

World Literature and Postcolonial Discourse: A Critical Reflection

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Abstract

This article critically reflects on the convergence of World Literature and Postcolonial Discourse, and how it transforms the global literary canon into a dynamic site of cultural resistance, hybrid identity formation, and narrative innovation. It aims to demonstrate how postcolonial “writing back” rearticulates classical, colonial, and contemporary texts to interrogate enduring power structures and reshape transnational literary exchange. Employing a comparative textual analysis grounded in David Damrosch’s definition of world literature and its gain in circulation, and the critical frameworks of Edward Said (Orientalism), Homi K. Bhabha (hybridity and the Third Space), and Gayatri Spivak (the subaltern and narrative agency), the study examines six primary texts: Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Weep Not Child*, Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, and Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing*. The findings reveal that the selected postcolonial works expose intergenerational tensions and cultural fissures engendered by colonial modernity; reframe classical and colonial narratives to critique residual imperial authority and narrative silencing; and extend “writing back” into twenty-first-century contexts by staging diasporic migrations, digital memoirs, and multi-generational genealogies that unsettle Eurocentric racial paradigms. This analytical reflection concludes that postcolonial interventions not only diversify world literature but also actively reshape it. They allow previously marginalised voices to assert authorial authority, deconstruct prevailing ideologies, and emphasise literature’s transformative potential in a globalised society.

Keywords: World Literature, Postcolonial Discourse, Reflection, Comparative, Dominant Ideologies.

Introduction

World Literature refers to literary works that transcend their original cultural and linguistic contexts to engage with audiences globally. This concept encompasses the totality of national literature and its circulation beyond the country of origin. Traditionally centred on Western European masterpieces, world literature has evolved to include diverse global works accessible through various translations. A prominent scholar in this field, David Damrosch, defines world literature as “all literary works

that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” and that gain “new meanings in the circulation” (Damrosch, 2003, p. 4, cited in D’haen, 2012, p. 26). Postcolonial Discourse examines colonialism and imperialism’s cultural, political, and social legacies. It focuses on the aftermath of Western colonialism and the efforts to reclaim and rethink the history and agency of people subordinated under various forms of imperialism. Postcolonial theory addresses the effects of colonial rule on cultures and societies, highlighting struggles for autonomy, cultural hybridity, and the enduring impact of imperial rule.

As a field of study, world literature invites us to explore literary works beyond national or linguistic boundaries, emphasising the circulation, translation, and reinterpretation of texts globally. Postcolonial discourse plays a critical role in this expansive arena by interrogating the enduring legacies of colonialism embedded within literary traditions. Seminal works such as Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1995), Homi K. Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (2009) have established frameworks for understanding how colonial power structures continue to influence both the production and reception of literature. Postcolonial theorists argue that the Eurocentric canon has historically marginalised voices from formerly colonised regions, which often leads to a skewed portrayal of non-Western cultures. In response, writers from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and other regions engage in “writing back” to the empire, crafting narratives that reclaim suppressed histories, challenge stereotypes, and assert hybrid identities born from the collision of indigenous traditions and colonial impositions. Authors like Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, and Salman Rushdie exemplify this critical intervention, using literature as a means of cultural resistance and self-representation. Moreover, the dynamic interplay between world literature and postcolonial discourse is evident in contemporary practices such as the reimagining of classic texts—where canonical works are retold from the perspectives of those who were once silenced or marginalised—thus enriching our understanding of global literary traditions and urging a continual re-examination of cultural and ideological hierarchies.

World literature and postcolonial discourse intersect in a dynamic conversation that challenges traditional literary hierarchies and redefines the global canon (D’haen, 2011). World literature aims to highlight the complex cultural interrelations forged by colonialism, migration, and globalisation. Postcolonial discourse, emerging from the historical experiences of colonised peoples, critically interrogates the enduring impact of imperial power on literary production and cultural representation. It foregrounds the necessity of “writing back” by reclaiming and rearticulating marginalised or distorted narratives under colonial rule. The theoretical frameworks developed by scholars such as Said, Bhabha, and Spivak have been instrumental in this process; Said’s critique of *Orientalism* exposes how Western depictions of the “Other” served as tools of domination, while Bhabha’s concepts of

hybridity, mimicry, and the “Third Space” unveil the ambivalence and creative resistance inherent in colonial encounters. Said’s work in *Orientalism* reveals how Western narratives construct and essentialise the ‘Other’ by imposing a veil of exoticism and otherness, effectively masking the complexities of non-Western identities. Similarly, Bhabha’s notion of hybridity and the ‘third space’ illustrates that rigid, pre-determined categories do not conform to cultural identities; instead, they emerge from the interstitial spaces where different cultures meet, clash, and blend. Bhabha’s perspective helps to deconstruct the binary oppositions—such as coloniser/colonised or normative/deviant—that both postcolonial and queer theorist’s critique.

Spivak’s notion of the subaltern further emphasises the importance of amplifying voices that have been historically silenced (Mutongoza, 2025, pp. 2-4). The digital age has added new layers to hybridity; Davis (2010) and Bhandari (2022) examine how globalisation and technology form online “third spaces” where younger generations of Africans navigate their local and global identities. Together, these approaches emphasise that world literature is not merely a collection of texts from diverse cultures but a transformative field where literary works become sites of political and aesthetic resistance, offering alternative visions of identity and community. In this reimagined literary landscape, postcolonial writers contribute to an evolving dialogue that challenges Eurocentric norms and celebrates the multiplicity and hybridity of human experience, ultimately reshaping our understanding of literature as a global, interconnected phenomenon.

The realms of world literature and postcolonial discourse intersect in several significant ways (D’haen, 2011; Hamadi, 2014; Wade, 2017; Unmar & Lawan, 2024; Mutongoza, 2025):

Representation of Marginalised Voices: Postcolonial literature frequently places interest in narratives from previously colonised societies, challenging dominant Eurocentric perspectives. When these works enter the realm of world literature, they offer global audiences’ valuable insights into the experiences and histories of marginalised communities, thereby enriching the international literary canon.

Translation and Cultural Exchange: Translation plays a pivotal role in both fields. For postcolonial authors, it can reach broader audiences and facilitate cross-cultural dialogues. However, the process also raises questions about fidelity, cultural distinctions, and the potential for misrepresentation—issues central to postcolonial critique.

Critique of Imperial Narratives: Both world literature and postcolonial discourse critically examine the narratives imposed by imperial powers. While world literature seeks to diversify the literary landscape by incorporating diverse voices, postcolonial

discourse specifically interrogates the power dynamics and cultural hegemonies that have historically marginalised certain literatures.

Hybridity and Identity: Postcolonial discourse examines themes of cultural hybridity arising from colonial encounters. These themes are prominent in world literature, where works frequently portray characters navigating complex identities shaped by indigenous and colonial influences.

Globalisation and Literary Circulation: The global circulation of literature raises questions about cultural commodification and the homogenising effects of globalisation, which are pertinent to both fields. Postcolonial discourse critically assesses how global literary markets can perpetuate neo-colonial dynamics, while world literature studies how texts gain international prominence.

Classical Textual Discussion

World literature and postcolonial discourse are brought to life in the interaction between canonical texts and their re-readings that question imperial narratives and highlight marginalised voices. For instance, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the collision of indigenous tradition and colonial modernity is richly embodied in a range of characters whose experiences speak to the transformative impact of imperialism on world literature and postcolonial discourse. Central to Achebe's narrative is Okonkwo, whose personal rigidity and fierce determination to uphold traditional Igbo values ultimately leave him unable to adapt to the relentless pressures of change brought about by internal shifts and colonial forces. In contrast, Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, symbolises the rupture within the culture; his growing dissatisfaction with the violent customs of his father's generation and his eventual attraction to Christianity epitomise the emergence of a hybrid identity formed at the intersection of indigenous tradition and foreign influence. The character of Ezinma, the cherished daughter of Okonkwo, further complicates the narrative by representing both the continuity of Igbo heritage and the vulnerabilities beneath rigid patriarchal expectations. Ezinma's intelligence and sensitivity highlight a nuanced space between acceptance and subversion in a society grappling with loss and transformation. Achebe uses these contrasting voices—not only those of the older generation, which clings to a nostalgic past, but also those of the youth who are more adaptable—to expose the fissures in a culture undergoing rapid, imposed metamorphosis, and thus to question the monolithic representations promoted by the Eurocentric canon.

Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not Child* (1964) highlight the effects of colonial rule on personal and collective identities through characters whose lives are caught between indigenous traditions and the modernising forces of colonialism. The protagonist, Njoroge, dreams of upward social mobility and education, yet his

aspirations are constantly undermined by the harsh realities of an educational system designed to serve colonial interests rather than to nurture indigenous potential. His struggles symbolise the broader conflicts that postcolonial societies face, where traditional values are destabilised by imposed modernity. Njoroge's father, Mwangi, embodies the older generation's cautious adherence to tradition and the painful loss of identity under foreign domination. Similarly, his friends and family often showcase varying complicity, resistance, and resignation. For example, characters such as Mumbi, Njoroge's mother, portray the emotional toll of a society divided between hope for a better future and the persistence of cultural dislocation. Through these characters, Ngũgĩ exposes the deep-seated fractures caused by colonial rule, fractures that lead to a personal crisis of identity and a broader cultural disorientation. The interaction between traditional African values and the introduced colonial ideologies in *Weep Not Child* emphasises the postcolonial theme of hybridity, wherein individuals must navigate an ambiguous terrain of conflicting cultural narratives. Both Achebe and Ngũgĩ, through their varied characterisations and intergenerational conflicts, invite readers to engage with world literature not as a static canon but as an evolving, contested space where voices long silenced or misrepresented actively contribute to the reconstruction of a more inclusive and accurate narrative of history.

Rewriting Classics: Critiquing Imperial Authority and Silenced Voices

The concept of "writing back" is also vividly illustrated in texts that reframe classical traditions through postcolonial lenses. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (1885)—a cornerstone of Western literature for exploring fate and self-discovery—finds new life in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971). In Rotimi's adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the transformation of characters serves as a compelling example of postcolonial intervention. The character, Odewale, is not merely a transplanted Oedipus; his tragic journey is recontextualised to mirror the specific social, political, and cultural tensions within a Nigerian setting. Odewale's struggle becomes representative of the collision between indigenous values and the disruptive historical and contemporary influences of foreign rule. His downfall, rooted in fate and personal failings in the classical sense, is recast in a framework that interrogates how colonial legacies continue to shape identity, authority, and destiny in postcolonial societies. Alongside Odewale, other adapted characters further enrich the narrative's postcolonial dialogue. For instance, the figure corresponding to Jocasta, Ojuola—rotating between roles of maternal nurturer and unwitting perpetuator of cultural taboos—is reimagined to reflect the layered realities of Nigerian womanhood. In this rendition, Ojuola's decisions and vulnerabilities carry qualities of both traditional expectations and the disruptive aftereffects of external domination. In addition, the role of the oracle or seer—traditionally a singular guiding voice in the classic Greek tragedy—is transformed into a more communal and multilayered entity that embodies the collective wisdom of the local society. This re-envisioned chorus not only offers

commentary on individual fate but also interrogates the broader socio-political conditions imposed on the indigenous community by colonial or neo-colonial forces.

Additionally, the secondary characters in Rotimi's play, such as the advisers and elders surrounding Odewale, carry a dual significance. On one level, they serve as mediators between the old ways and the new challenges arising from contact with Western ideals; on another, they highlight the internal conflicts faced by a society in transition, caught between preserving a rich cultural heritage and adapting to external pressures that seek to redefine its identity. These characters articulate the complexities inherent in the "hybrid" identities that postcolonial discourse emphasises, revealing how indigenous practices and modern influences interact, sometimes in harmony and at other times in bitter conflict. Through these character transformations, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* exemplifies how postcolonial writers rearticulate canonical texts to create a localised narrative that resonates with indigenous histories and realities. This adaptation challenges the fixed notions of identity inherited from the classical world and exemplifies how postcolonial writers rearticulate canonical texts to reflect local histories and realities.

Similarly, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), long celebrated as a foundational text of colonial literature, has been re-read and subverted in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1987). While Crusoe's narrative originally celebrated the triumph of European rationality through the character of Crusoe and his encounter with the native Friday, Coetzee's reimagining interrogates the power dynamics of narration. In *Foe*, protagonist Susan Barton endeavours to reclaim a narrative silenced by imperial discourse, questioning who gets to tell stories and how those stories serve to reproduce historical hierarchies. Here, the character of Friday—transformed from a mere subordinate companion in Defoe's work into a more enigmatic, voiceless presence—symbolises the ongoing struggle for authenticity and agency in the representation of the colonised.

Contemporary Textual Discussion

Contemporary postcolonial narratives are not left out in the embodiment of these reflections. This brings Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) into dialogue with the twin frameworks of World Literature (as defined by Damrosch) and Postcolonial discourse (drawing on Said, Bhabha, and Spivak). Both novels "write back" to imperial narratives, generate "third spaces" of hybridity, and participate in the global circulation of texts and identities in ways that transform the evolving world-literary canon.

Deriving from the aforementioned, postcolonial discourse interrogates how colonial power structures shape representation and reception. Said's critique illuminates the epistemic violence underlying orientalist depictions; Bhabha's concepts describe cultural ambivalence and creative resistance; and Spivak's formulation underscores the necessity—and difficulty—of amplifying historically

silenced voices. When brought together, the frameworks invite the question: How do *Americanah* and *Homegoing* participate in world-literary circulation, and how do they rearticulate the traces of colonialism embedded in global narratives?

At its core, *Americanah* dramatises the circular journey of Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman whose migration to the United States and eventual return to Lagos map the contours of diasporic identity. Damrosch's emphasis on "circulation" resonates powerfully: Ifemelu's blog posts about race in America become a textual hinge between her personal experience and a global readership, demonstrating how a local voice acquires transnational purchase. In parallel, the novel traverses multiple literary traditions—melding Nigerian narrative strategies, American realist social critique, and epistolary invocations (her blog entries) that mirror the affordances of digital "world literature."

Said's Orientalism helps us see how Ifemelu is confronted by "racial scripts" upon her arrival in the U.S.: her dark skin, accent, and unfamiliar customs are codified into reductive stereotypes. Yet Adichie rejects a simplistic 'coloniser/colonised' binary. Instead, through Bhabha's lens of hybridity, Ifemelu's identity becomes a continually negotiated performance: she adopts American styles of speech and self-presentation while also maintaining a critical distance—her blog posts expose American racism to a global audience. This "mimicry" is not a flawed copy but a strategic inversion. By adopting American norms, she highlights their contingency and contradictions, creating a "Third Space" in which Nigerian and American sensibilities intersect.

Furthermore, Spivak's question — "Can the subaltern speak?"—arises when Ifemelu's privileged education in Nigeria contrasts with her later dislocation in the U.S. She is not without a voice, but her authority is contested: mainstream American media rarely provides a platform for her insights, which she consequently disseminates independently online. This act of self-publication reclaims narrative sovereignty, subverting traditional gatekeepers of knowledge. Ifemelu's eventual return to Nigeria, coupled with her reconnection with her childhood love Obinze, demonstrates a reverse migration. No longer the naïve "pre-Americanah," she returns armed with transnational experience, and her blog—even as it loses traction domestically—sheds new light on Nigerian society's internal attitudes toward race, class, and globalisation.

Thus, *Americanah* exemplifies world literature not merely as a collection of cosmopolitan texts but as an active process: the novel circulates across continents, languages, and digital platforms, generating new dialogues about identity, belonging, and the asymmetries of power that endure in postcolonial and neocolonial contexts.

Homegoing: Genealogy, Memory, and the Afterlife of Slavery

Yaa Gyasi's debut, *Homegoing*, spans seven generations across two continents, tracing the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade from an African castle to antebellum America and beyond. Damrosch's insistence that world literature engages new audiences through translation is evident here: each chapter adopts a different narrative voice and style—epistolary, diary entries, third-person realism—thus translating across literary modes while chronicling the movement of a single bloodline. The novel's structure enacts global circulation: it moves from Asante, Ghana, to the American South, then to Harlem, Chicago, and finally to a present-day researcher in California, reflecting the varied geographies of the diaspora.

Through Said's framework, the initial chapters reveal how Europeans constructed African history as static and primitive. The pairing of Effia (married to a British colonial officer) and her sister Esi (sold into slavery) dramatises the colonial dichotomy: one child who becomes complicit with the empire, another who suffers its worst violence. Yet Gyasi avoids reductive binaries by imbuing each character with inferiority and complexity. Bhabha's "hybridity" emerges in the Eurasian progeny of Effia and the African-American descendants of Esi: both lines negotiate cultural syncretism under duress. Each descendant contends with inherited trauma—whether through cycles of abuse, addiction, or identity dislocation—yet also exhibits moments of resilience and community formation.

Spivak's "subaltern" resonates deeply: the voices of enslaved people are often elided in the historical record. Gyasi recovers these voices by granting them narrative centrality, though their "speech" sometimes appears fragmented or mediated (as in H's mute resistance or Yaw's archival research). This narrative strategy acknowledges that recovering subaltern subjectivity is fraught and partial. By rendering these lives visible — "writing back" to the erasures of official history—*Homegoing* asserts that the descendants of the dispossessed cannot be contained within colonial archives and must be heard on their terms.

Moreover, *Homegoing* engages in world-literary circulation by inviting various readerships—American readers confronting the legacy of slavery, Ghanaian readers reflecting on local histories of complicity, and global audiences recognising the shared structures of racial capitalism. The novel's translation into numerous languages and its presence in academic syllabi worldwide demonstrate Damrosch's point: as it circulates, the novel acquires new resonances and facilitates transnational dialogues about memory, justice, and collective healing.

Comparative Reflections: Hybridity, Agency, and Circulation

Americanah and *Homegoing* enact "writing back" by repositioning so-called minoritised experiences at the centre of global narratives. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's critique of American racial logic unsettles the assumed universality of Western

liberalism; in *Homegoing*, Gyasi's multi-generational epic reveals the interconnectedness of African and African-American histories, challenging neat origin myths in either context. Each novel generates a "Third Space" where identities are neither purely native nor wholly diasporic but interwoven. Agency is reclaimed through narration. Ifemelu's blog and the shifting perspectives in *Homegoing* demonstrate how marginalised subjects can appropriate the very technologies and narrative forms once used to exclude them. Spivak's warning that the subaltern may speak only in "authorised" or partial voices is countered: both authors employ formal experimentation—blog entries, fragmented vignettes, multiple narrators—to resist colonial logics of coherence and closure.

Finally, the circulation of these texts speaks to Damrosch's proposition: as they travel, they transform both sending and receiving cultures. *Americanah* has prompted Nigerian readers to re-examine internal class and colour biases; American readers to reconsider the US as a multiracial postcolonial site; and global digital publics to debate immigration, social media, and racial formation. *Homegoing* has spurred conversations about reparations, historical memory, and the global dimensions of slavery. Their translations and academic uptake illustrate that world literature is not merely a descriptive category but a field of contestation and renewal—one in which postcolonial discourse remains indispensable for understanding how power, culture, and identity are continually renegotiated across borders.

Conclusion

World literature and postcolonial discourse are inextricably linked in their shared project of mapping the complexities of cultural interaction, power relations, and literary innovation in a globalised age. Drawing on Damrosch's model of textual circulation and the critical lenses of Said, Bhabha, and Spivak, this study has shown that texts such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not Child*, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* do more than simply diversify the canon—they actively reshape it. Achebe and Ngũgĩ expose the fissures and hybridities born of colonial encounters; Rotimi and Coetzee reconfigure classical and colonial narratives to interrogate lingering imperial legacies; and Adichie and Gyasi stage emergent "third spaces" of diasporic identity and intergenerational memory. Across these works, postcolonial interventions transform literature into a dynamic arena of cultural resistance, the reassertion of suppressed histories, and the deconstruction of Eurocentric hierarchies. Far from a static archive, world literature emerges as a vibrant, ongoing dialogue—one in which formerly marginalised voices not only circulate but also claim authority, question enduring power structures, and assert the transformative potential of storytelling in shaping a more inclusive and equitable global literary imagination.

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