

african american literature postcolonial

The Resonant Echoes: African American Literature in the Postcolonial Landscape

African American literature, a vibrant and ever-evolving tapestry of stories, experiences, and intellectual thought, finds a powerful resonance within the postcolonial discourse. This rich literary tradition, born from the crucible of slavery, Jim Crow, and ongoing struggles for racial justice, shares profound thematic intersections with postcolonial writings worldwide. From the interrogation of colonial power structures to the reclamation of identity and the assertion of self-determination, African American authors have consistently grappled with legacies analogous to those faced by colonized peoples. Exploring African American literature through a postcolonial lens offers a deeper understanding of the universal human quest for freedom, dignity, and the unearthing of suppressed histories. This article delves into the multifaceted relationship between African American literature and the postcolonial experience, examining key themes, influential authors, and the enduring impact of this critical perspective.

- Introduction to African American Literature and Postcolonialism
- Historical Context: Slavery and Colonial Legacies
- Shared Themes in African American and Postcolonial Literature
- Key Figures and Their Contributions
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African American Literature: A Postcolonial Perspective

Understanding African American literature through the prism of postcolonialism is not merely an academic exercise; it is a vital pathway to appreciating the depth and resilience of Black artistic expression. The historical parallels between the enslavement and systematic oppression of African Americans and the colonial subjugation of peoples across the globe are undeniable. Both experiences involved the dehumanization of a population, the stripping away of their cultural heritage, and the imposition of dominant power structures. Postcolonial theory, which analyzes the

cultural, political, and economic legacy of colonialism, provides a framework for dissecting these similarities and understanding the unique ways in which African American writers have responded to their historical circumstances. This perspective illuminates the enduring impact of racialized power dynamics that extend far beyond the formal end of slavery or colonial rule, revealing ongoing struggles for liberation and self-definition.

The Interplay of Power and Identity

At the heart of both African American literature and postcolonial writing lies a profound exploration of power dynamics and their impact on identity. Colonialism, by its very nature, sought to define and subjugate the colonized, often through the imposition of foreign languages, religions, and social norms. Similarly, the institution of slavery and its aftermath in the United States were designed to strip African Americans of their inherent identities and to construct them as subordinate beings within a white supremacist system. Authors within both traditions have meticulously documented this process of identity erasure and have, in turn, championed the arduous work of identity reconstruction. This involves reclaiming ancestral narratives, forging new understandings of self, and challenging the internalized oppression that can result from prolonged subjugation.

The concept of the "colonized mind," a term often used in postcolonial studies, finds a direct parallel in the experiences of African Americans who were forced to internalize the negative stereotypes and prejudices perpetuated by the dominant society. African American authors frequently depict characters grappling with this internalized oppression, demonstrating the psychological toll of systemic racism. The act of writing itself becomes a form of resistance, a means of externalizing these internal struggles and asserting a selfhood that was systematically denied.

Historical Parallels: Slavery and Colonialism

The historical trajectory of African Americans shares significant commonalities with the experiences of colonized populations globally. The transatlantic slave trade, a brutal system of forced migration and labor, was a foundational element of early global capitalism, mirroring the economic exploitation inherent in colonial ventures. Both systems relied on the dehumanization of enslaved or colonized peoples to justify their subjugation and the extraction of their labor and resources. The legacy of these historical injustices continues to shape contemporary social, economic, and political landscapes for both African Americans and many formerly colonized nations.

The dismantling of colonial empires in the mid-20th century, while a monumental achievement for many nations, did not automatically erase the deeply embedded structures of inequality and racial hierarchy that had been established during the colonial era. Similarly, the abolition of slavery in the United States marked the end of a brutal legal institution, but it did not dismantle the pervasive racism and systemic discrimination that continued to shape the lives of African Americans. Postcolonial theory helps to illuminate these enduring connections, emphasizing how the effects of historical oppression can persist and manifest in new forms.

Shared Themes in African American and Postcolonial

Literature

Thematic resonance between African American and postcolonial literature is striking, offering a rich ground for comparative analysis. Both literary traditions grapple with the profound impact of oppression on individual and collective identity, the struggle for self-determination, and the enduring search for home and belonging. These shared concerns highlight the universality of the human experience when confronted with systemic injustice.

The Reclamation of Narrative and History

A central concern for both African American and postcolonial writers is the urgent need to reclaim and retell histories that have been deliberately suppressed or distorted by dominant narratives. Colonial powers often sought to erase the histories and cultures of the colonized, replacing them with their own accounts of civilization and progress. Similarly, the history of African Americans, particularly the experiences of slavery and its aftermath, was often marginalized or outright denied in mainstream historical accounts. Writers in both traditions undertake the crucial work of unearthing forgotten stories, giving voice to the silenced, and challenging the official histories that served to legitimize oppression.

This reclamation often involves a conscious effort to disrupt colonial or hegemonic discourse. Authors might employ non-linear narrative structures, incorporate oral traditions, or utilize hybrid forms of language to express experiences that fall outside the confines of Western literary conventions. The act of writing becomes a way to assert agency and to re-inscribe the erased histories of marginalized peoples, fostering a sense of shared heritage and collective memory.

The Quest for Identity and Belonging

The fragmentation of identity is a pervasive theme in postcolonial literature, reflecting the experience of living between cultures, traditions, and worlds. Similarly, African American literature frequently explores the complexities of identity formation in the face of slavery, segregation, and ongoing racial prejudice. Characters often struggle with a sense of displacement, torn between ancestral roots and the dominant culture that seeks to assimilate or marginalize them. The search for a stable sense of self and a place of belonging is a powerful driving force in many of these narratives.

The concept of "double consciousness," famously articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois, is particularly relevant here. It describes the experience of viewing oneself through the eyes of a dominant, often hostile, society. This internal conflict between one's own sense of self and the external perception of it is a hallmark of both postcolonial and African American literary explorations of identity. Writers explore the psychological and emotional consequences of this duality, as well as the strategies for navigating and transcending it.

Resistance and Agency in the Face of Oppression

Despite the overwhelming power of colonial or oppressive systems, both African American and

postcolonial literature celebrate the indomitable spirit of resistance and the assertion of human agency. This resistance can take many forms, from overt acts of rebellion to subtle acts of cultural preservation, intellectual defiance, and the creative reimagining of one's own narrative. Authors showcase the ways in which individuals and communities find strength and resilience in the face of immense adversity.

The act of storytelling itself is often portrayed as a form of resistance. By sharing their stories, individuals challenge the silencing effects of oppression and assert their right to self-definition. This can involve questioning the dominant ideology, exposing the injustices of the system, and forging new understandings of freedom and liberation. The literary works become repositories of resistance, offering inspiration and a sense of solidarity to readers who have faced similar struggles.

Key Figures and Their Contributions to African American Literature Postcolonial Thought

Numerous African American authors have, through their powerful literary contributions, engaged with themes that deeply resonate with postcolonial discourse, even if not explicitly using the terminology. Their works offer profound insights into the enduring impact of historical injustices and the resilience of the human spirit.

W.E.B. Du Bois: The Father of Black Intellectualism

W.E.B. Du Bois's seminal work, "The Souls of Black Folk," is a cornerstone of African American literature and its connection to postcolonial thought. His concept of "double consciousness" directly addresses the psychological impact of racial oppression, a phenomenon strikingly similar to the identity crises faced by colonized subjects. Du Bois's analysis of the "color line" and its global implications predates much of postcolonial theory, highlighting his prescient understanding of racialized power structures that extend beyond national borders. His critique of American society's failure to live up to its democratic ideals also aligns with the postcolonial critique of Western hypocrisy.

Richard Wright: The Voice of the Marginalized

Richard Wright's novels, such as "Native Son," vividly portray the debilitating effects of systemic racism and the socio-economic marginalization of African Americans. The struggles of his characters to navigate a society that denies them basic dignity and opportunity echo the experiences of colonized peoples fighting against oppressive structures. Wright's naturalistic style often exposes the brutal realities of a system that perpetuates inequality, making his work a powerful testament to the enduring consequences of historical subjugation.

James Baldwin: The Intellectual and the Artist

James Baldwin was a master essayist and novelist whose work consistently interrogated the

complexities of race, identity, and power in America. His writings, particularly in essays like "Notes of a Native Son" and "The Fire Next Time," offer a profound analysis of the psychological and social ramifications of racism, drawing parallels between the American experience and broader global struggles against oppression. Baldwin's eloquent prose and incisive critiques challenged both Black and white Americans to confront the legacy of slavery and to reimagine a more just society. His exploration of the "outsider" perspective aligns with the postcolonial experience of living between worlds.

Toni Morrison: Memory, Trauma, and Healing

Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize-winning novels, including "Beloved" and "Song of Solomon," are deeply immersed in the historical trauma of slavery and its lingering effects on subsequent generations. She masterfully explores the ways in which the past continues to haunt the present, a common theme in postcolonial literature that examines the unhealed wounds of historical injustices. Morrison's lyrical prose and her focus on the interior lives of her characters offer a powerful counter-narrative to simplistic understandings of history and identity. Her work emphasizes the importance of memory, storytelling, and communal healing in overcoming the legacy of oppression.

Contemporary Voices: Expanding the Dialogue

More recent generations of African American writers, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (though Nigerian, her work often intersects with diaspora studies relevant to African American experience) and Colson Whitehead, continue to engage with these critical themes. They explore the complexities of race, identity, and belonging in a globalized world, often drawing on the legacy of colonialism and its ongoing impact. Their works demonstrate the evolving nature of these conversations and the continued relevance of a postcolonial lens for understanding contemporary African American life and literature.

The Language of Resistance and Reclamation

The manipulation and reinvention of language are crucial tools for resistance and reclamation in both African American and postcolonial literary traditions. Language, as a primary instrument of colonial power and control, was often used to denigrate, dehumanize, and erase the cultures of the colonized. Consequently, the act of reclaiming and reshaping language becomes an act of liberation and self-affirmation.

Challenging Dominant Lexicons

African American writers, much like their postcolonial counterparts, have often found the English language, as wielded by the colonizer, to be inadequate for fully expressing their experiences. They have deliberately challenged dominant lexicons, subverting the meaning of words and infusing them with new resonance. This can involve incorporating elements of African languages, Black vernacular English, and the creation of entirely new vocabularies to articulate unique cultural understandings and historical memories. The deliberate distortion or repurposing of language serves to disrupt the hegemony of the colonizer's voice.

For example, the evolution of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) itself can be seen as a form of linguistic resistance, developing a rich and complex system of communication that is distinct from and often judged against Standard American English. Writers who utilize AAVE in their literary works are not merely employing dialect; they are reclaiming and celebrating a cultural heritage and a mode of expression that has historically been devalued.

The Power of Oral Traditions and Storytelling

The preservation and elevation of oral traditions are vital to both African American and postcolonial literature. In societies where literacy was denied to the masses, oral storytelling became the primary vehicle for transmitting history, culture, values, and resistance. Writers often integrate elements of oral storytelling – call-and-response patterns, proverbs, spirituals, and folk tales – into their written works, thereby bridging the gap between spoken and written word and honoring ancestral forms of knowledge. This practice is a direct challenge to the Western emphasis on written authority and a testament to the enduring power of communal memory.

The act of storytelling, in this context, is not merely entertainment; it is an act of cultural preservation, a means of asserting a collective identity, and a way to pass down the lessons of survival and resistance to future generations. It allows for the articulation of experiences that might not be captured by more formal, Westernized modes of discourse.

Diasporic Experiences and Transnational Connections

The concept of diaspora is intrinsically linked to both African American and postcolonial experiences. The forced displacement of Africans through the slave trade created a vast diaspora, scattering people across the Americas and beyond. Similarly, colonialism led to widespread migration and the creation of diasporic communities across the globe. These experiences of displacement, dislocation, and the forging of new identities in new lands are recurring and powerful themes.

The Search for "Home" and Belonging

The notion of "home" becomes a complex and often elusive concept for diasporic communities. For African Americans, this can involve a yearning for an ancestral homeland in Africa, a concept often invoked in literature as a place of origin and spiritual connection. Simultaneously, there is the lived experience of building communities and forging a sense of belonging within America, despite the persistent realities of racism and exclusion. This dual sense of belonging, or lack thereof, is a central preoccupation.

Postcolonial literature often grapples with the idea of a fractured homeland, a place irrevocably altered by colonial rule, or a homeland that can only be accessed through memory and imagination. The search for a stable, authentic sense of place and belonging is a universal human need that is amplified by the experience of displacement and the disruption of cultural continuity.

Transnationalism and Global Solidarity

The interconnectedness of diasporic communities and the shared struggles against oppression foster strong transnational connections. African American writers have often found solidarity with liberation movements and literary voices from Africa, the Caribbean, and other parts of the world. This recognition of shared experiences creates a powerful sense of global solidarity and a collective understanding of resistance against global systems of power. The postcolonial framework helps to illuminate these interconnected struggles for liberation.

The rise of globalization has further blurred national boundaries and highlighted the shared challenges faced by marginalized communities worldwide. Literature that engages with these transnational themes contributes to a broader dialogue about social justice, human rights, and the ongoing fight against systemic inequalities that often have roots in colonial histories.

Challenging Western Narratives and Constructing New Ones

A fundamental project of both African American and postcolonial literature is the deconstruction of Western-centric narratives and the subsequent construction of alternative, empowering stories. Western intellectual and cultural traditions have historically positioned themselves as the universal standard, often marginalizing or dismissing the contributions and perspectives of non-Western peoples. This hegemonic stance has shaped how history, culture, and identity have been understood and represented.

Deconstructing Colonial and Racist Ideologies

Writers in both traditions meticulously dissect the ideologies that underpinned colonialism and racism. This includes exposing the pseudo-scientific theories, religious justifications, and economic imperatives that were used to legitimize the subjugation of entire populations. By critically examining these dominant narratives, authors reveal their inherent flaws and the ways in which they were used to maintain systems of power and control. The literary act becomes one of intellectual and cultural reclamation.

The concept of "orientalism," as articulated by Edward Said, is highly relevant here, describing the West's construction of the "Orient" as exotic, irrational, and inferior, thereby justifying colonial dominance. Similarly, the construction of African Americans as inherently inferior, lazy, or dangerous served to rationalize slavery and subsequent discrimination. Literature plays a crucial role in dismantling these harmful stereotypes.

Creating Counter-Narratives of Agency and Resilience

In direct opposition to these dominant narratives, African American and postcolonial literature crafts counter-narratives that emphasize the agency, resilience, and creativity of the oppressed. These stories center the experiences, perspectives, and humanity of those who have been historically

marginalized. They highlight acts of resistance, moments of cultural flourishing, and the enduring strength of communities in the face of immense adversity. These narratives are vital for reclaiming dignity and fostering a sense of self-worth.

The creation of these counter-narratives is not merely about telling a different story; it is about asserting the right to self-representation and challenging the authority of those who have historically controlled the narrative. It is about demonstrating that the experiences of the marginalized are not merely footnotes to the grander story of the dominant culture but are themselves central and vital.

The Enduring Relevance of the Postcolonial Lens for African American Literature

The application of a postcolonial lens to African American literature continues to be a dynamic and illuminating approach. It reveals the deep historical and thematic connections between the struggles of African Americans and those of colonized peoples worldwide, fostering a broader understanding of systemic oppression and the universal human desire for liberation. This critical perspective enriches our appreciation of the complexity, resilience, and profound artistry found within African American literary traditions.

Interrogating Global Power Structures

By examining African American literature through a postcolonial framework, we gain a more nuanced understanding of how global power structures, often rooted in colonial histories, continue to shape racial dynamics and social inequalities. The interconnectedness of historical injustices and contemporary manifestations of racism becomes more apparent, underscoring the need for continued critical engagement with these issues. This perspective allows us to see the particularities of the African American experience within a larger, global context of domination and resistance.

Fostering Comparative Literary Studies

The postcolonial lens encourages comparative literary studies that can bridge cultural and geographical divides. By drawing parallels between African American writers and authors from Africa, the Caribbean, and other formerly colonized regions, we can foster a greater appreciation for the shared intellectual and artistic heritage of the global Black diaspora. This comparative approach enriches scholarly discourse and expands our understanding of literary movements and thematic preoccupations.

Such comparisons highlight not only the shared struggles but also the unique innovations and cultural expressions that have emerged from these diverse yet interconnected experiences. It allows for a more comprehensive and globalized understanding of literary history and the enduring impact of historical power imbalances.

Conclusion: The Unfinished Symphony of Liberation

In conclusion, African American literature, when viewed through the analytical framework of postcolonialism, reveals a profound tapestry of shared experiences, thematic concerns, and modes of resistance. The historical echoes of slavery and systemic oppression in the United States resonate powerfully with the legacies of colonialism across the globe, creating a rich dialogue about identity, power, and liberation. From the reclamation of narrative and the deconstruction of oppressive language to the forging of diasporic connections and the creation of counter-narratives, African American authors have consistently engaged in a struggle for self-determination and the assertion of their humanity. The postcolonial lens not only illuminates these deep connections but also underscores the enduring relevance of these literary traditions in challenging global power structures and advocating for a more just and equitable world. The work of these writers, much like the ongoing quest for true liberation, continues to be an unfinished symphony, resonating with power and purpose for generations to come.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the key themes explored in African American literature in the context of postcolonialism?

Key themes include the legacy of slavery and its lingering effects, the struggle for identity and self-definition in the face of imposed colonial narratives, the interrogation of power structures and systemic oppression, the reclamation of history and cultural heritage, and the exploration of hybridity and the complexities of belonging in diasporic communities.

How does postcolonial theory inform our understanding of African American literary traditions?

Postcolonial theory provides a framework to analyze how African American writers have resisted and deconstructed the colonial project's ideologies. It helps us understand the ways in which racialized narratives were used to justify oppression and how literature became a site for counter-narratives, challenging dominant historical accounts and asserting agency.

Can you name some influential African American authors whose work engages with postcolonial themes?

Certainly. Authors like Toni Morrison (e.g., 'Beloved'), James Baldwin (e.g., 'Go Tell It on the Mountain'), W.E.B. Du Bois (e.g., 'The Souls of Black Folk'), Zora Neale Hurston (e.g., 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'), and more contemporary writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Jesmyn Ward, engage with these themes in profound ways.

How does the African diaspora's experience relate to

postcolonial discourse?

The African diaspora's experience is intrinsically linked to postcolonial discourse due to the transatlantic slave trade and its enduring impact. It highlights the forced displacement, cultural disruption, and ongoing struggles for recognition and liberation faced by people of African descent across the globe, mirroring many postcolonial anxieties.

In what ways has African American literature responded to the concept of the 'Other' as defined by colonial powers?

African American literature has actively dismantled the 'Othering' process by reclaiming marginalized voices, humanizing Black experiences, and revealing the complexities and richness of Black identity. Writers have challenged stereotypes, asserted agency, and presented multifaceted representations that resist colonial categorizations.

How do concepts like mimicry and hybridity appear in African American literature influenced by postcolonialism?

Mimicry, where the colonized adopts aspects of the colonizer's culture, can be seen in characters who navigate dominant societal expectations while retaining their cultural integrity. Hybridity explores the creation of new, syncretic cultural forms and identities born from the collision of African and Western traditions, often resulting in unique forms of expression and resistance.

What role does language play in African American postcolonial literature?

Language is a crucial site of struggle. Writers often reappropriate and reconfigure dominant English, infusing it with African American vernacular, oral traditions, and spirituals. This act of linguistic reclamation challenges the colonizer's linguistic authority and asserts a distinct cultural voice.

How has the legacy of colonialism shaped the understanding of 'home' and 'belonging' in African American literature?

The disruption caused by slavery and subsequent systemic oppression has made the concepts of 'home' and 'belonging' deeply complex. Literature often explores the search for belonging in a homeland that was never truly possessed, the creation of chosen families, and the longing for ancestral origins that may be fragmented or lost.

What are some contemporary debates or trends in the study of African American literature and postcolonialism?

Current discussions often focus on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class within postcolonial frameworks, the influence of digital technologies on disseminating diasporic voices, the ongoing impact of neocolonialism, and the evolving understanding of Black identity in a globalized world.

How does African American literature contribute to a broader understanding of global postcolonial experiences?

By detailing the specificities of the Black experience in America, African American literature offers valuable insights into universal postcolonial themes of resistance, resilience, and the struggle for liberation. It demonstrates the interconnectedness of global struggles against oppression and enriches our understanding of the diverse manifestations of colonialism's impact.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to African American literature and postcolonialism, with descriptions:

1.

The Souls of Black Folk

This seminal work by W.E.B. Du Bois is a foundational text in African American literature and thought. It delves into the multifaceted experiences of Black Americans in the post-Reconstruction era, exploring themes of racial identity, segregation, and the psychological impact of oppression. Du Bois poignantly articulates the concept of "double consciousness," the experience of seeing oneself through the eyes of others, particularly white society, a concept deeply resonant with postcolonial analyses of internalized oppression and cultural hybridity.

2.

Things Fall Apart

Chinua Achebe's masterpiece offers a vivid and unflinching depiction of pre-colonial Igbo society in Nigeria and its subsequent disruption by British colonialism. The novel follows the life of Okonkwo, a respected leader whose traditional values clash with the encroaching European influence. Achebe masterfully illustrates the devastating consequences of colonialism on indigenous cultures, social structures, and individual lives, making it a cornerstone of postcolonial literature.

3.

Beloved

Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel is a haunting exploration of the legacy of slavery and its enduring psychological trauma on individuals and generations. The story centers on Sethe, an escaped slave haunted by the ghost of her child, Beloved, whom she killed to prevent her return to slavery. Morrison's lyrical prose and magical realism powerfully convey the profound and often unspeakable horrors of slavery and its lingering postcolonial effects on the African American psyche.

4.

Half of a Yellow Sun

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's powerful novel tells the story of the Biafran War in Nigeria through the interconnected lives of five characters. It provides a deeply humanized perspective on the

devastating impact of civil conflict, ethnic tensions, and the lingering shadows of colonial power. The novel explores themes of love, betrayal, and the search for identity amidst societal upheaval, reflecting the complexities of post-independence African nations.

5.

The Color Purple

Alice Walker's epistolary novel chronicles the life of Celie, a poor, uneducated Black woman living in the American South during the early 20th century. Through her letters, Celie recounts her experiences of abuse, resilience, and eventual self-discovery, finding strength and independence in her relationships with other women. The novel powerfully addresses themes of patriarchal oppression, racial injustice, and the quest for liberation and self-definition, resonating with postcolonial struggles for agency.

6.

The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures

This influential work by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding postcolonial literature. It analyzes the ways in which formerly colonized peoples have challenged and subverted the dominant discourses of colonialism through their writing. The book explores key concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, and resistance, offering critical tools for examining literature from diverse postcolonial contexts, including the African diaspora.

7.

Homegoing

Yaa Gyasi's debut novel traces the lineage of two half-sisters in Ghana, one who marries an Englishman and remains in Africa, and the other who is sold into slavery and brought to America. The narrative unfolds through the lives of successive generations, highlighting the enduring impacts of the slave trade and colonialism across centuries. Gyasi's novel powerfully demonstrates how historical injustices continue to shape identities and experiences for descendants of those affected by these colonial legacies.

8.

Invisible Man

Ralph Ellison's classic novel portrays the journey of an unnamed Black man navigating a society riddled with racism and invisibility. The protagonist grapples with his identity and his place in a post-Reconstruction America where his humanity is constantly denied. The novel's exploration of racial alienation, the struggle for selfhood, and the pervasive effects of systemic oppression makes it a vital text for understanding the enduring psychological impacts of historical subjugation, akin to postcolonial critiques of internalized otherness.

9.

A Grain of Wheat

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's powerful novel examines the complex social and psychological landscape of Kenya during its struggle for independence from British rule. The story focuses on a village preparing for the release of a man imprisoned for his involvement in the Mau Mau Uprising, and the revelations that emerge about betrayal and collaboration. Thiong'o offers a nuanced portrayal of the human cost of liberation movements and the difficult process of forging a new national identity after colonial rule.

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