White Teeth and postcolonial literature

1. COLONIAL DISCOURSE(S):

- Joseph Conrad
- Lord Cromer
- H M Stanley

Read this:

Discourse is broadly defined as ‘a way of speaking, thinking and writing about something.’ An important addition to this is the idea that a certain position or relation to the world is tacitly assumed to be correct and shared.

A colonial discourse is therefore any way of speaking or, more importantly for postcolonial peoples, writing about relationships between west and east or colonial and ‘native’ peoples in such a way as to assume to tacit superiority of the white westerners and inferiority of the colonised peoples.

As there are many ways of representing indigenous peoples in ways which are harmful to them, we may meaningfully speak in the plural of colonial discourses. Consider the following examples and ask yourself how the people involved in the text are represented, and who by:

1. ‘The European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of any ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic; he is by nature sceptical and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any proposition; his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism. The mind of the oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description... They are often incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusion from any simple premises of which they admit the truth. Endeavour to elicit a plain statement of fact from an ordinary Egyptian. His explanation will generally be lengthy and wanting in lucidity. He will probably contradict himself half-a-dozen times before he has finished his story. He will often break down under the mildest process of cross-examination.’


In the following extract, the natives have tried to prevent the author from crossing a river and entering their village:

2. ‘Loads were at once dropped... and a smart scene of battle-play occurred, and the end of which the natives retreated on the full run. To punish them for four hours persecution of us we turned about and set fire to every hut on the bank... It should be observed that up to the moment of the firing of the villages the fury of the natives seemed to be increasing, but the instant flames were devouring their homes the fury ceased, by which we learned that fire had a remarkable sedative effect on their nerves.’

   (in Stanley, H.M.: In Darkest Africa, 1890)

Colonial discourse does not have to be non-fiction:

3. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly along 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 break out in a madhouse...

   The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was
uneartly, and the men were - no, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it - this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was the thought of their humanity - like yours - the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you - you so remote from the night of first ages - could comprehend.'

(Gordain, Joseph: Heart of Darkness pp. 61-2).

Make notes, including brief quotations, on how these three texts represent ‘other’ people. Think about how the notion of people as something different to the white western European is constructed.

2. ANALYSING COLONIAL DISCOURSES...

Read this:

- Edward Said

In 1976, Edward Said wrote the first major work to analyse in detail how such colonial discourses worked to represent indigenous peoples in ways which rendered them at best invisible and at worst dehumanised them. Said entitled his work Orientalism and he used this as a shorthand term to cover the ways in which the West produced images of the East (he was particularly interested in representations of the Middle and Far East). He looked at how the East, the ‘Orient’ had become opposed to the West or the ‘Occident’ and how the East had become the subject of much European writing and politics. An entire monolithic edifice of writing and thinking produced a wholly manufactured image of the East which helped support colonial expansion and rule (see references above). In Said’s words, Orientalism was:

‘... the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage - and even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively... furthermore, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no-one writing, thinking or acting on the Orient could do so without taking an account of the limitation on action and thought imposed by Orientalism.’

In your own words, explain Said’s theory and how a writer like Smith would react to it.

3. ... AND UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS OF ‘COLONISING THE MIND’;

Read this:

- Sam Selvon
- Olive Senior
- Chinua Achebe
- Ngugi wa Thiong’o

‘When one talks of colonial indoctrination, it is usually about oppression or subjugation or waving little flags on empire day and singing ‘God Save the King’. But this gut feeling I had as a child was that the Indian was just a piece of cane trash while the white man was to be honoured and respected - where had it come from? I don’t remember consciously being brainwashed to hold this view either at home or at school.’

(Selvon, Sam: Foreday Morning: Selected Prose, 1989).
'How those pale northern eyes and Aristocratic whispers once erased us How our loudness, our laughter, debased us. There was nothing left of ourselves Nothing about us at all.'

(Senior, Olive: ‘Colonial Girls’ School’).

'The moment I realised in reading *Heart of Darkness* that I was not supposed to be a part of Marlow’s crew sailing down the Congo to a bend in the river, but I was one of those on the shore, jumping and clapping and making faces and so on, then I realised that was not me, and the story had to be told again.’

'I would be quite happy if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.'

(Achebe, Chinua: ‘The Novelist as Teacher’).

Language carries culture and culture carries, particularly through... literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, their politics and the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to the world... Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.’


**Explain in your own words how each writer outlined here has reacted to the process of being raised in a colony where the British ruled and how they see the role of language and literature. Include brief quotations (a word or short phrase).**

**4. BINARY OPPOSITIONS**

**Read this:**

- Coloniser/ colonised
- Civilised/ savage
- Western/ Eastern
- European/ African

Colonial discourses help to produce such fallacious notions as these of ‘the ways the world is organised’. A ‘binary opposition’ pitches two aspects of humanity at opposite ends of the scale and artificially produces them as having nothing to do with each other. In this way, the concept of ‘race’ is one which divides human beings into separate ‘categories’, much as animals are divided into different genus and species. Under this construction, a ‘black’ is different to a ‘white’ in the way an elephant is different to a giraffe – both animals, but entirely different types of animal. This is then further complicated by similar artificial notions of gender constructions so that a ‘black man’ is as far removed as humanity can get from a ‘white woman’ (which is why texts like *Othello* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* have had a certain resonance in the past). In binary oppositions theory, a savage is everything that a civilised man is not; an African is everything that a European is not; the colonised need to be colonised in order to learn from their superiors. Rudyard Kipling referred to this as ‘the white man’s burden’, suggesting that there was an onerous responsibility to educate and improve.
How do binary oppositions appear in your text? Note that they are obviously more likely to appear in colonial discourse texts than in postcolonial writing.

5. ‘FIRST WAVE’ POSTCOLONIAL WRITING: ASSERTING THE NATION

Read:

- In the light of new independence, writers are part of a concerned group of people who might be said to be attempting to articulate an identity for the newly-independent nation. After years of subjugation, generations of indigenous peoples may have had their minds so systematically colonised, in Ngugi’s phrase, that their new status leaves them feeling disorientated. Consider the Selvon and Achebe quotations again in the light of this. After colonisation, how do you begin to articulate who you are?
- Achebe’s response is to write Things Fall Apart. Consider in particular the opening and closing of the novel and how they contrast.
- Read Elechi Amadi’s novel The Concubine or consider useful extracts, and how it engages in a similar process to Achebe but from a female point of view;
- Look at Patricia Grace’s Potiki and consider how she shows knowledge of the landscape and how to read it; she looks with an insider’s interpretation.
- Consider the notion of audience and who writers are addressing themselves to. White Westerners may not be the intended recipients of the text.

Why will the idea of nationhood be so important to newly independent people? How might it help them? What symbols of nationality can you think of and how might these be important?

6. SECOND WAVE POSTCOLONIAL WRITING: THE NATION IN QUESTION

Read:

Second wave postcolonial writers are often less certain of things, and rather more suspicious and less confident. They experience life in a greater degree of flux and mobility. They have often left the (ex-) colonised country for England, where they experience a different set of problems. Many of these are to do with other people’s problematic attitudes towards them, and concomitant (and often right-wing) notions of race and nationhood.

‘...it is to the city that the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic come to change the history of the nation... it is the city which provides the space in which emergent identifications and new social movements of the people are played out. It is there that, in our time, the perplexity of the living is most acutely experienced.’

(Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture)

‘My name is Karim Amir and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having merged from two old histories. But I don’t care - Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere.’

(Kureishi, Hanif, The Buddha of Suburbia)

Can you think of any examples of films, books, music you know which might be said to deal with 2nd wave postcolonial questions (Bend It Like Beckham, for example). What sorts of questions and problems are encountered? Try and watch the film East is East - an excellent example of mixed-cultural identities.
7. HYBRIDITY:

Read this:

- Cultural

'The Hotel People liked to tell their guests that the oldest of the wooden houses, with its airtight, panelled store-room which could hold enough rice to feed an army for a year, had been the ancestral home of Comrade EMS Namboodiripad, 'Kerala's Mao Tse Tung', they explained to the uninitiated. The furniture and knick-knacks that came with the house were on display. A reed umbrella, a wicker couch, a wooden dowry box. They were labelled with edifying placards which said Traditional Kerala Umbrella and Traditional Kerala Bridal Dowry Box...

'So there it was. History and literature enlisted by commerce. Kurtz and Karl Marx joining hands to greet rich guests as they stepped off the boat...

'In the evenings for that regional flavour the tourists were treated to truncated Kathakali performances. ('Small attentions spans,' the Hotel People explained to the dancers). So ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos.'

(Roy, Arundhati: The God of Small Things)

- Linguistic

Different perspectives on use of English: for example, Gabriel Okara discusses different types of language in his essay 'Towards An Africa Language for African Literature'. He outlines three positions in respect of using English as a means of expression. One is to ignore it completely, one to fully embrace it, and one (which Okara himself espouses) to use a new English, an English which expresses an (in his case) African (specifically, Nigerian) experience in an Africanised English. Languages, and the language you choose to write in, become political acts in postcolonial contexts.

'I wanted to make a new noise in English.' Salman Rushdie

'Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed the drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?'

(Walcott, Derek, 'A Far Cry from Africa')

I ent have no gun
I ent have no knife
But mugging de Queen’s English
Is the story of my life...

Dem accuse me of assault
on de Oxford dictionary/
imagine a concise peaceful man like me/
dem want me serve time
for inciting rhyme to riot

(Agard, John, 'Me Not No Oxford Don')

- Literary

Salman Rushdie openly acknowledges literary influences which range from Indian myths and oral story telling techniques to European experimental writers such as the German novelist Gunther Grass. He adapts and adopts his style of writing according to what suits him, seeing
White Teeth and postcolonial literature

no boundaries or borders other than those he self-imposes according to what he wishes to achieve.

Millat: Linguistic and cultural hybridity:

'It was a new breed, just recently joining the ranks of the other street crews: Becks, B-boys, Indie kids, wide-boys, ravers, rude-boys, Acidheads, Sharons, Tracies, Kevs, Nation Brothers, Raggas and Pakis; manifesting itself as a kind of cultural mongrel of the last three categories. Raggastanis spoke a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Gujarati and English. Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be called that, was equally a hybrid thing: Allah featured, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as-fuck geezer who would fight in their corner if necessary. Kung Fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy; added to this was a smattering of black power (as embodied by the album Fear Of A Black Planet, Public Enemy); but mainly their mission was to put the Invincible back in Indian, the Bad-aaass back in Bengali, the P-Funk back in Pakistani.’ (p. 231)

'It was his most shameful secret that whenever he opened a door, a car door, a car boot, the door of KEVIN’s meeting hall or the door of his own house just now - the opening of Goodfelllas ran through his head and he found this sentence rolling around in what he presumed was his subconscious: As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster...but Millat’s mind was a mess and more often than not he’d end up pushing the door, head back, shoulders forward, Ray Liotta style, thinking: as far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a Muslim.’ (p. 446)

- Other ‘hybrid’ moments:

‘the Englishman’s game adapted by the immigrant’ (p. 6)

‘And it goes to prove what has been said of immigrants many times before now: they are resourceful. They make do. They use what they can when they can.’ (p. 465)

8. TRANSCULTURAL

Read:

This describes a state of being between two places; writers or characters who do not fit neatly into any particular area can be described as transcultural in the sense that they live and write ‘across’ national boundaries. Rushdie pointed out that he saw himself as a ‘translated man – I have been borne across’, he said, in reference to the fact that he was born in India but was educated and lived for many years in the UK and had an English education. One characteristic feature of such writing is a sense of rootlessness or displacement.

The following extract was written by VS Naipaul. Naipaul was born in Trinidad to Hindu Indian parents but has lived most of his life in East Africa and India. Do we therefore label him Indian, Caribbean or African? Consider the following extract from one of his novels:

Africa was my home, had been my home for centuries. But we came from the east coast, and that made the difference. The coast was not truly African. It was an Arab-Indian-Persian-Portuguese kind of place, and we who lived there were really people of the Indian Ocean. True Africa was at our back. Many miles of scrub and desert separated us from the up-country people; we looked east to the lands with which we traded – Arabia, India, Persia. These were also the lands of our ancestors. But we could no longer say that we were Arabians or Indians or Persians; when we compared ourselves with these people, we felt like people of Africa.

(VS Naipaul, A Bend in the River)
What is described here is a sense of plurality and some sense of confusion. The idea of ‘home’ is complicated because of the ways it can draw on many different locations and peoples. Such writing challenges the notion that national and cultural identities can be defined in the singular, and that individuals fit neatly into categories. This world is more plural, more fluid; it is the world of ‘both/and’ as opposed to ‘either/or’. Naipaul has created a narrator who is caught between cultures. Even though his family have lived in Africa ‘for centuries’, they are ‘really people of the Indian ocean’. However, even that is not secure; when they compare themselves with Arabians, Indians or Persians, they ‘felt like people of Africa’; and this despite the fact that ‘true Africa was at our back’.

'It may be that writers in my position, exiles or immigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely those things which were lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.'

(Rushdie, Salman, Imaginary Homelands)

See also Irie, (White Teeth pp. 400, 402)

Consider Samad as an example of a character who deals with and faces some transcultural issues. His anxiety about the impact living in England has on the second generation is equally pertinent to his own situation. At first, he wishes to display his identity to people who may not be able to see what he truly is or has been in the past:

'I am not a waiter. I have been a student, a scientist, a soldier. My wife is called Alsana. We live in East London but we would like to move north. I am a Muslim but Allah has forsaken me or I have forsaken Allah - I'm not sure.' (p. 58)

This last statement is a moment of some insight for Samad. He swings between the poles of faith and secularism, between rejecting and falling prey to temptation. On one hand, he wishes to live a life as a true Muslim and therefore according to the dictum ‘to the pure all things are pure’. However, he uses this maxim as a way of justifying his failures in the areas of masturbation, food, drink and Poppy Burt-Jones. In attempting to deal with his attraction to his children’s music teacher, Samad makes a fatal compromise according to his other maxim: ‘Can’t say fairer than that’. He pleads to Allah with this phrase in a series of bargains promising to abstain from one pleasure if he indulges in another:

'The deal was this. On 1 January 1980, like a New Year dieter who gives up cheese on the condition that they can have chocolate, Samad gave up masturbation so that he might drink. It was a deal, a business proposition with God... and since that day Samad had enjoyed relative spiritual peace.’ (p. 139)

His constant concern for and apparent disappointment in the way his children turn out fails to take account of the influences he himself has succumbed to, influences which have led him to stray from a truly Islamic lifestyle. He therefore embodies some of the issues facing a transcultural character who has two sources of influence to draw on. He has to juggle categories which are frequently seen as mutually exclusive. He wishes to have true Muslim children. He thinks this will not be possible in England so sends Magid ‘home’ to Bangladesh, wishing at least one of his children to live according to boundaries and borders which he cannot see he has not been able to live by. His is a very familiar parental dilemma with a particular flavour; he wishes his children to live a better life than he himself has managed to:

'The one I send home comes out a pukka Englishman, white-suited silly wig lawyer. The one I keep here is fully paid-up green bow-tie wearing fundamentalist terrorist. I sometimes wonder why I bother,’ said Samad bitterly, betraying the English inflections of twenty years in the
country. 'I really do. These days it feels to me like you make a devil’s pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself started... but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable; terrible food, dreadful newspapers – who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house-trained. Who would want to stay? But you have made a devil’s pact... it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere... suddenly this... belonging, it seems like some long, dirty lie... and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents...' (p. 407)

Yet the nature of the dilemmas facing Millat and Magid are different. They live out a kind of hybridisation of opposites that only become problems when they run into other people’s definitions of borders and boundaries:

‘But he knew other things. He knew he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people’s jobs or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner but not a footballer or film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans; that no-one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had been murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in this country, until the week before last when suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and Millat recognized the anger, thought it recognised him, and grabbed it with both hands.’ (p. 234)

**Multiculturalism**

‘This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white... wearing somebody else’s uniform or somebody else’s skin.’ (pp. 326-328)

**Double belonging-double exile**

Millat:

‘He stood schizophrenic, one foot in Bengal and one in Willesden. In his mind he was as much there as he was here. He did not need a passport to live in two places at once.’ (p. 219)

‘And underneath it all there remained an ever-present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere.’ (p. 269)

**Double colonisation**

The experience of women under colonial rule is sometimes referred to in this way; they suffer firstly the oppression of colonial rule then the oppression of sexist organisation of society.

**Zadie Smith... On being seen as an ‘ethnic’ writer:**

‘I think some writers, not just me, feel that you’re being compared to Rushdie or Kureishi just because there are Asian characters in your book, and if that’s the case, it’s a waste of time and a pain in the ass because there are thousands of books out there with white people in them and they’re not all the same.’

‘Do you go to Don DeLillo and say, ‘He doesn’t represent middle class white people enough’?... No. You give him complete freedom. Why would you limit writers of any ethnicity or gender to be a sex or class politician and give freedom to white writers to write about absolutely anything?’