

## Chapter Seven

### Postcolonial Studies

The much-debated term “postcolonial” generally refers to writing/culture of nations/peoples/cultures who were once colonised by European powers. Postcolonial theory is an attempt to uncover the colonial ideologies implicit in European texts about the Other (in this case, native, non-European). It explores strategies of resistance and “independence” or a “counterdiscourse” in native texts against colonialism. The term “postcolonial literature” now replaces the traditional category of “Commonwealth literature” or “Third World literature.” Postcolonial theory looks at: colonialism’s strategies of representation of the native; the epistemological underpinnings of colonial projects; the “writing” of colonial histories; the feminisation, marginalisation and dehumanisation of the native; the rise of nationalist and/or nativist discourse; the psychological effects of colonialism on both the coloniser and the colonised; the role of apparatuses like education, English studies, historiography, art and architecture in the “execution” of the colonial project and the “transactive” or negotiatory structure of postcolonialism. Homi Bhabha defines postcolonial as “that form of social criticism that bears witness to those unequal and uneven processes of representation by which the historical experience of the once-colonised Third World comes to be framed in the West.” No term in postcolonial studies is unproblematised. Meenakshi Mukherjee, Harish Trivedi among others “interrogate” the very idea of “postcolonialism.” Aijaz Ahmed, arguing from a Marxist position, questions Saidian categories of Orientalist texts and Fredric Jameson’s description of the “Third World” literature as “national allegory.” The debates are extensive and cover an extraordinary range of issues.

## I Background and Origins

Postcolonial theory may be said to have originated in the mid-twentieth century texts of Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire and Albert Memmi. Though studies of imperialism have been undertaken much earlier (notably in works like V.I. Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, 1916), it is with Fanon that studies in the psychological effects of colonialism really develop. Mannoni's work on the "psychology of colonialism" (1956) was a central text in this area. However, it is with Edward Said's phenomenally influential *Orientalism* (1978) and Bill Ashcroft et al's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) that *postcolonial studies* (perhaps this is a better and more inclusive term than postcolonial "theory") becomes an institutional "enterprise." Today the field is vast, and ever expanding, including in its ambit and theoretical concerns, film and culture studies, language/religion, art and architecture, education systems and curricula, displacement, Diaspora and multiculturalism, feminism, historiography, nativism and fundamentalism, environmentalism, the "project" of modernity and development and, more recently, globalisation.

## II Assumptions and General Methods

There are no specific "schools" in postcolonial theory (as an act of faith, the postcolonial would resist being subsumed under homogenising categories, which would delimit and define her/him), nor are there clear-cut methods of "postcolonial reading." The approaches, however, show some similarities and common concerns which we may summarise here.

- (1) The term "postcolonial" (written, sometimes, with the hyphen as "post-colonial") indicates
  - (a) A temporal marker to suggest the age or period *after* colonisation, specifically the *decolonised* states. It therefore functions as a historical category that suggests a chronology—from the colonised to the decolonised or *postcolonial*.
  - (b) a specific reading or analytical practice. Here it refers to the intellectual or theoretical practices that emerged in the academies where colonial texts were re-read for colonial



ideologies imbedded in them. In this sense, postcolonial refers to an oppositional analytic procedure.

- (2) Postcolonialism/postcolonial theory after Edward Said analyses the European "construction" of the East/Orient as a discursive field called "Orientalism." The European colonial power "creates" the Orient as an epistemological category before dominating it militarily, politically and economically. That is, Europe first *produces* a category designated as the Other or the Orient through certain specific practices of knowledge acquisition and formation: philologic, literary, ethnographic, geographic and so on. This knowledge and representation relies upon a series of binary oppositions, all of which treat the native as the *negative/dark opposite of Europe*: civilised/barbaric, white/black, mature/immature, strong/weak, masculine/effeminate, rational/emotional, and progressive/primitive. Here the first term signifies the European, and the second (which stands for all the qualities rejected as inferior/or even bad by the West) always applies to the native. This knowledge now treated as an authentic survey/history/study is then used for "material" practices such as racial discrimination, political control, and economic exploitation. Said's argument thus adds a whole new dimension to the aphorism that "knowledge is power": here knowledge is colonisation.
- (3) Adapting ideas from poststructuralism, postcolonial studies focuses on the discursive and linguistic construction of reality. This meant that representation of the native in Europe was hardly "innocent" or "true," but essentially an exercise that preceded more concrete alterations in the material reality of the native: the discourse that represented the native also ruled the native. This link between representation, epistemology and political practices becomes the subject of analysis in postcolonial studies. Thus the *conceptual foundations* of Western imperialism are unravelled for their complicity in actual political and economic practices.
- (4) Ashcroft and others characterise writing emerging from the once-colonised nations as postcolonial. They identify three major characteristics of this postcolonial writing:

- (a) The silencing and marginalisation of the post-colonial voice by the imperial centre
- (b) The abrogation of the imperial centre within the text
- (c) The active appropriation of the language and culture of that centre.

Ashcroft and others argue that postcolonial readings illustrate these common features of all postcolonial writing. They suggest a common thematic of these former colonies (including areas as distinct and diverse as Latin America, Asia and Africa).

- (5) Postcolonial studies especially in the 1980s and 90s questioned the nationalist resistance to colonialism. They argued that the nationalist resistance and stress on "cultural independence" also relied on categories that were themselves European: specifically the idea of modernisation, development, the "nation-state" and democracy.
- (6) Later developments added issues of ethnicity, displacement, gender, and race as categories for analysis. Thus the postcolonial arguments began to focus on how the nationalist project in colonial times and the decolonised nation-state replicated/ extended certain fundamental oppressive structures in class, gender and (in India) caste. The decolonised nation, argue the postcolonials, under the guise of homogenising, national stability, federalism, elide differences and perpetuate oppression of the marginalised—the women, the lower classes/castes. This, they argue, is essentially the same technique as that of colonialism. Under the rubric of postcolonial studies, we thus have an ongoing attempt to retrieve histories that have been silenced/erased by both colonial and nationalist powers. This is the subaltern studies project in India, which seeks to write the history of the subaltern as against/alternative (to) the history of the upper classes/castes, a "history from below."
- (7) Other "resistance" struggles such as the Afro-American, the gay-lesbian and the environmental, now find increasing affinities with the postcolonial theoretical frameworks. The common denominator of oppression and marginalisation by certain self-imposed but questionable hierarchies (male, heterosexual,



white, Christian, human) links these apparently disparate groups.

- (8) However, postcolonial studies is wary of uniting scattered positions under one umbrella. After the poststructuralist and postmodern distrust of essentialising, homogenising categories and master narratives (see chapter on postmodernism below), postcolonialism seeks to move beyond the universal into local, particular and singular conditions/concerns. That is, they focus on *local* sites of contests rather generalised categories of analysis. This is postcolonialism's emphasis on differences and particularities: such as the oppression of the tribal African woman in colonialism as compared to that experienced by the least literate 19th century woman in Bengal. It proceeds from the assumption that the experiences of these two are varied under the same conditions of colonialism, and therefore requires different parameters/approaches for analysis.
- (9) Postcolonialism seeks to understand how oppression, resistance and adaptation have occurred during the colonial rule. This means that postcolonialism analyses specific strategies of power, domination, hegemony and oppression utilised by the coloniser in the colony. This includes a vast spectrum of issues: art and architecture, economics, political philosophy and their legal manifestations (courts, laws), psychological states, medical and other scientific apparatuses, the education system and civil codes, all of which embody, in some form or other, colonial ideology. That is, postcolonial studies uncovers the ideological *subtexts* of differences, Othering, discrimination and unequal power relations between the European and the native that are submerged in apparently innocent, universal or value-neutral texts of literature and culture.
- (10) Postcolonialism also seeks to understand how the colonised reacted to, adapted and/or resisted this structure of domination. Thus, nativist/nationalist resistance and/or complicity, collaboration (unconscious or conscious) with colonisers, effects of colonialism (dehumanised, Westernised, schizophrenic, "hybridised," ultra-nationalist identities) are analysed.

## Conclusion:

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~~(11)~~ Finally,

Postcolonial studies analyse representations and identity formations of the coloniser *and* the colonised in literary and cultural texts. Further, the adoption of postcolonial studies as a discipline in Western academies, the dangers of neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism in the age of global capital and information networks, the role of the nation-state in such a globalising context, the issues of multiculturalism are also addressed.

~~(12)~~ Postcolonialism adopts tools from a wide range of disciplines. Psychoanalysis, feminism, poststructuralism and postmodernism, historiography, Foucauldian discourse analysis, cultural studies, anthropology, urban sociology, architectural studies, philosophy, reader-response theory and Marxism have all contributed to the theoretical rigour of postcolonial studies.

After a sketch of the basic assumptions and issues in postcolonial studies, we may now look at the principal thinkers in the area. The theorists discussed here include Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Albert Memmi, O. Mannoni, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Aijaz Ahmad and Homi Bhabha. Later sections include discussion of the subaltern studies project and historiography, women and colonialism, the role of English studies, aesthetics and other discourses.

### III Key Concepts and Thinkers