

DECOLONIZING NARRATIVES: AN OVERVIEW OF FOURTH WORLD LITERATURE

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Abstract

Fourth World Literature is a literary movement that amplifies the voices of indigenous, stateless, and marginalized populations. Originating from political discourse, it has evolved into a genre that challenges dominant narratives and resists the historical erasure imposed by colonial and neo-colonial structures. This paper explores the evolution of Fourth World Literature, differentiating it from Postcolonial Literature by focusing on communities that have never attained sovereignty. Key themes such as colonial oppression, land and identity, linguistic marginalization, and resilience through storytelling are examined. The study highlights how Fourth World Literature functions as an essential platform for self-representation and the decolonization of knowledge, ensuring that marginalized histories, languages, and cultures continue to thrive in an increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: Fourth World Literature, Indigenous Narratives, Colonial Oppression, Land Dispossession, Oral Storytelling, Linguistic Resistance, Postcolonial Theory, Cultural Decolonization.

Introduction

The nascent literary genre, Fourth World Literature, amplifies the voices of indigenous, stateless, and marginalized populations globally. Indigenous leader George Manuel of Canada first used the term "Fourth World" in his 1974 publication, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*. It addresses nations, ethnic groups, and indigenous populations that exist beyond the traditional framework of modern nation-states. The Fourth World consists of indigenous, colonized, and internally oppressed populations who frequently lack political sovereignty, despite their significant historical and cultural heritage within their respective nations, in contrast to the First World (developed capitalist nations), Second World (former socialist governments), and Third World (developing nations). Fourth World Literature is a powerful literary movement that seeks to reclaim narratives, preserve cultural memory, and resist historical erasure, colonial oppression, and systemic marginalization. It encompasses oral histories, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and drama that represent the perspectives, struggles, and aspirations of indigenous and stateless people. This body of art examines resistance, resilience, rebirth, and survival. Fourth World Literature serves as an essential platform for self-representation and the decolonization of knowledge, even as globalization, modernity, and nation-building continue to jeopardize indigenous identities.

Origins and Definition of Fourth World Literature

Emerging from political debates, the idea of "Fourth World Literature" gained literary significance as indigenous and marginalized writers used narrative genres to challenge accepted

narratives and recover their histories. While Fourth World Literature shows those who have never attained statehood or sovereignty, remaining under colonial or neo-colonial circumstances, scholars argue that Fourth World Literature is unique from Postcolonial Literature in that postcolonial narratives address the consequences of colonialism and national independence. With stateless nations like the Kurds, Palestinians, Tibetans, and Basques, this literary heritage largely consists of works by Native American, First Nation, Aboriginal Australian, Māori, Adivasi, Sami, and other indigenous people. Their writing strongly opposes forced assimilation, cultural eradication, land seizure, and institutional prejudice these groups have suffered. Fourth World Literature is distinguished in part by its reliance on oral storytelling traditions. Unlike Western literary traditions that give written works first priority, numerous indigenous communities have long histories of oral literature, folklore, and mythology that influence their modern creative forms. Beyond just a stylistic element, this orality is a fundamental component of indigenous epistemology that shapes the transfer of knowledge, history, and identity across generations.

Originally coined by Mbuto Milando, the first secretary of the Tanzanian High Commission in Canada, who said, "When Native people come into their own, on the basis of their own cultures and traditions, that will be the Fourth World," in conversation with the Canadian indigenous leader George Manuel as mentioned by Peter McFarlane in "Brotherhood to Nationhood: George Manuel and the Making of the Modern Indian Movement" (Toronto: Between the Lines, 160). The fourth world is made up of the indigenous people of every

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land. I would rather concentrate on the literary ramifications of the term "Fourth World" than its geographic meaning. The idea now encompasses all underprivileged groups, including women, minorities, the abused, and those targeted by social elites or positioned in the lowest levels of hegemony. History shows that indigenous people have been constantly oppressed by either colonialism or societal modernity. Since literature is a vehicle for raising awareness and empowering underprivileged people by elevating their voices, anyone involved in it should be focused on the literary portrayal of the Fourth World. The basic tools these people utilize for survival and emancipation are opposition and protest. Among others, this has produced Postcolonial theories, Protest theories, Subaltern theories, Feminism, Ecocriticism, Cultural theories, and Dalit Literature.

One theory in literature that studies the subjugated group is Postcolonialism. We all are well aware of Postcolonialism and its highlighting of the issues of otherhood and the detailing of the binary of the haves and the have-nots, of the centre and the margin, of the master and the slave, of the colonizer and the colonized, so on and so forth. Postcolonial theory attempts to investigate the shape that any colonized society takes after its freedom from colonization. The dimensions of analysis are the literature, culture, and history of that nation. Colonization and the subsequent decolonization were the initial concerns for the study as colonization meant oppression of the native and decolonization involved the movement of the colonized or the native from the periphery to the centre. Colonization has been understood as the actual forceful taking over of a country physically by the imperial powers, but we need to understand that colonization or subjugation can be psychological as well. Frantz Fanon takes up a psychoanalytical study of colonization in *The Wretched of the Earth*, which is a canonical work to understand the enfeebling effect on an individual and a nation that has been colonized. And from here we move into the realms of Feminism, the Dalit issues, the aborigines, the stateless, the powerless, the homeless, the abused, and the tortured. Feminism was a movement started to give more power to females in society. We all know about the different phases of feminism and the warriors of this still-ongoing war. The names such as Simone de Beauvoir and Hélène Cixous are well known to all of us, but I would like to mention here that in India, feminism can be dated as far back as the 15th century in the works of Balaram Dasa, an Odia poet who wrote *Lakshmi Purana* narrating the story of Goddess Lakshmi who is thrown out of her home, the famous Puri temple by her husband Lord Jagannath and his brother Lord Balram for eating

with an outcaste and how Goddess Lakshmi with her determination makes them realize their prejudiced behaviour and finally reunites with her family. Fourth World Literature is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of indigenous, stateless, and marginalized communities. The major themes in this literary tradition explore colonial oppression, land and identity, language and storytelling, and resilience through resistance and Indigenous Futurism. These themes not only document historical injustices but also highlight the strength, agency, and continued survival of indigenous cultures despite systemic efforts to erase them.

Colonial Oppression and Historical Erasure

Fourth World Literature's analysis of colonial oppression and the eradication of indigenous histories and identities runs as a major subject. Globally, indigenous people have suffered forced assimilation, a loss of autonomy, a degradation of cultural legacy, and violent displacement events. Indigenous writers use their work to challenge the Eurocentric narratives that present them as either extinct civilizations or as relics of the past. Colonial governments and dominant national cultures often try to reinterpret historical events in ways that hide indigenous contributions, challenge their sovereignty, and justify their continuous marginalization. For indigenous people, literature provides a forum to recover their stories, validate their existence, and correct historical distortions. The complexity experienced by a Native American protagonist negotiating the conflict between his cultural background and the pressures of assimilation in modern America is explored in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968). The story emphasizes the great influence of colonial policies on indigenous identities, therefore highlighting the alienation people from their cultural background experience. The 1977 *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko combines present concerns with indigenous mythology to show how colonization has fragmented Native American identity and the possibility for repair via ancient rites. The 1978 *Draupadi* by Mahasweta Devi provides a thorough analysis of the merciless treatment of Adivasi people by the Indian government. Draupadi, the major character, embodies the ongoing brutality committed against indigenous people by modern nation-states as a tribal lady tormented by security agents. Using parody, Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) looks at how Western stories have marginalized indigenous points of view. King underlines the ongoing importance and influence of Native cultures by means of a re-examination of history from an indigenous perspective. This kind of Fourth World Literature challenges colonial narratives that present indigenous people as just victims, therefore expressing their agency in both

historical and current settings. It aims to expose the ongoing systematic persecution, therefore highlighting the challenges experienced by indigenous people.

Land and Identity

For many indigenous cultures, land is not just a physical space but a sacred entity that shapes identity, spirituality, and community life. Unlike Western conceptions of land as property to be owned, indigenous worldviews see land as a living being that must be respected and preserved. Colonialism and modern nation-building have led to land dispossession, forced displacement, and environmental destruction, all of which threaten indigenous ways of life.

Literature in the Fourth World tradition often portrays land as a site of cultural memory and resistance. Many texts explore the emotional, spiritual, and political consequences of losing ancestral lands.

Witi Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* (1987) explores the connection between Māori identity and the sea, illustrating how indigenous traditions are tied to the natural world. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey* (2014) presents the Adivasi relationship with land, highlighting how modern industrialization and deforestation threaten tribal communities. Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) blends indigenous knowledge with scientific ecology, advocating for sustainable land practices rooted in indigenous traditions.

The land and Identity issues in Fourth World Literature reaffirms indigenous spiritual and cultural relationships with the land and it highlights the impact of land dispossession on identity and community survival. In posthuman conditions it serves as an important standpoint because it critiques environmental destruction caused by colonialism and corporate exploitation.

Language, Orality, and Storytelling

Language is more than just a communication tool - it carries culture, memory, and identity. Indigenous languages have been historically suppressed through colonial education systems, forced assimilation, and linguistic imperialism. Many indigenous communities have been forced to abandon their native languages in favour of English, Spanish, or other dominant languages, leading to cultural erasure. Fourth World Literature resists linguistic colonization by incorporating indigenous languages, oral traditions, and storytelling techniques into written texts. Many indigenous narratives use mythology, folklore, and

song as essential storytelling devices that challenge Western literary conventions.

Another major theme in the literature of the fourth world is Dalit Literature. This area attempts to topple the previous three worlds' edification of culture and learning. It is the literature of and by the downtrodden of the society symbolized on caste lines. We list in this group the natives of America, the aboriginals of Australia, the Marois of New Zealand, the natives of Latin America besides the Dalits and the tribals of India. This is also due to the fact that the story of subjugation and victimization is universal in nature and technique and is still continuing. Literature empowers these groups by voicing their issues. Here we can refer to Foucault whose discourse analyses involves a non-linear, contentious and incongruous historical account of those establishments or discourses that have fashioned our ideas of sexuality, sickness, criminality, madness, morality etcetera, exposing how pre-eminence is maintained by dominant power structures over the margins through the creation of appropriate discourses. According to Foucault, the discourse of power and knowledge does not mean "knowledge is power" rather it shows how certain knowledge is suppressed and other knowledge is produced through power. Power produces knowledge as well as suppressed knowledge. So, Dalit literature has been able to disrupt this equation and create a niche by developing its own discourse to subvert the existing discourse of the dominant. Though we acknowledge that the subversion is not yet over, and it still needs voicing by the subverted as well as those having their say in the written world, the elites of the societies.

From here we can move on to a related field and that is of Subaltern studies. Though its area of analysis is not just the Dalits but also includes the have-nots of a society. Despite the term being coined by Antonio Gramsci, it actually came into prominence and acquire its present meaning around the year 1982 with the publication of several articles by west trained Indian scholars who stood up to revolt against the Eurocentric based elite history focusing on subaltern in the dimensions of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture. The pioneer of this group was Ranajit Guha who started with his writings about the peasant uprising.

History plays an important role in the existential issues of identity. When on the one hand it can establish and strengthen the identity of an individual or a group, on the other it can even wipe off the existence of that very individual or group. It all depends on the narrative of History. It is extremely pertinent to mention here that for years

all together and even today as well Vasco da Gama is credited with and eulogised for discovering the sea route to India and some even call him the discoverer of India as if India did not exist before his discovery. But few know about the existence of letters written in the year 1139, 1140 and 1142 by an Algerian Jew writing from Egypt to his master in South India about some business issues related to trade which proves that the sea route to India was known to people long before Vasco da Gama's much celebrated discovery. These letters are kept in American Congress library and have been written about by Amitav Ghosh in *In an Antique Land*. The one argument and rightfully raised so by the colonized or suppressed groups is that the history written on them and about them is elite in nature and there is no representation of their voice in it and so the movement of rewriting and reinterpreting of History started with emphasis on History from below. The rewriting, reinterpreting and re-presenting History has a few offshoots which we term as Microhistory, history from below etc. Microhistory can largely be defined as it sounds. It is not grand; it is not grandiose, it is small and intimate, and its subjects are often obscure. While on the other hand History from below democratizes History and is cantered at the periphery.

It may be noted here that interpretation of every spoken word or sentence depends on the context of its expression. Meaning is not static and independent of context. Hence, the fourth world will always be in existence though the creed may change. Someone would always remain at the margin with the gradual movement of the margin to the centre. And it is the duty of the academic world to keep an eye open for the marginalised and to be their spokesperson in order to make the world aware of their existential dilemmas.

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