance and discomfort as I did with my first class reading Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* because there will always be resistance from those who are being asked to reconsider what they have previously been taught to believe; however, isn't this why we became teachers in the first place? The opportunity to push students outside of their comfort zone, and in doing so broaden the very limits of that zone, is often the exclusive privilege of the educator. I do not take that responsibility lightly and neither should anyone who decides to take up the role of facilitator of learning.

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