colonialism

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Abstract:

*Per colonialismo si intende quel regime politico ed economico in cui un paese controlla e **sfrutta** un **territorio straniero**, chiamato **colonia**, in uno schema di **sottomissione** e **conquista**. La colonia è un territorio d'oltre mare, **distante** dalla madre patria.*

*Il **colonialismo** ha spesso comportato l'**imposizione** di **modelli culturali**, **religiosi** e **linguistici** da parte della potenza colonizzatrice, provocando **profonde trasformazioni** e talvolta gravi **conseguenze sociali**, economiche e ambientali per le **popolazioni locali**. Le principali potenze europee colonizzatrici sono state: Francia, Inghilterra, Spagna, Portogallo, Germania, Danimarca, Belgio, Paesi Bassi, Russia e Italia; i territori più colonizzati sono stati: l'Africa, le Americhe e parte dell'Asia.*

***L'Italia** iniziò le sue **imprese coloniali** tra il XIX e il XX secolo con l'occupazione dell'**Eritrea** nel 1885, seguita dalla **Somalia** nel 1889. Successivamente, durante la guerra italo-turca del 1911-1912, l'Italia conquistò la **Libia** ed il **Dodecaneso** in Grecia. Infine, l'Italia ha anche occupato l'**Albania** nel 1939.*

*Tuttavia, il periodo coloniale italiano terminò con la Seconda Guerra Mondiale e la fallita guerra in **Etiopia**, quando le potenze alleate sconfissero l'Italia e iniziò il processo di **decolonizzazione.***

Colonialism refers to the **political** and **economic regime** in which a country controls and **exploits** a **foreign territory**, called a colony, in a pattern of **subjugation** and **conquest**. The colony is a territory across the sea, far away and **distant** from the motherland.

Colonialism has often involved the **imposition** of **cultural**, **religious** and **linguistic patterns** by the colonizing power, causing **profound transformations** and sometimes severe **social**, **economic** and **environmental consequences** for the **local populations**. The main colonizing European powers were France, England, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Russia and Italy; the most colonized territories were: Africa, the Americas and parts of Asia.

Italy began its **colonial enterprises** between the 19th and 20th centuries with the occupation of **Eritrea** in 1885, followed by **Somalia** in 1889. Later, during the Italo-Turkish War of 1911-1912, Italy conquered **Libya** and the Greek **Dodecanese** region. Finally, Italy also occupied **Albania** in 1939. However, the Italian colonial period ended with World War II and the failed venture in **Ethiopia**, when the Allied powers defeated Italy and the process of **decolonization** began.

Etymology:

Colonialism is etymologically rooted in the Latin word "***colonus***", which was used to describe **tenant farmers** in the **Roman Empire**.

The directives through which the individual powers implemented the **occupation** and **territorial exploitation** to the detriment of peoples considered backward or savage have been different during the centuries.

The orientations of **colonial policy** can be classified in three ways: **subjugation,** the act of defeating people or a country and ruling them in a way that allows them no freedom; **assimilation**, tendency to equate the colonies and its inhabitants with the metropolis and its citizens; **autonomy**, a system which, by limiting the interference of the colonial authorities in the social structure of the local population, aimed to prepare the progressive assumption of

administrative and political responsibilities by local elements until complete independence was achieved (from: Treccani Encyclopedia; Britannica Dictionary).

Cultural specificity:

"**Ambaradan**" is an informal Italian expression used to describe a chaotic, confusing, or messy situation.

It originates from the **Battle of Amba Aradam** (1936) during the **Second Italo-Ethiopian War**, which was particularly chaotic due to the numerous local **independent militia** that offered their support to the highest bidder, resulting in a rapidly evolving **mess** of **allegiances** and **betrayals**. The situation, which was believed to be easily manageable with little to no effort for the Italian troops, suddenly got out of control and in **retaliation** it was chosen to **extinguish** all forms of **resistance** in one fell swoop using a dangerous **chemical weapon**, commonly called **mustard gas**. This gas caused **painful death** to soldiers and **civilians** alike, leaving only a **scant few survivors** later eliminated by **flamethrowers**.



Italian troops at the Battle of Amba Aradam
(Istituto Luce)

Over time, the name evolved in **Italian slang** to indicate any kind of **disorder** or **commotion**. This is how a **historical war crime** has entered into **colloquial conversation** assuming a lighthearted connotation which **starkly contrasts** its **bloody origin**. For example: "*Sono andata ai saldi stamattina, ma era un vero ambaradan*" [I went to the sales this morning, but it was such an ambaradan]; *Metti a posto la tua stanza, è tutto un ambaradan!* [Tidy up your room, it's all an ambaradan].

This could be also due to the fact that **documents** regarding the **use** of **chemical weapons** were **declassified** only in **1996** (Vazzana, 2017), allowing the propagation of the myth ***Italiani, brava gente*** [Italian, good people] especially in matters related to **colonies**.

Nowadays, **very few people remember** or **even know** in the first place the **origins** of the **term 'ambaradan'** and **pass it off** as just another expression, completely disregarding the **controversial past** which lies at its core.

Songs

Songs have always held a **significant place** in **human culture** due to the **powerful impact** music has on our **emotions** and **bodies** (Fubini, 2018). This unique characteristic makes music an **essential tool** in **pro-war propaganda**, aiding governments in **influencing public opinion** and **fostering alignment** with their **ideologies**. During both World War I and World War II, **music** played a **crucial role** in the lives of **soldiers** and **civilians** alike. It served to **boost morale**, **strengthen unity** and **discipline**, facilitate **coded communication**, and **commemorate key events**. The following two songs, taken from the collection *I Canti del Fascismo* (De Marzi, 2004), were used to **celebrate the victory** of the **Ethiopian War** and to promote the idea that **Italian colonization** was **beneficial**.

***C'era una volta il Negus* [*Once upon a Time there was the Negus*]** (Enrico Frati, 1936). The song celebrates the victory of the fascist army in the war in Ethiopia, making fun of the defeated enemy, the Negus Haile Selassie. The opening phrase of each refrain, in fact, begins like in fairy tales with 'Once upon a time', to indicate both the fairy tale tone of the story and to underline the end of the Ethiopian empire that now belongs to history.

***Faccetta nera* [Black Face]** (Carlo Buti, 1935). This is an Italian fascist song that talks about an Ethiopian woman welcoming Italian soldiers, symbolizing the regime's 'civilizing' mission. The song was used as propaganda to justify the invasion of Ethiopia. Despite the popularity of the song, Mussolini tried to suppress it due to its focus on racial unity.

Besides songs, **Italian soldiers** were encouraged to leave for the **colonies** also through **postcards** of **half-naked Black women**, with the message that both **African territories** and **African women** were there to **be conquered**.

Problematization:

The process of invading **foreign lands** and claiming them as an offshoot of one's territory is a concept as old as time. However, the diplomatic and mutually beneficial relationship between mainlanders and local population present during the Greek and Phoenician periods (Larizza, 1929/1993) are a far cry from the rampant and **exploitative** model of colonization that later arose during the age of the discovery of the new world.

The issue at the **core** of **Colonialism** derives from the **greed** and the desire to affirm the **glory of empires** and **individuals** alike that pushes some powers to invade foreign lands not out of necessity, but simply to demonstrate their power or to further the reaches of their influence.

This process eventually expanded to the point of **invading** foreign territories lacking the means of defending themselves and effectively **enslaving** the **entire population** for the benefit and glory of the mainland, and thus completely **disregarding** the **environment**, the **culture** and the **livelihood** of the people and the land. Colonialism imposed its own culture, religion and education systems, thus leading to the **loss of native identities** (Dirks, 2000).

Communication strategies:

(The following paragraphs have been 30% generated by AI and then revised by the students)

Proponents of **colonialism** argue that **colonial governments** benefit **colonized peoples** by **developing** the **economic** and **political infrastructure** necessary for modernization and democracy. They bring up former colonies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Singapore as examples, which are considered post-colonial successes. However, **these nations do not represent** the typical course of **colonialism**, being colonial societies or trading cities.

On the other hand, dependency theorists such as **Andrè Gunder Frank** (1929-2005), a German-American economy professor, believed that **colonialism** actually involves a **net transfer** of **wealth** from the colonized to the colonizers, **inhibiting** prosperous **economic development**. He criticized export-oriented economic policies that, in his view, created negative imbalances in poor countries (Frank, 1967).

Post-colonial critics such as **Frantz Fanon** (1925-1961) argue that colonialism harms not only the colonized but also the colonizers politically, psychologically and morally. Born on the island of Martinique under **French colonial rule**, Fanon was one of the **most important writers** in **Black Atlantic theory** in an age of **anti-colonial liberation struggles** (see also foreigness). He published in academic journals and revolutionary newspapers, translating his radical vision of **anti-colonial struggle** and **decolonization** for a variety of audiences. His most famous work is ***The Wretched of the Earth*** (1961/1963), which serves as a **manifesto** for the **anti-colonial struggle** and the emancipation of the 'Global South'. Another notable work is *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/1967) which had a **strong influence** on **liberation movements**, such as those of **Ali Shariati** in Iran, **Stephen Biko** in South Africa, and **Che Guevara** in Cuba.

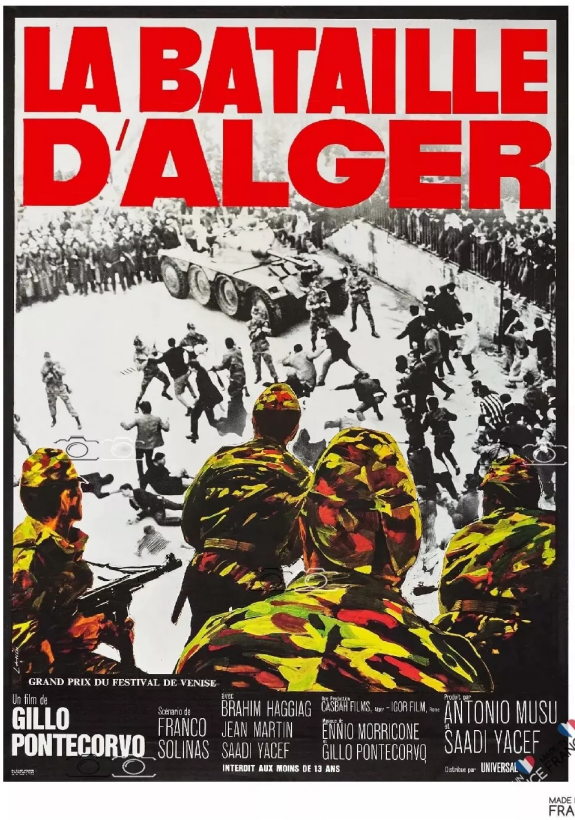
Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), a **Martinican poet**, **playwright**, and **politician**, claimed that **colonialism degraded** and **decivilized** the **colonizers**, sowing the seeds of **Nazism**, which merely applied against Europeans the **same methods** used by the **Europeans** in the rest of the **world**. Together with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon-Gontran Damas, he also developed the concept of ***négritude***, an ideology that **celebrates** the **spiritual**, **artistic** and **philosophical values** of **Black African populations** (Césaire, 1955).

Subversion:

Films

Movies are essential tools for representing the **dark side of colonialism** because they **visually** and **emotionally** immerse the audience in **historical injustice**, **oppression** and **resistance.** With the help of storytelling, they **expose** the **violence**, **exploitation** and **cultural destruction** imposed on colonized peoples.

La bataille d'Alger **[*The Battle of Algiers*]** (IT/FR; 1966). Directed by Gillo Pontecorvo. The film is about **Algeria's war for independence** from French colonialism. It highlights **oppression**, **racism**, the **violent resistance** led by the FLN and French military repression (including torture) to Algerians. Though the FLN was temporarily defeated, **Algeria** gained i**ndependence** in **1962**. For the themes, the film was banned in France for years. This Italo-French production **has inspired several anticolonial struggles** - from the Black Panthers to the Palestinian activists.
More info: https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/media/series/ethics-on-film/ethics-on-film-discussion-of-the-battle-of-algiers



(film poster)



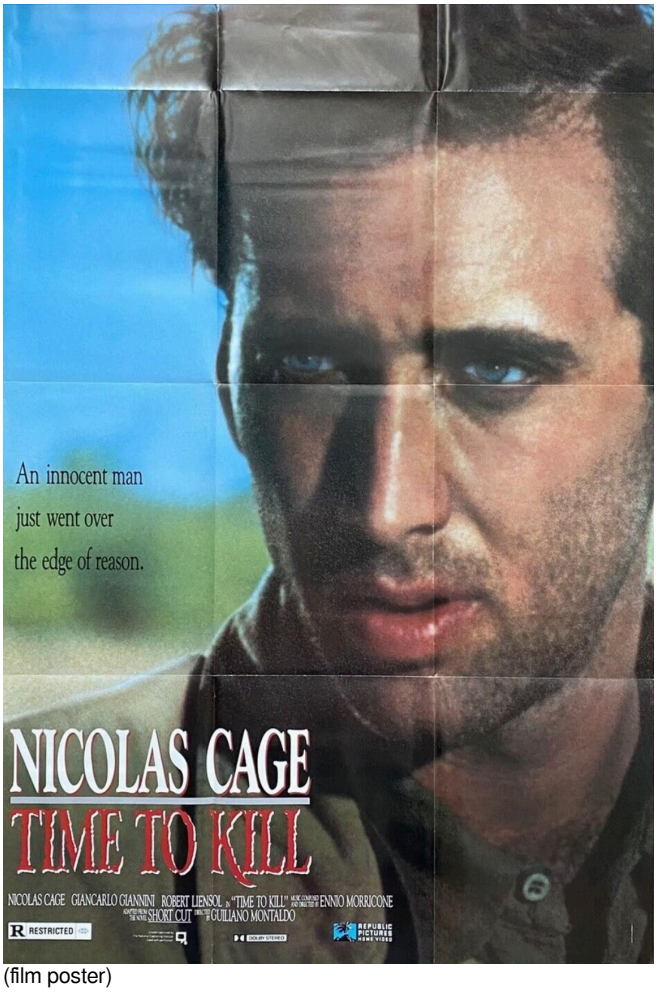
(film poster)

***I dannati della terra* [*The Wretched of the Earth*],** (IT; 1969). Directed by Valentino Orsini. Inspired by Franz Fanon's work, the film speaks about an Italian director, **Fausto Morelli**, who receives as an inheritance the **first** and last **unfinished film** by his young African disciple, **Abramo Malonga**. The director is faced with an **interesting** but **unfinished** work. With the help of Malonga's **young widow** and notes, the Italian director tries to **reconstruct** the film, and, after a hard confrontation with himself, he manages to **complete** it, shooting a satisfactory ending.

Lion of the Desert (US, Libya; 1980). Directed by Moustapha Akkad. In **Fascist Italy** pre-World War II, the cruel **General Rodolfo Graziani** is directly assigned by Benito Mussolini to **fight** in the **colonial war** in **Libya** to vanquish the Libyan nation. However, his **troops** are frequently **defeated** by the **national leader Omar Mukhtar** and **his army** of **Bedouins**. To subdue Mukhtar, **General Graziani**, the '**Butcher of Ethiopia and Libya'**, uses a **dirty war** against the Libyans, **slaughtering women**, **children**, and **aged people**. It has to be noted that, in **Italy**, the **film** underwent a **long censorship** as it was considered 'offensive to the honour of the Italian army'. It was **finally released** only in **September 2024** thanks to an Italian NGO (*Un Ponte Per* - A bridge For) who obtained the **ministerial visa** for **public viewing**.



(film poster)



(film poster)

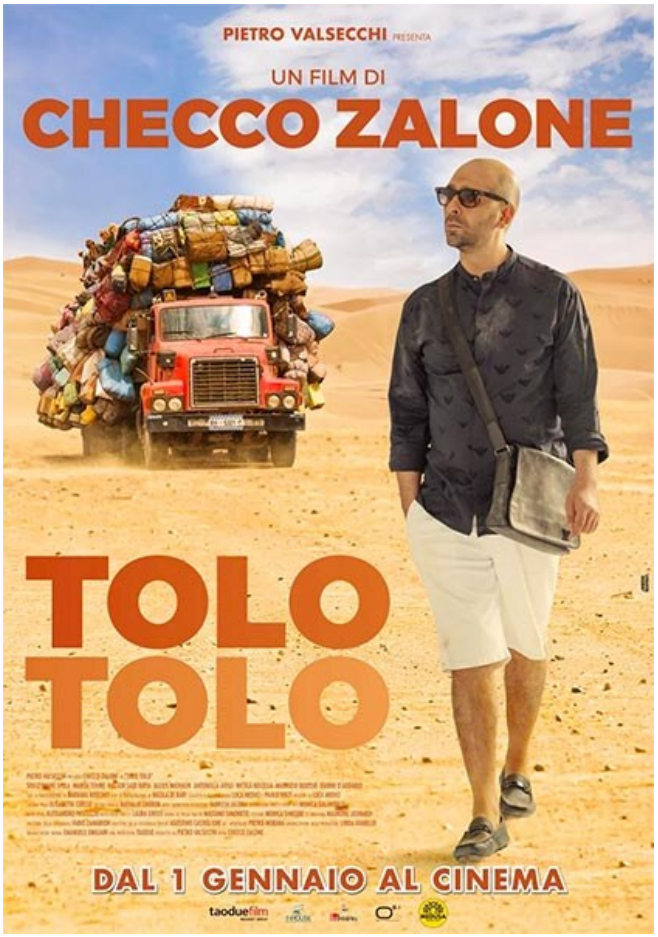
Time to kill (IT; 1989). Directed by Giuliano Montaldo; based on a novel by Ennio Flaiano. The protagonist Enrico Silvestri is an **Italian lieutenant** in Ethiopia in the mid-thirties. Obsessed with the thought of **killing** a **young local woman**, the man is on the verge of losing his mind.
"The critical sight on Italian colonialism of the novel is turned to a **shallow tale** where is instead enforced the **traditional view** of **white male superiority**" (Lilli, 2022).

Fascist Legacy (UK; 1989). Directed by Ken Kirby. The **BBC documentary** is about **Italian war crimes** in the **Second World War** and their **post-war cover-up**. It's divided into **two parts**: the first talks about Italian atrocities in **Ethiopia**, **Slovenia**, and **Croatia**, including **mustard gas attacks**, **massacres**, and **concentration camps**. The **second part** talks about **British** and **American complicity** in shielding **1,200 Italian war criminals** to maintain Italy as an **anti-communist ally** during the Cold War. It also highlights **Italy's historical amnesia** regarding these crimes.

If only I were that warrior (IT, US, Ethiopia; 2015). Directed by Valerio Ciriaci. The documentary addresses the unpunished **war crimes** by **General Rodolfo Graziani** committed in the name of Mussolini's imperial ambitions. The director follows the **stories** of **three characters** travelling through Ethiopia, Italy and the United States. A **journey** through **life memories** and the **tangible remains** of the **Italian occupation** of **Ethiopia**, spanning generations and continents where this often overlooked legacy still binds the destiny of two nations and their peoples.



(film poster)



(film poster)

Tolo Tolo (IT; 2020). Directed by Checco Zalone. The movie is semi-serious reflection on the **legacies** of **fascism** and **Italian colonialism**. It revolves around the **main character** of **Checco** who, after his project of opening a sushi restaurant miserably fails, decides to flee "where it is **possible** to continue **dreaming**": that is, in **Africa**. There, he improvises himself as a waiter for an exclusive resort. Then, Checco meets a group of **immigrants** and he becomes **involved** in their **lives**. In a scene on the lorry overpacked with migrants, he has an '**attack of fascism**', so that the scene becomes a harsh attack on the **failure to process** what fascism was in Italy, and the evidence of how the **seeds** of **fascism** are always ready to **flourish** again, in particular in **periods** of **crises**.

Decolonial Atlas

On the ***Decolonial atlas Project*** we can see some images and graphs that show the **aspects** and **consequences** of **colonialism.**

"The **Decolonial Atlas** is a **growing collection** of **maps** which (..) help us to **challenge** our **relationships** with the **land**, **people**, and **state**. It's based on the premise that **cartography** is not as **objective** as we're **made to believe**. (...) Because **decolonization** is a process of **unlearning** and **rediscovering**, we're especially committed to **Indigenous language revitalization** through toponymy" (https://decolonialatlas.wordpress.com/).

One of the studies shows how colonialism led to the **spread** of **multilingualism** even in **individual cities**. In **New York**, for example, **700 different languages** are spoken.

Visual Arts

Visual art related to colonialism is important because it tells long forgotten **stories**, **denounces** the **injustices** of colonialism and helps **restore memory** and **dignity** to oppressed cultures. With **images** and **symbols**, it stimulates **dialogue** between **different cultures** and addresses **current problems** such as **racism** and **exclusion**. This art is a **form of resistance** and contribution to **social change**. It is both a **reminder** of the forgotten **past** and an **incentive** to i**mprove** the **present**.



Napoleon leading the Army over the Alps (2005)
https://www.kehindewiley.com/exhibitions/jacques-louis-david-meets-kw/

Kehinde Wiley replaces originally **white** and **aristocratic protagonists** of very iconic **paintings of the past** with **Black people** whom he street casts in suburban areas. This act overturns the **power hierarchies of Western art** by **restoring visibility** to historically **marginalized groups**.
He gives **visibility** to the **bodies** of those who were **never represented** in the history of art.
"A **contemporary descendent** of a long line of **portraitists**, including Reynolds, Gainsborough, Titian, Ingres, among others, Wiley, engages the signs and **visual rhetoric** of the **heroic**, **powerful**, **majestic** and the **sublime** in his representation of **urban**, **Black** and **Brown** men".
https://www.kehindewiley.com/

Peruvian artist Daniela Ortiz confronts **colonialism** through her **multifaceted artistic practice,** which includes video, photography, sculpture and illustration. Ortiz tries to **undermine** the **discriminatory symbolic systems present** in the **artistic heritage**, bringing them to light. During a trip to Rome, she showed the continuity between the **State's interference** in the **lives of migrant families** and **fascist control** over motherhood and childhood.
The Hidden Histories cycle, created by Locales (Valerio Del Baglivo and Sara Alberani), brings **Rome's historical legacy** into **dialogue** with **contemporary art** to adequately **address** the issue of **Italian colonialism**, highlighting the **permanence of hegemonic symbols** dating back to the Roman Empire and the fascist era (*Il manifesto*, 2021).



Daniela Ortiz, from the series "Anti-colonial prayer to Fernandito Tupac Amaru Bastidas", 2020. COURTESY Galleria La Veronica

Essay

In her work (2025), **Grace Fainelli**, an Italian afro-descendent as she calls herself, provides several **points for reflection** and **discussion** on how **colonialism** has shaped **societal perceptions** of **race** and **gender**. She critiques the dominant narratives that perpetuate stereotypes, like the **hypersexualization of Black bodies** or the portrayal of **Africa** as a continent in **need** of **saving**. Her work advocates for a 'pluriversal' approach of **diverse knowledge systems** in order to dismantle the **Eurocentric lens** that has historically dominated.

The author also emphasizes how **media** and **advertising** still **reinforce racist** and **sexist stereotypes**, shaping collective imagination. To overcome these prejudices, Feinelli encourages a **shift in perspective**: it is **not** just about **eliminating problematic words**, but about **understanding their history** and consciously **choosing language** that **does not perpetuate discrimination**.

Her work serves as **a call to actio**n for individuals to reflect on language and its implications, encouraging a shift

towards inclusivity and awareness.

An interview to her is available here:

https://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2025/03/20/video/colonialismo_linguaggio_grace_fainelli-424074072/

Literary works

Novels on **colonialism** and **postcolonialism** address the **complex relationship** between **power**, **identity,** and **culture**, exploring the **impact** of **colonial rule** on **colonized societies**. During **colonial times**, many works revealed a **Eurocentric vision**, often justifying **imperialism**. In the **postcolonial period**, short stories **have given voice** to oppressed peoples, denouncing **exploitation**, **racism**, and **loss of identity,** highlighting the **resilience** of **local cultures** and the **struggle** to recover a **collective memory.** These writings offer a **critical perspective** on the **legacies colonialism** and its **lasting consequences**.

Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad (1899) is considered one of the **first** and most **important** novels that **explores** in depth the **dynamics of colonialism**. Set in the **Belgian Congo**, it denounces the **abuse**, **exploitation** and **inhumanity** perpetrated during **colonial rule**, highlighting the **brutality** hidden behind the **European 'civilizing mission**'. Through the story of **Marlow** and his encounter with **Kurtz**, the novel reflects on the **moral corruption** and **devastating impact** of **colonialism**, both on the **colonized** and the **colonizers**.

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys (1966).

Jean Rhys, a Dominican-British writer, explores **colonialism** through the **experiences** of **Antoinette**, a **Creole woman** in post-slavery Jamaica. The novel highlights **racial tensions** between the **descendants** of the **colonizers** and the **black population**, showing **social disintegration** and **identity alienation**. Antoinette, an **emblem** of a **declining colonial legacy**, is trapped between **two worlds**, rejected by both European and local society. Her **forced marriage** to an Englishman symbolized colonial domination and exploitation. Her eventual **alienation** reflects the devastating psychological **consequences** of **colonialism**.

Discussion:

In the end, we propose some questions for a further reflection on the topic of colonialism and how it affected the territories that were once colonies:

- What do you think defines a colony? Is it just a foreign occupation of the territory? Is it inherently malicious?
- How do you think colonialism has changed the world?
- Is your country under any type of colonialism?
- What were the main economic and cultural impacts of colonialism on colonized nations?
- Do you think colonialism has positive aspects?
- How could food be a sign of colonialism?

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