

Teaching Postcolonial Literature at a Jesuit Institution

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In 2024, Pope Francis wrote and promulgated “Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis on the Role of Literature in Formation,”¹ in which he examines the role of literature, imagination, and faith in the education of seminarians. For literary scholars and other humanists, this wholehearted emphasis on the importance of reading, of literary texts, and particularly novels, from a spiritual and political leader counters the anti-humanities discourse that prevails in our public sphere.

I have spent the last 31 years teaching at Seattle University, a private Jesuit Catholic institution. I was raised in India as a Hindu in what was then a largely secular nation and attended Catholic educational institutions for most of my life. I am now a Professor of English whose scholarship, teaching, and pedagogy are deeply influenced by postcolonial and feminist studies. Therefore, Seattle University’s Jesuit mission to teach the whole person and to promote professional formation of the students so they can be leaders in a just and humane world is one that resonates deeply with me. My colleagues embrace these values as well, and as an institution we strive to have our mission inform all aspects of our work with students. We are plagued by some of the same issues that other American higher educational institutions face, such as declining enrollments, financial challenges, and alarming changes wrought by the federal government that currently seeks to undermine any work we have done on equity, cultural diversity, and inclusion that supports our historically marginalized communities. The late Pope Francis’ statements, such as his encyclical *Laudato si’* and the more recent *Laudate Deum*, play a huge role in our institution’s curriculum and mission, and so I am happy to see a statement on literature and its role in formation. He is addressing seminary education, but it is a statement that resoundingly emphasizes the value of the humanities and especially the written word, and so is valuable to all of us in academia.

I am particularly drawn to a statement early in the letter in which Pope Francis writes:

Readers in some sense rewrite a text, enlarging its scope through their imagination, creating a whole world by bringing into play their skills, their memory, their dreams and their personal history, with all

its drama and symbolism. In this way, what emerges is a text quite different from the one the author intended to write. A literary work is thus a living and ever-fruitful text, always capable of speaking in different ways and producing an original synthesis on the part of each of its readers. In our reading, we are enriched by what we receive from the author and this allows us in turn to grow inwardly, so that each new work we read will renew and expand our worldview.²

In this passage, the Pope speaks about the importance of the imagination and of the role the reader plays in interpreting the text rooted in their experiences and how literature expands our worldview. Not only is the text a product of a writer's imagination, but the reader too is recreating the text each time they read it by drawing upon their experiences. Thus, the reader's inner life is enriched by this engagement with the writer and their text.

Yet what is missing in this letter is an engagement with the politics of knowledge formation and the ideologies of reading and interpretation. Postcolonialists and feminists have established that literary texts can be alienating, and not all readers experience transcendence in their encounters with literary texts. A fine example of such alienation is Chinua Achebe's essay "An Image of Africa,"³ in which he reads Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a racist text. Scholars have read Conrad's famous novella as a critique of imperialism; however, Achebe's examples of how African characters are marginalized in the novella and depicted as savage with limited linguistic ability demonstrate that for African readers, the novel is dehumanizing. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in his important work *Decolonising the Mind*,⁴ argued for the lasting psychological and cultural impacts of a colonialist Eurocentric education. Ngũgĩ writes about Gikuyu children being punished for speaking their language in colonial schools and experiencing corporal punishment for not speaking exclusively in English. For Ngũgĩ, English can never be the language that authentically expresses African realities, and he calls for African writers to eschew writing in colonial languages and to return to their native tongues.

How then can we balance the Pope's letter with the arguments of Achebe, Ngũgĩ, and the many postcolonial and feminist scholars? This is an ongoing challenge for many of us academics. I introduced postcolonial studies into my department and university's curriculum when I began teaching there in 1993. At first it was a very lonely pursuit, as I was the sole person pushing against a Eurocentric curriculum that, in keeping with Jesuit education, emphasized the classics; and the English department curriculum was exclusively canonical British, American, and European literatures from Beowulf and Homer to the present. At my institution, we still struggle with

this history each time we attempt to revise the curriculum, especially in our University Honors Program, which started out as a great books program. Instead of decentering the European curriculum, many courses get revised to simply add other texts and do not question the ideologies that underlie how we teach textual interpretation. In the courses I teach (and have taught) in the different tracks within the program, I embrace two approaches: 1) I teach canonical texts from a postcolonial perspective. For example, I pair George Orwell's *Burmese Days* with Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. 2) I displace British and American texts by focusing on writers from Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean and have students read these texts from an intersectional feminist perspective. So, when we read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, we talk about the importance of the text speaking back to the Empire but also problematize Achebe from a feminist perspective.

Recently, the university undertook a massive curricular revision insisting that every student graduating from SU must have been exposed to three themes: race and economic injustice, climate change and sustainability, and the impact of technology on society. What troubles me still is that a lot of the new courses that address race and economic injustice—while well-intentioned—are often simply uncritically teaching texts by authors who come from historically marginalized communities in the United States or from the Global South. I led the conversation about curriculum change for one of the tracks in our Honors Program and used Priyamvada Gopal's insightful essay "On Decolonisation and the University."⁵ She notes four elements to decolonizing a university:

(a) Acknowledging that much of what we take for granted – methodologies, practices, disciplines – in university contexts in the West and beyond are still structured by the imperatives of the European imperial enterprise (also racial capitalism) and its attendant activities of extraction and ownership.

The university was not, and is not, separable from endeavours of 'discovery' and control.

(b) Acknowledging the loss, mutilation and marginalisation of bodies of knowledge and ideas as "Europe" became (and, in many ways, remains) the primary arbiter of what was worth knowing and how it is known.

(c) Excavating and recognising lines of influence that run from "non-Europe" to "Europe." This includes undoing what Trouillot calls 'bundles of silences' such that the history of the West is "retold in ways that bring forward the perspective of the world".

(d) Opening pathways to dialogue – and mutually transformative engagement – between different cultures, traditions, and approaches to knowledge, bearing in mind structural disadvantages and historic power differentials. We might even call this process “relinking”.⁶

It is Gopal’s final point on “relinking” that universities need to address in our current moment. These four points became central to our workshops in the Honors Program as we focused on reimagining our curriculum and pedagogy. We had spirited conversations on whether our program’s devotion to historic periodization was too rooted in a Eurocentric world view; if we had to rethink our pedagogies, such as the oral final exam, to be more inclusive; and what tools we would use to teach students to discern power differentials amongst different cultures and traditions.

While the Pope focuses on spiritual formation through literature and the importance of reading, his text sidesteps the politics of reading and knowledge formation that is central to postcolonial and decolonial studies. Gopal offers us “pathways to dialogue” that require us to radically rethink our pedagogies and curricular design. Although we in American higher education and particularly Jesuit education are battling an anti-humanities mindset, we cannot uncritically offer literature as a tool for empathy and transcendence. We must engage in a critical discussion about imperialism both historically and in its current manifestations, including genocide, and ask how we can teach our students to read critically, so that their formation as leaders for a just and humane world is not just what we put into our marketing materials. As the current Trump administration has cut funding to universities and attacked universities for focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and many colleagues have been censured or fired for the work they do, our conversations in higher education, including in languages and literatures departments, must engage in the politics of knowledge production within an imperial society.

¹ Pope Francis, “Letter of His Holiness on the Role of Literature in Formation,” The Holy See, July 17, 2024, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2024/documents/20240717-lettera-ruolo-letteratura-formazione.html>.

² Pope Francis, “Letter,” Paragraph 3.

³ Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa,” *Massachusetts Review* 57, no. 1 (2016): 14–27. This essay was originally a Chancellor’s lecture from 1977 and is now included in several print and digital sources.

⁴ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind* (London, UK: James Curry/Heinemann, 1986).

⁵ Priyamvada Gopal, “On Decolonisation and the University,” *Textual Practice* 35, no. 6 (2024): 873–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1929561>.

⁶ Gopal, “On Decolonisation,” 20.