

The evolution of twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction

Abhishek Saurabh

Department of English, T.M. Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur, Bihar, India

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Abstract

Twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction has undergone a profound paradigm shift, expanding beyond the historical binary of colonizer and colonized to negotiate the complex realities of late-stage global capitalism, digital hegemony, climate crisis, and transnational migration. While traditional postcolonial theory focused predominantly on the deconstruction of European imperial archives and the immediate aftermath of twentieth-century decolonization, twenty-first-century narratives respond to subtle, structural forms of contemporary subjugation. This paper systematically traces the evolutionary trajectories of contemporary postcolonial literature, examining how modern writers reframe the legacy of empire within a globalized, hyper-connected world. Utilizing a textual and interdisciplinary analytical methodology, the study investigates key thematic dimensions: the transition from territorial imperialism to neo-liberal globalization, the intersection of diaspora and transnational identity, the gendered dynamics of colonial trauma, the emergence of environmental postcolonialism and the nascent challenges posed by digital colonialism and artificial intelligence. Furthermore, the paper conducts a comparative analysis of key contemporary authors including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Mohsin Hamid, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o demonstrating how their stylistic and formal innovations redefine the spatial and temporal boundaries of postcolonial discourse. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction is defined not merely by localized resistance, but by a holistic, decolonial commitment to reimagining human and non-human relationality in an increasingly precarious world.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, twenty-first-century fiction, neoliberalism, transnationalism

Introduction

The narrative landscape of postcolonial literature has evolved dramatically over the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Whereas twentieth-century canonical works exemplified by Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, and Edward Said's theoretical formulations were primarily preoccupied with writing back to the imperial center and dismantling the socio-cultural hegemony of European empires (Said, 1993 ^[39], p. 261), contemporary postcolonial literature operates within a vastly different geopolitical matrix shaped by globalization, neoliberal capitalism, transnational migration, ecological crises, and digital technologies. The twenty-first century presents a reality marked by frictionless financial flows, border enforcement technology, ecological collapse, and digital enclosures (Couldry & Mejias, 2019 ^[10], pp. 17–18). Consequently, the postcolonial novel has transformed from a site of national allegory into a complex, multi-sited arena for probing the contradictions of global modernity (Jameson, 2002 ^[22], p. 230). This evolution does not signify the total erosion of historical colonial trauma; rather, it highlights how colonial structures have morphed into neo-colonial economic imperatives and ideological frameworks (Quijano, 2000 ^[35], pp. 533–535). Writers of the contemporary era navigate a world where power is decentralized yet pervasive, operating through international financial institutions, multinational corporations, data surveillance networks, and Western-centric environmental discourses (Mignolo, 2011 ^[30], p. 24). As a result, twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction demands new interpretive paradigms capable of addressing both local historical specificities and global systemic interconnectedness, demonstrating that postcolonial literature continues to remain a dynamic and indispensable

field for understanding the evolving relationships between history, power, identity, culture, and globalization in the contemporary world (Warwick Research Collective, 2015 ^[44], pp. 31).

The present study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of postcolonial fiction in the twenty-first century by examining the significant theoretical, thematic, aesthetic, and ideological transformations that have reshaped the field in response to contemporary global realities (Ashcroft, 2001 ^[21], pp. 9–10). It aims to trace the historical and intellectual trajectory of postcolonial fiction from its earlier emphasis on anti-colonial resistance, national liberation, and cultural recovery to its present engagement with globalization, transnational mobility, and the increasingly complex dynamics of postcolonial modernity (Said, 1993 ^[39], pp. 275–276). The study further seeks to interrogate how contemporary postcolonial novels critically engage with emerging structures of domination, including neo-colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, digital hegemony, environmental degradation, and global inequalities, while simultaneously exploring new modes of resistance, cultural negotiation, and decolonial imagination (Mbembe, 2001 ^[28], p. 23). It also examines the formal, aesthetic, and linguistic innovations employed by twenty-first-century postcolonial novelists, including narrative fragmentation, multilingualism, hybridity, intertextuality, polyphonic storytelling, and experimental literary techniques, to represent transnational identities, diasporic experiences, Indigenous knowledge systems, and multiple forms of cultural belonging (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 37–39). In addition, the study maps major critical debates within contemporary postcolonial studies, particularly those concerning the institutional commodification of subaltern

narratives, the commercialization of cultural difference in the global literary marketplace, the tension between cosmopolitanism and localized resistance, and the continuing relevance of postcolonial theory in an increasingly interconnected yet unequal world (Huggan, 2001^[21], pp. 11–12).

Guided by these objectives, the study addresses several interrelated research questions that seek to deepen the understanding of contemporary postcolonial literary discourse. It investigates how twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction has shifted its critical focus from the historical realities of territorial European imperialism to the contemporary structures of global neoliberal capitalism, digital colonialism, surveillance technologies, and transnational networks of power. It further explores the ways in which contemporary postcolonial writers redefine concepts of home, nation, identity, migration, displacement, memory, and belonging within increasingly fluid transnational and diasporic frameworks, thereby challenging fixed notions of citizenship and cultural identity (Brah, 1996, p. 180). Finally, the study examines how questions of gender, ecocriticism, environmental justice, climate change, Indigenous epistemologies, and the Anthropocene intersect with postcolonial literary forms to imagine alternative futures grounded in social justice, ecological sustainability, cultural plurality, and decolonial ethics, thereby demonstrating the continuing vitality and expanding scope of postcolonial fiction in addressing the most pressing intellectual, political, and environmental challenges of the twenty-first century.

This study employs a qualitative, critical-hermeneutic methodology grounded in textual analysis, comparative literary analysis, and interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis (Radhakrishnan, 2003^[36], p. 115). The research adopts an interpretative and analytical framework that facilitates an in-depth exploration of the evolving concerns, narrative strategies, and ideological dimensions of twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction within its broader historical, political, cultural, and global contexts. The primary texts selected comprise major twenty-first-century postcolonial novels representing varied geographical and cultural loci, including Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, the Middle East, and their respective global Diasporas. These literary works are examined comparatively to identify both shared and region-specific representations of colonial legacies, globalization, migration, identity formation, cultural hybridity, ecological crisis, and transnational experiences. The selected texts are juxtaposed against an extensive body of secondary critical literature drawn from postcolonial theory, cultural studies, political economy, ecocriticism, decolonial theory, globalization studies, and subaltern studies (Loomba, 2015^[27], pp. 30–32). This interdisciplinary engagement enables the study to situate literary narratives within wider socio-political, economic, and environmental discourses while critically evaluating the changing theoretical paradigms of contemporary postcolonial scholarship (Ashcroft, 2001^[21], pp. 18–19). Through close reading and contextual interrogation, the study examines thematic trajectories alongside formal innovations, including speculative realism, polyphonic narrative structures, linguistic hybridity, fragmented narration, intertextuality, metafictional techniques, and experimental modes of storytelling (Culler, 1997, p. 67). Particular attention is devoted to the ways in which

contemporary authors negotiate questions of power, resistance, memory, displacement, diaspora, gender, indigeneity, environmental justice, and digital modernity through innovative literary forms and narrative experimentation (Nixon, 2011^[34], p.16). Furthermore, the study incorporates a comparative interpretative approach to identify convergences and divergences across different regional literary traditions, thereby highlighting the plurality and heterogeneity of postcolonial experiences in the twenty-first century (Damrosch, 2003^[24], p. 303). Rather than relying on quantitative measurement, the research emphasizes qualitative interpretation, critical evaluation, and theoretical synthesis to generate nuanced insights into the continuing transformation of postcolonial fiction and its expanding engagement with contemporary global realities (Creswell, 2013, pp. 43–45).

The theoretical architecture of this paper combines classic postcolonial criticism with contemporary decolonial and materialist frameworks (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 15). It draws upon foundational concepts developed by Edward Said on Orientalism and worldly textual criticism, Homi Bhabha on hybridity and the third space, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on subalternity and strategic essentialism. To address twenty-first-century realities, this foundation is extended through the concepts of decoloniality and imperial globality developed by Walter D. Mignolo and Anibal Quijano, particularly their formulation of the "coloniality of power" and the option for "border thinking". It further incorporates theories of neoliberal globalization and world literature proposed by Fredric Jameson, Pascale Casanova, and the Warwick Research Collective, framing postcolonial literature as a registration of combined and uneven global development (Loomba, 2015^[27], pp. 230–232). The framework also integrates the perspectives of environmental postcolonialism through Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" and Dipesh Chakrabarty's reflections on the climate of history in the Anthropocene, while also recognizing the increasing significance of ecological justice and environmental humanities in contemporary postcolonial literary criticism (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 20). Finally, it includes critical approaches to digital and algorithmic colonialism by drawing upon Shoshana Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism and Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias's formulation of data colonialism, thereby providing a comprehensive theoretical foundation for analyzing the evolving forms of power, identity, resistance, and representation in twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction (Young, 2001^[45], pp. 383–385).

Twentieth-century postcolonial literature was largely structured around the geopolitical cartography of nation-states emerging from imperial rule (Fanon, 2004^[13], p. 20). In contrast, twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction responds to the dissolution of Westphalian sovereignty under the pressure of globalization (Appadurai, 2006^[4], p. 23). The nation-state is no longer depicted as the sole or primary locus of liberation; instead, writers portray it as an entity trapped between historical colonial boundaries and contemporary global markets (Casanova, 2004^[7], pp. 81–83). Rather than focusing exclusively on the struggle against colonial occupation, contemporary postcolonial fiction examines the complex realities of transnational capitalism, migration, global mobility, economic inequality, cultural hybridity, and shifting forms of political authority that characterize the twenty-first century. It explores how the

legacy of empire continues to shape societies through new mechanisms of power, including multinational corporations, global financial institutions, digital technologies, and international governance structures, thereby revealing that colonial domination has been transformed rather than entirely dismantled. Fiction in this era maps how global capital bypasses national borders while simultaneously reinforcing social hierarchies, economic disparities, and cultural inequalities on the ground (WReC, 2015 ^[43], pp. 15–16). Consequently, contemporary postcolonial narratives move beyond the binary opposition of colonizer and colonized to investigate the interconnected dynamics of globalization, neoliberalism, identity, displacement, and resistance, demonstrating that the evolution of postcolonial fiction reflects the changing configurations of power and inequality in an increasingly interconnected world (Gikandi, 2010 ^[17], pp. 17–18).

Contemporary postcolonial narratives expose how physical decolonization did not dismantle systemic exploitation (Mbembe, 2001 ^[28], p. 23). Instead, they reveal that colonial systems of domination have been reconfigured through the forces of neo-colonialism, global capitalism, and neoliberal economic policies, which continue to perpetuate unequal power relations between the Global North and the Global South. Through corporate resource extraction, structural adjustment programmes, foreign debt, privatization, and unequal trade regimes, former imperial powers and transnational corporations maintain economic dominance over formerly colonized societies (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2006 ^[32], p. 15). Contemporary novels portray how global financial institutions, multinational corporations, and market-driven development policies reshape local economies, erode indigenous livelihoods, intensify social inequalities, and deepen class divisions while presenting globalization as an inevitable process of progress. Literary narratives set in urban hubs across the Global South illustrate the stark contrast between elite enclaves integrated into global financial networks and impoverished populations subjected to labour exploitation, forced migration, environmental degradation, and social displacement (Jameson, 2002 ^[22], p. 230). By foregrounding these contradictions, twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction demonstrates that political independence has often failed to translate into genuine economic sovereignty, exposing the persistence of imperial power through financial institutions, transnational markets, and global systems of capital accumulation that continue to shape postcolonial realities in the contemporary world (Lazarus, 2011 ^[26], p. 18).

The twenty-first-century postcolonial subject is frequently defined by mobility whether forced by war, economic ruin, environmental degradation, and climate change, or undertaken voluntarily in pursuit of education, employment, and improved living opportunities (Gilroy, 2000 ^[18], pp. 111–113). Consequently, traditional concepts of "home" and "belonging" are fundamentally transformed as contemporary postcolonial fiction portrays identity as fluid, multilayered, and continually negotiated across geographical, cultural, and political boundaries (Lahiri, 2003 ^[24], pp. 49–50). Diaspora is no longer characterized merely by nostalgic longing for a lost homeland; rather, it is represented as a dynamic, fluid, and often fragmented condition shaped by migration, displacement, cultural hybridity, and global interconnectedness (Bhabha, 2004 ^[6], p. 221). Contemporary narratives explore the psychological and

emotional complexities of exile, memory, alienation, and adaptation while emphasizing that migrants frequently inhabit multiple cultural worlds simultaneously without fully belonging to any single one. Transnational identity is therefore portrayed as a continuous negotiation between multiple spaces, languages, histories, and cultural traditions, where individuals resist complete assimilation while navigating racialized surveillance, discrimination, exclusion, and unequal citizenship in host nations (Hamid, 2017 ^[20], p. 117). Through these representations, twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction redefines identity not as a fixed national or cultural category but as an evolving process shaped by transnational mobility, cross-cultural encounters, and the persistent legacies of colonialism in an increasingly globalized world (Rushdie, 2002 ^[5], pp. 9–10).

Historical memory remains a pivotal battleground in contemporary postcolonial literature (Chakrabarty, 2000 ^[8], pp. 43–45). However, twenty-first-century writers increasingly examine how historical atrocities, including partition, slavery, colonial massacres, forced displacement, and racial oppression, continue to shape contemporary political conflict, social inequality, and structural violence across postcolonial societies (Adichie, 2006 ^[2], p. 104). Rather than viewing trauma as an isolated psychological condition, postcolonial fiction presents trauma as systemic, collective, and intergenerational, deeply embedded within landscapes, cultural memory, family histories, and bodily experiences that continue to influence present-day identities and relationships (Mbembe, 2019 ^[29], pp. 25–28). Alongside these concerns, twenty-first-century postcolonial feminist writers challenge both Western imperialist patriarchy and Indigenous traditionalist patriarchy by questioning multiple and intersecting structures of domination (Loomba, 2015 ^[27], pp. 125–127). Their works dismantle the long-standing representation of the subaltern woman as a passive victim in need of rescue and instead foreground women's agency through every day acts of resistance, transnational solidarity, community leadership, and cultural resilience (Spivak, 1999 ^[40], p. 308–310). These narratives further expose how neoliberal globalization and global capitalism commodify women's labour, bodies, and identities in the Global South while simultaneously highlighting the role of women as active participants in social transformation, political resistance, and decolonial futures (Adichie, 2013 ^[3], p. 15–17).

Environmental Postcolonialism, Digital Colonialism, and Indigenous Perspectives: The intersection of postcolonialism and ecocriticism has emerged as one of the most significant theoretical developments in twenty-first-century literary studies (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011 ^[11], p. 18). Contemporary postcolonial climate fiction demonstrates that ecological degradation is not merely an anticipated future crisis but an ongoing historical process rooted in imperial resource extraction, deforestation, environmental exploitation, and the dispossession of Indigenous and marginalized communities (Ghosh, 2016 ^[15], pp. 21–23). These narratives emphasize that communities in the Global South disproportionately experience the consequences of climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and environmental injustice, illustrating what Rob Nixon conceptualizes as "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011 ^[34], p. 16). Simultaneously, as digital technology, surveillance systems, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic governance increasingly shape global society, postcolonial writers have

begun interrogating the emergence of digital colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019 ^[10], pp. 16–18). Their works critically examine how multinational technology corporations extract data from the Global South, reinforce algorithmic bias, expand systems of surveillance, and reshape identity, memory, and political resistance within non-Western societies (Zuboff, 2019 ^[46], p. 225). Furthermore, contemporary postcolonial literature increasingly incorporates Indigenous epistemologies that challenge Western Enlightenment rationality, anthropocentrism, and human–nature dualisms (Mignolo,

2011 ^[30], p. 137). Decolonial perspectives prioritize land defence, language revitalization, cultural sovereignty, ecological stewardship, and relational ways of knowing that offer meaningful alternatives to capitalist extraction, colonial knowledge systems, and imperial historical narratives, thereby expanding the intellectual and ethical horizons of twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2012 ^[33], p. 18).

Comparative Analysis of Major Twenty-First-Century Novelists

Author	Key Works	Central Themes	Aesthetic & Formal Innovations
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	<i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i> (2006), <i>Americanah</i> (2013) ^[3]	Race, transatlantic migration, Biafran historical memory, gender politics (Adichie, 2006, 2013) ^[2, 3]	Realist multi-vocal narratives, integration of digital blogging, satirical commentary on race (Walkowitz, 2015) ^[43]
Mohsin Hamid	<i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i> (2007), <i>Exit West</i> (2017) ^[20]	Neoliberal capitalism, post-9/11 empire, global refugee crises, border politics (Hamid, 2007, 2017) ^[19, 20]	Dramatic monologue, magical realism, surrealist portal devices to collapse spatial distances (Gikandi, 2010) ^[17]
Amitav Ghosh	<i>The Glass Palace</i> (2000), <i>Ibis Trilogy</i> , <i>Gun Island</i> (2019) ^[16]	Environmental crisis, global trade routes, colonial resource extraction, displacement (Ghosh, 2000, 2016, 2019) ^[14, 15, 16]	Historical archival research, polyglot linguistic blending, ecological speculativeness (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011) ^[11]
Jhumpa Lahiri	<i>The Namesake</i> (2003), <i>The Lowland</i> (2013) ^[25] , <i>Whereabouts</i>	Second-generation diaspora, cultural translation, alienation, linguistic identity (Lahiri, 2003, 2013) ^[24, 25]	Introspective minimalist prose, psychological realism, cross-cultural code-switching (Walkowitz, 2015) ^[43]
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o	<i>Wizard of the Crow</i> (2006)	Neo-colonial dictatorship, corporate globalization, Indigenous resistance (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2006, 2012) ^[32, 33]	Afro-mythic satire, oral storytelling traditions, socio-political allegory (Mbembe, 2001) ^[28]

Contemporary postcolonial studies are characterized by several important theoretical and ideological debates that continue to shape the interpretation of twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction. One significant debate concerns the commodification of the "postcolonial exotic," wherein scholars argue that postcolonial literature is frequently marketed by major Western publishing houses to satisfy the expectations of global cosmopolitan audiences, thereby transforming cultural difference into a marketable commodity and, in some instances, diluting its radical political critique (Huggan, 2001 ^[21], p. 18). Another major debate revolves around the tension between cosmopolitanism and local resistance, questioning whether contemporary postcolonial fiction increasingly privileges the experiences of elite, highly mobile diasporic subjects while marginalizing the lived realities of localized subaltern communities that continue to experience economic exploitation, political exclusion, and social inequality (Lazarus, 2011 ^[26], p. 22). A further theoretical discussion concerns the continuing relevance of the term "postcolonial" itself, with several critics arguing that the prefix "post-" misleadingly suggests that colonialism has ended despite the persistence of neo-colonial power structures, global capitalism, and imperial inequalities. Consequently, alternative conceptual frameworks such as "world literature," "decolonial literature," and "imperial globality" have been proposed to better explain the enduring forms of political, economic, cultural, and epistemic domination that characterize the contemporary world (Mignolo, 2011 ^[30], pp. 22–24). Collectively, these debates demonstrate that postcolonial studies remain a dynamic and evolving field, continually reassessing its theoretical foundations, conceptual vocabulary, and critical methodologies in response to the changing realities of globalization, transnationalism, and the enduring legacies of colonialism (Young, 2001 ^[45], p. 73).

Postcolonial fiction in the remainder of the twenty-first century faces unprecedented challenges arising from rapidly changing political, technological, environmental, and economic conditions. The rise of ethno-nationalism, the intensification of climate-induced displacement, the expansion of militarized borders, the persistence of global economic inequality, and the consolidation of algorithmic authority increasingly threaten to redefine concepts of citizenship, sovereignty, human rights, and social justice within both postcolonial societies and the wider global order (Appadurai, 2006 ^[4], p. 25). Contemporary postcolonial literature must therefore continue to engage with these emerging realities by examining the complex intersections of migration, environmental crisis, digital governance, surveillance technologies, artificial intelligence, and new forms of neo-colonial domination that shape everyday life across the Global South (Couldry & Mejias, 2019 ^[10], p. 18). At the same time, future scholarship should broaden its analytical scope by giving greater attention to speculative and science-fiction traditions emerging from Africa, South Asia, and Indigenous communities, including Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurisms, which reimagine decolonial futures through alternative epistemologies and narrative forms (Mbembe, 2019 ^[29], p. 72). It should also critically examine the growing significance of non-print, multimedia, and digital storytelling platforms in shaping postcolonial discourse and literary production in an increasingly networked world (Walkowitz, 2015 ^[43], p. 128). Furthermore, greater emphasis should be placed on studying inter-South solidarity movements, South–South cultural collaborations, and economic and literary exchanges that develop independently of Western institutional mediation, thereby highlighting alternative models of globalization, knowledge production, and decolonial cooperation (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018 ^[31], p. 118). Collectively, these emerging directions suggest that the future of postcolonial

studies will depend upon its ability to integrate interdisciplinary perspectives while responding critically to the evolving structures of global power, technological transformation, ecological crisis, and cultural resistance in the twenty-first century (Nixon, 2011 ^[34], p. 16).

Twenty-first-century postcolonial fiction has expanded beyond its original theoretical boundaries to become a dynamic, critical mapping of global modernity. By confronting the interwoven crises of neoliberal capitalism, environmental destruction, digital hegemony, and enforced migration, modern writers demonstrate that the effects of historical colonialism remain deeply woven into contemporary global systems. Through formal experimentation ranging from magical realism and speculative fiction to polyphonic digital realism authors such as Adichie, Hamid, Ghosh, Lahiri, and Ngũgĩ illuminate alternative visions of justice, memory, and human interconnection. Ultimately, contemporary postcolonial literature remains an essential framework for envisioning a genuinely decolonized world.

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