



Reconsidering Authenticity: Checking Exoticism with Existentialism

Faisal Nazir

Department of English | University of Karachi
nazir.faisal@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Postcolonial literature has always faced questions of authenticity aimed at distinguishing literary works that provide genuine representations of a culture from those that rely on cultural exoticism for their appeal. Authenticity is thus used to measure the status of a literary text as a true or fake cultural artefact of a postcolonial nation. However, postcolonial literary critics have questioned the very idea of cultural authenticity and have emphasised the constructed nature of 'authentic' cultural traditions. Cultural authenticity has, therefore, not only been rendered ineffective as a measure of a text's relation to the culture it represents, but has also been questioned as a concept. This paper argues that while cultural authenticity is a problematic concept to be used in the study of postcolonial literature, authenticity in the existentialist sense can provide a basis for discussing and evaluating postcolonial literary works. Instead of seeking to establish a literary work's cultural authenticity through anthropological or ethnographic reading, postcolonial criticism can use the existentialist concept of authenticity as a framework for discussing the cultural experience of the members of a cultural community. To illustrate this approach, the paper uses Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a literary text that has been both appreciated and criticised on the basis of its cultural authenticity. I argue that what makes the text valuable as a literary piece is not the accuracy of cultural information presented in the text, but rather the story of its main protagonist, Okonkwo, whose determination to live by the values of his ancestral religion and culture leads him to his death. I would therefore recommend the use of existentialist authenticity instead of cultural authenticity in the reading of postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Authenticity, culture, existentialism, postcolonial literature, representation

Cultural representation has long been considered as a key element in postcolonial literature. However, the detailed cultural description in postcolonial literary texts has also invited the charge of exoticism upon postcolonial writers and their work. In this paper, I consider exoticism in relation to and as an effect of another key emphasis in postcolonial literature and criticism, authenticity. In this context, I am concerned with a particular kind of exoticism which Graham Huggan has termed the “anthropological exotic”. The anthropological exotic, provides a “perceptual framework” for the reading of postcolonial literature through which the literary text is seen as an accurate representation of the writer’s native culture (37). When read through this framework, postcolonial literature is supposed to provide authentic representation of the culture of a specific community or nation. This is a claim made not only by critics on behalf of postcolonial literature but also by some of the writers themselves. As Robert Young has pointed out in an interview, some writers provide such rich details of the cultural life of the society they describe in their work that the work becomes more relevant to social science and anthropology than to literary studies (Noske 613). This has resulted in an anthropological approach to postcolonial literature, an approach that positions the postcolonial writer as a native informant, an insider to the culture s/he represents in her or his works. Some postcolonial novels have even been characterised as ‘ethnographic’ novels, with detailed “semi-anthropological” cultural representation, defined as their main concern. Young places Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Ahmed Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi*, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* in the category of ethnographic novels (Young in Noske 614).

The anthropological approach to postcolonial literature is based on a certain essentialist reading of culture which takes a specific culture or some of its central values and practices as fixed and unchanging. A concern for authenticity and authentic cultural representation, therefore, engages the critic in a search for genuine cultural artifacts which embody the essence of a culture and are its symbolic representation. Postcolonial texts continue to be read with the assumption that these texts provide a true account of the cultures to which they belong and from which they originate. The search for authenticity is thus based on certain assumptions about cultures and how they are lived by people belonging to them. As stated above, it relies on an essentialist reading of culture – that each culture has certain unchanging core values and practices which are manifested accurately in authentic literary works belonging to that culture. Culture is thus approached as static and inert.

This view of culture has been questioned by a number of cultural and

literary theorists. Foremost among them in the denunciation of a static view of culture is Frantz Fanon who in his essay “On National Culture” rebukes the African intellectuals for representing African culture in racial and essentialist terms. While acknowledging that the glorification and celebration of pre-colonial African culture by African poets can motivate people in the struggle for independence, Fanon argues that if done for its own sake and not in connection with a political objective, the attempt to reconstruct a ‘pure’ African culture leads only to a “banal search for exoticism” (180). Throughout the essay, Fanon challenges a static conception of culture with a dynamic one. Criticising the native intellectual’s attempt to attach himself to his native culture, Fanon writes: “He wishes to attach himself to the people; but instead he only catches hold of their outer garments. And these outer garments are merely the reflection of a hidden life, teeming and perpetually in motion” (180). For Fanon, the outward manifestations of culture (such as dressing and other social customs) are only a “result of frequent, and not always very coherent adaptations of a much more fundamental substance which itself is continually being renewed”. The intellectual makes the mistake of taking these “outward contrivances” for culture itself when they are nothing but its “mummified fragments”. They are static while culture is dynamic. The intellectual interprets culture only as a “set of particularisms” or social customs while culture, for Fanon, is opposed to custom “for custom is always a deterioration of culture” (180).

As opposed to the aesthetic approaches to culture espoused by the writers of the Negritude movement, approaches which end up in cultural exoticism, Fanon’s own approach is political. Throughout the essay Fanon insists on considering culture in national and not in racial terms. However, Fanon does not consider the nation in essentialist terms but considers it in historicist terms. For Fanon, the nation provides a more valid framework for conceptualising culture not because the nation has a purer essence than race but because the nation is brought into being by the collective effort of a people and is a sign of their commitment to liberty. It is liberty as a goal that must become the guiding principle for the entire life of the nation, not just political and economic, but also cultural. The intellectuals’ aesthetic approach to culture appears to Fanon to be derived from their exposure to the colonial ideology, the central principle of which is the binary opposition between the European and the African races and their cultures. For Fanon, the intellectual who tries to reach back to his people by way of culture “acts like a foreigner” (180). In other words, the intellectual exoticises his native culture just like the European writers do. What an intellectual

must have towards his people is a political commitment, a willingness to join them actively in their anti-colonial struggle. Thus, at every level, Fanon opposes a static aesthetic concept of culture and valorises a political concept, since for him culture is not a state of being but of becoming through political action.

Thus, in Fanon's essay we see two approaches to authenticity. One, which he questions, is based on an essentialist view of culture and leads to the production of exotic cultural goods (such as clothing, cuisine, literature). The other, which he espouses and recommends, is based on what may be called an existentialist view of culture. The first approach conceives culture as fixed and static, the cultural life of a people being governed by certain core values and beliefs which have remained the same since ancient times. Thus, authentic cultural products of such a culture will be those which represent these supposedly permanent values and beliefs. The second approach regards culture as something that continuously evolves in response to the historical conditions and is shaped by the lived experience of the people. From this perspective, authentic cultural products will be those which represent the lived experience of the people and record their day to day life in the process of living. For Fanon, authenticity is achieved only by those who take part in the anti-colonial struggle and political action. In a colonial and by extension neo-colonial context, political struggle against the forces of domination authenticates one's existence and it is this type of authenticity that he demands from the native intellectuals.

One literary text that has been at the centre of debates on cultural authenticity is Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (which will be discussed in the later part of this paper), praised and criticised for the authenticity of its representation of precolonial African culture. For some critics, Achebe's descriptions of the cultural life of the Igbo people are accurate and authentic, particularly because they are produced by an 'insider', a person who belongs to the community he represents in his work. For others, the descriptions are inaccurate because they are produced by a person whose claims to belong to the community are questionable due to his European education and the use of the English language. Thus, the question of authenticity, or lack thereof, of representation is raised within a largely anthropological framework. The identity of the producer of a cultural good and the materials used in the production of the good determine whether the product is authentic or not. While establishing the authenticity of a cultural product, the determination of its relation to its socio-historical context and its material properties, is, as Claire Chambers points out, an essential task for art historians and cultural anthropologists (n.p.). Bill Ashcroft has shown that it is

futile to search for cultural authenticity since the “basic reality of culture [is that] it is never static but continually mobile and transformative” (416). For Ashcroft, the postcolonial context of literary and artistic production “throws the concept of authenticity into disarray” since it is defined by hybridity and cross cultural interaction (415). According to Ashcroft, postcolonial literary production takes place in a “transcultural contact zone” defined by the use of European languages by writers from non-European cultures. In Ashcroft’s view, the use of English language by postcolonial writers, a sign of their ‘inauthenticity’ for critics like Ngugi, is only an indication that “this process of transformation and hybridisation is a continual tension between agency and control, between individual inspiration and the rules of the discourse”. Therefore, for Ashcroft “‘Authenticity’ is rendered meaningless because what we universally understand as traditional paintings [or literature] are in fact transcultural” (416).

Ana Maria Sanchez-Arce has provided an even stronger critique of the use of the concept of authenticity in relation to assertions of cultural identity and cultural difference. Taking note of the variations in the meanings of authenticity since the medieval times, Sanchez-Arce deals with its usage in the present postcolonial context and designates this critical practice as ‘authenticism’. According to Sanchez-Arce, “Authenticism [...] is the discourse or grand narrative that legitimises knowledge on the grounds of it originating from essential identity characteristics or subjectivities. It permits and precedes the ‘celebration’ of difference whilst enforcing a repressive discourse that restricts the articulation of those differences” (143). This critical practice is similar to Orientalism but differs from it in a crucial way. Instead of being supported by a prior grand narrative such as that of civilising mission or cultural enlightenment on which Orientalism partly relied, authenticism relies on the “exploitation of cultural difference” by cleverly adapting Lyotard’s idea of ‘minor narrative’ to postcolonial discourse by turning it into minority narratives (144). However, these discourses themselves become hegemonic when seen through the framework of authenticism as in this framework all subjective experiences are seen as basically conditioned by and a reflection of the writer’s cultural identity. In authenticism, the representation of the subjective experience of a minority group through one or a few of its members narrated in literature or in autobiographical writing has to conform to already established ideas about the culture of that minority group and the literary writer is positioned as a representative or spokesperson of a specific cultural community. This necessarily restricts the writers’ imaginative and narrative freedom and imposes a burden of representation upon them with or without their

consent. Thus, writers are routinely described as African, South Asian, or Indian or Pakistani, implying thereby that their political and cultural background defines the nature of their work. The authenticity of their work is then assessed in relation to how accurately they mirror the cultural life of their nation or community in their works. Thus, as Sanchez-Arce points out, authenticity also relies on a mimetic view of literature, in which literary works are seen as representing the ‘reality’ of different cultures.

From Ashcroft’s dismissal of authenticity as meaningless and Sanchez-Arce’s critique of ‘authenticism’, it seems that the concern for authenticity is only a misleading approach in postcolonial criticism. It is based on questionable theoretical foundations (essentialism and mimeticism) and is, therefore, invalid as a critical tool. However, among various meanings of authenticity discussed by Sanchez-Arce is an existentialist meaning of authenticity which she discusses in relation to Romanticism. As Sanchez-Arce describes, authenticity in Romantic aesthetics refers to the idea of being true to one’s self in word and deed. In Sanchez-Arce’s words, “authenticity is used as an allegedly accurate measure of the validity of the representation of subjectivity” (141). Though, as Sanchez-Arce relates, even this understanding of authenticity has been adapted by postcolonial discourse to serve its own objectives of recuperating and recovering the voice of the suppressed minorities, this paper aims to explore if a return to the existentialist concept of authenticity can be of help in checking and critiquing the widespread exoticism that the pursuit and valorisation of authenticity has produced in postcolonial criticism. In other words, what this paper asks is if in postcolonial criticism it is possible and helpful to conceive authenticity outside of authenticism.

Authenticity is a key term in existentialist philosophy. Various existentialist philosophers have defined it in different ways. Jacob Golomb, however, identifies one common element in these definitions and it is that authenticity is not something to be defined but to be practiced. Since a definition implies the essence of something, it goes against the basic principle of existentialism to assign an essence to anything. Rather, authenticity is seen to be brought about by people in their lives through action and that is why, as Golomb states, most of the existentialist philosophers have found it convenient to use literary writing to illustrate their understanding of authenticity instead of defining it as a philosophical concept. Taking examples of “heroes of authenticity”—figures historical and fictional who have demonstrated authenticity in their lives—from the works of the existentialist philosophers he discusses in his book, Golomb describes the common element

in these highly diverse figures as their “wish to transcend their social and ethical predicaments and achieve authentic modes of living” (ii). Having put it this way, Golomb critiques his use of the expression ‘heroes of authenticity’, since to be a hero means to live by and exemplify “the prevailing ‘ethos’” while the figures and characters he discusses are characterised by their “desperate attempt to transcend this ethos and attain a personal and subjective pathos (in terms of a particular experience, feeling or sentiment) which expresses their individuality as human beings who become what they singularly are. ‘Anti-heroes’ may be a better term for these characters” (ii-iii). Towards the conclusion of the introductory section of his book, Golomb contrasts this view of authenticity as pathos to the dictionary meaning of authenticity as “genuine documents or works of art” and says that “with regard to works of art, documents and archaeological finds, this [latter] is the principle use of the term. It presupposes the existence of a genuine and original product, to be contrasted with potential copies and forgeries” (iii). However, Golomb questions the applicability of this view of authenticity to a discussion of human life: “But is it wise to adopt a model from art and apply it to human life and human selves? Who is the legitimate prototype, the paradigm of authenticity?” (iii).

From the above discussion of the various meanings and uses (and abuses) of authenticity, it seems that in postcolonial criticism it is the artistic and anthropological meanings of authenticity that are being applied to literary works while it is the existential meanings that may be more relevant to the discussion of works of literature. The former interpretation of authenticity takes literary works as simple, straightforward reflections of the permanent and unchanging values of the culture of a community or nation, while the latter interpretation regards literary works as creative engagements with the processes of history, locating their authenticity in the depiction of lived experience instead of abstract values and established cultural customs. The centrality of lived experience to literary expression has been a matter of critical debate for some time. It is traditionally associated with liberal humanism, particularly the one espoused and practiced by F.R. Leavis, which has fallen into critical disfavor since the rise of literary theory. However, existentialism has close affinities with humanism though it does not harbour any belief in universal and eternal values as does humanism. This does not mean that existentialist humanism offers a better understanding of life than liberal humanism but only that lived experience is central to both these approaches. And it is this particular element in existentialism, this paper argues, that can help postcolonial literary criticism in critiquing the alleged exoticism

found in postcolonial literary works.

The question that arises here is: How is it possible to measure the authenticity of the lived experience depicted in a literary work? According to Golomb, the writers that hold and propound an existentialist view of life represent authenticity through the pervasive use of irony in their works. In relation to authenticity, Golomb specifies a particular type of irony “that indirectly casts doubt on the validity of prevailing values and thereby arrests or lessens the reader’s motivation to continue upholding them” (15). Golomb describes two ways in which this type of irony is used by existentialist writers, either by “the simulated adoption of another’s point of view for the purpose of ridicule, by reducing this point of view to absurdity (as exemplified by Kierkegaard’s treatment of the aesthetic life), or by depicting the psychologically disastrous consequences of clinging to prevailing values (a technique used by Nietzsche). According to Golomb, “This type of irony, implying that no vindication of the values under attack is possible, is helpful in the search for authenticity, which necessarily involves transcending the prevailing ethos of objectivity in favour of a less-defined openness of mind, character and identity” (15-16). From this perspective, the mark of authenticity of a literary text is not the representation of eternal or currently prevailing cultural customs and values of a society but rather a questioning of the self’s relation to those customs and values. Since these customs and values are seen to be mechanically practiced by a society, an authentic life can only be lived in opposition to them. This is why Fanon expresses his distaste for custom and preference for culture in “On National Culture”. When culture is seen solely as a set of customs, as the prevailing ethos, the result is an exoticising approach to culture. When culture is seen as constituted by the lived experiences of the members of a community or nation, that is, as pathos, the result is an existentialist approach to culture.

The measure of a work’s authenticity is, thus, not the accuracy of cultural representation but a more intimate engagement with cultural values that discloses the gap between the inner experience and the outward norms. The authentic text represents human beings whose cultural affiliation undergoes a crisis. This crisis shakes the faith in the validity of cultural values and even if the text does end up affirming some values, it is only in the form of an experiential affirmation and not a dogmatic one. Frequently, the literary work leaves the resolution ambiguous and paradoxical. What it aims at is not the affirmation of an ethos but the affirmation of a specific pathos, an inner experience of crisis of faith in cultural values. In postcolonial literature, one of the aims of which is supposed to be the affirmation

of the values of the authors' native cultures, this questioning of culture is interpreted as a sign of the authors' alienation from their native cultures. However, what needs to be seen is if this alienation is a result of the experience of an inner conflict or if it is merely a reflection of an outward cultural conflict. If it is the former, then the alienation is a natural outcome of the crisis of faith a character undergoes in attempting to live by the values which he/she later discovers to be false or shallow or no longer compatible with the changed times. However, if it is the latter, the alienation is more a matter of cultural estrangement and ignorance. Its shallowness is reflected in the repulsion the native culture arouses without ever having been part of the writer's or a character's lived experience. The former type of experiential alienation authenticates the experience; the latter type of alienation renders the experience inauthentic.

To demonstrate this difference between cultural/anthropological authenticity and the existential/experiential authenticity, a text like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* can be taken up for analysis. Since it was first published, Achebe's novel has been praised for its sympathetic representation of African culture, providing the reader with an inside view of the culture. However, some critics have questioned this reading of the novel and have challenged Achebe's insider status mainly with reference to his European education and the use of the English language (Huggan 41-42). Thus, the text's authenticity is measured by the accuracy of its cultural representation and the author's personal and institutional background. In other words, both the appreciators and the denigrators of the novel have taken a cultural/anthropological approach towards the novel in terms of its authenticity. Some critics have challenged this view on the grounds of the novel's status as a literary work, emphasising the fact that it is a creative work and not a work of journalism or history. However, some have highlighted the existential nature of the crisis experienced by the African community and its representative figures like Okonkwo and Obierika. The remaining part of the paper is a discussion of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* from the perspective of authenticity as an existentialist concept.

Things Fall Apart is divided into three parts. The first and the longest part consists mostly of detailed descriptions of the cultural life of the Igbo community. These detailed descriptions have led some critics to regard the novel as an ethnographic novel. An ethnographic novel "is one that conveys significant information about the culture or cultures from which the novel originates" (Tallman 12). These novels, as Tallman describes with reference to the work of Elizabeth Fernea, can be written by either an insider, a person who belongs to the

culture he/she writes about, or an outsider, a person who belongs to a different culture from the one he/she writes about. According to Tallman, “The artist writing from within a culture need not be and usually is not self-consciously anthropological, and yet this special sort of writer intuitively weaves into the story, character, theme, setting, and style details of the culture from which the book emerges” (12). From this definition Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* does seem to be an ethnographic novel written by an insider. However, while acknowledging the presence of ethnographic content in the novel, Abiola Irele states that it is important to pay attention to “Achebe’s handling of the ethnographic element of his novel” (6). Irele relates the presence of the ethnographic content to “Achebe’s conscious effort to project new light upon the precolonial Igbo world” and his “resolve to promote an alternative image to its earlier representations in Western discourse, one that affords an inside view not merely of its uncoordinated details as lived in the immediacy of everyday experience, but also of its overall, functional coherence” (7). It is with a “new ideological purpose” that Achebe incorporates the ethnographic material into his novel, one that aims to challenge the “pre-existing Western discourse” through a “reformulation, in the form of fiction, of the ‘scientific’ discourse of the ethnographic literature on the Igbo” (7).

However, Irele avers that “we must go beyond the documentary aspect of Achebe’s novel to consider the relation it bears to a serious artistic purpose” (7). This artistic purpose is first described by Irele as a formal requirement of working within the genre of the novel: “In other words, Achebe’s fictional reproduction of Igbo life must be seen in its immediate relation to the diegetic purpose and mimetic function of the novel as a genre” (7). Yet this formal artistic purpose does not contradict or belie the ideological purpose of the novel since “it develops as a redirection inward of Western anthropological discourse, towards the true springs of life and expression in the African world obliterated by this discourse” (7). Moreover, Irele insists that it is “the primacy of art that predominates” in Achebe’s novel. This is evident in the “economy of style and a marvelous restraint” in the presentation of the ethnographic content so that the “ethnographic freight is never allowed to weigh down upon its human interest or to obscure its aesthetic significance” (7). Irele concludes his commentary on the ethnographic content of the novel with this statement:

The novel’s imaginative scope thus extends beyond mere documentation to convey, through the careful reproduction of its marking details, the distinctive character of Igbo tribal life as experienced by its subjects, the felt texture from which it drives its universal significance. It is this that gives *Things Fall Apart* its power of conviction and validates the project of cultural

memory attested by the novel. (8)

Thus, if Achebe's representation of the Igbo culture is authentic, it is so not because of the accuracy of the ethnographic descriptions but because of the depiction of the lived experience of the people. And the lived experience itself is not to be taken as a true representation of the actual lived experience of the Igbo people, but rather an imaginative reconstruction of the life of the community. What is made prominent is not simply the 'ethos' of this community but rather the pathos of the people that constitute the community. And this inner life is also not to be taken as some eternal essence of the Igbo psyche, but rather as one affected by and constructed in response to the historical conditions in which the people exist. The importance of masculinity for the Igbo society, for example, is mainly due to the harsh material conditions within which the society struggles for its survival. Therefore, manliness is a virtue highly appreciated by the society because of its practical need and not simply because of its endorsement by the patriarchal ideology that seems to be the governing ideology of this society. It is also a society with its internal contradictions and conflicts which lead to the questioning of some of the cultural practices of the society by its own members. Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son, is never able to accept the cultural norms of the society and is already an alienated person before he comes in contact with the Christian missionaries. Obierika is another character who questions the cultural norms. Even Okonkwo, who makes it his mission to follow the cultural norms of his society to perfection, realises the paradoxes within his own culture when his eldest son Nwoye's desertion forces him to do some soul searching about his identity. Recalling the title given to him by the clan, 'Roaring Flame', while looking into the log fire, Okonkwo wonders how a person like him came to have a son like Nwoye. It is the burning log which gives him the answer: "He sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smouldering log also sighed. And immediately Okonkwo's eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash. He sighed again, deeply" (113).

Another element which adds to the authenticity of *Things Fall Apart* in the existentialist sense is the pervasive presence of irony in the novel. It is not just at the verbal level that irony is exhibited in the text but also in the general conception of life as inherently made up of paradoxes and contradictions. The biggest irony is of course, to be found in the character of Okonkwo. Right from the beginning of the novel, Okonkwo's greatness is emphasised. In fact, the repetition of the idea in the first part of the novel that Okonkwo was really cut out for great things alerts us to reflect on the full significance of this statement. It is this very quest

for greatness that leads to his downfall and he dies what his clansmen regard as an abominable death by killing himself. However, Okonkwo's suicide is not just a condemnation of British colonialism as Obierika describes it to the District Commissioner: "That man was one of the greatest men of Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog" (151). It is at the same time an indictment of the clan itself for failing to live up to its own ideals. After he has killed the court messenger, Okonkwo walks away alone, fully aware that his clan was not going to fight the coloniser: "He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape [...] He wiped his machet on the sand and went away" (149). Okonkwo's suicide is, therefore, as much a criticism and a rejection of his own clan as it is an act of defiance towards the British government. Thus, ironically, the man who wanted to affirm the tribal code of life by becoming its best example ends up condemning, and being condemned by it, and exposing its flaws and contradictions.

The rich ethnographic content in *Things Fall Apart* does enhance its exotic value for a foreign reader but it is much more than simply an ethnographic novel, a narrative the plot of which is merely an excuse for presenting ethnographic details. Instead, what Achebe's novel delivers "is not so much a revalued past, recollected in a spirit of untroubled celebration, as, ultimately, the opening out of the African consciousness to the possibility of its transcendence, to the historic chance of a new collective being and existential project" (Irele 27). The authenticity of the novel is not, therefore, in the accuracy of its representation of Igbo culture but rather in its deep involvement in the life of the people it represents. The irony it registers is not the effect of an alienated consciousness that has distanced itself from the past and the present of its native culture but rather one that is produced by the "apprehension by the tragic imagination of the essential fragility of our human condition" (Irele 27). Irony is, therefore, taken as a part of the human experience and it is the intensity of this experience which enables a person to perceive the ironies of existence. As Golomb states, the philosophers of authenticity deliberately choose to present "extreme situations" as these situations force characters to meditate upon existence and to re-evaluate their life. The colonial encounter in *Things Fall Apart* is the extreme situation which forces the members of the Igbo community to reflect on their own culture and to re-evaluate its beliefs and customs.

The existentialist meanings of authenticity, therefore, can be seen to oppose the artistic or documentary meanings of authenticity. What is regarded as authentic in a documentary sense is the relation of an artifact to its source

culture as an almost transparent representative of that culture. It is, thus, based on an essentialist conception of culture and a mimetic conception of art. Both these concepts have been challenged and critiqued by contemporary literary theory. In postcolonial theory and criticism, though, this understanding of authenticity continues to be invoked as the discourse remains concerned with the issue of cultural representation. The result is that exoticism continues to carry considerable value in postcolonial literature and criticism, as the writers and critics continue to participate in the market for ‘authentic’ cultural goods. On the other hand, authenticity as an existentialist concept requires us to regard literary texts as products of lived experience. Here we have to forego essentialism and a simple mimeticism and place ourselves in a world of ironical and ambiguous meanings, the human world of conflict and contradiction. Again, this ‘human world’ is not a true representation of the real world but rather an imagined framework for interpreting the human experience which does not aim for accuracy of representation but an intensity of affect. To conclude, then, we may refer to Golomb’s view of impact of the authentic literary text: an authentic text is one that inspires authentic life in the readers. A text that merely affirms our prior knowledge or assumptions about its subject matter—a foreign culture in the context of postcolonial literature—is not authentic in the existentialist sense. A text that shakes us out of our complacent view of reality and the world, including ours as well as others’ world, by making us confront the historicity and the ironic nature of existence, is authentic. It is this view of authenticity with regard to literature, and particularly postcolonial literature, that can be used to check the rampant exoticism that still dominates the field of postcolonial literary production.

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