

What is Post/Colonial Literature, and why are they saying such terrible things about it?

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Abstract

The present article first discusses the «ideological» implications of the use of the terms «post-colonial» and «postcolonial» in some recent publications, mainly Elleke Boehmer's 1995 *Colonial & Postcolonial literature* and John Thieme's 1996 *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*. It then tries to situate these uses with regard to current discourses on English Studies and on postmodernism.

Key words: postcolonial, postcolonialism, English Studies, postmodern, postmodernism.

A spectre is haunting literary studies: the spectre of «post/colonialism.» No self-respecting scholarly journal can survive without a regular dose of it. No decent academic institution can do without a specialist, or at least an amateur, in the field. But what is the beast that goes by the name of «post/colonial literature»? Is it merely «Commonwealth Literature» putting on another set of stripes, replacing those of former and now late popular disguises such as «New Literatures in English» or «World Literature Written in English»? Or is there more to it than that? And why does the term cause such heated debate?

It is not my aim here to exhaustively survey the already vast and still burgeoning literature with regard to post/colonialism. Rather, I will touch upon some of the main issues involved by reference to some of the better known and more easily accessible publications in the field, books the interested reader may well want to turn to for further enlightenment.

A first point to be raised is that of the very orthography of the term we are concerned with: if until now I have used «post/colonial» it is to avoid having to choose between «postcolonial» as in Elleke Boehmer's 1995 *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, and «post-colonial» as in John Thieme's 1996 *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*. Of the two, the second is certainly the older and more conventional. It is, for instance, the term used by what has still to be considered as *the* landmark publication in the field: Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's 1989 *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, and again, by the same authors, in

their 1995 *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Both Boehmer and Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in their 1995 *Reader* bring up the question of orthography. For Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, in their «Preface,» the terms «postcolonial/post-colonial»

encapsulate an active and unresolved dispute between those who would see the postcolonial as designating an amorphous set of discursive practices, akin to the postmodern, and those who would see it as designating a more specific, and «historically» located set of cultural strategies. Even this latter view is divided between those who believe that post-colonial refers only to the period after the colonies become independent and those who argue, [as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin themselves would], that it is best used to designate the totality of practices, in all their rich diversity, which characterise the societies of the post-colonial world from the moment of colonisation to the present day, since colonialism does not cease with the mere fact of political independence and continues in a neo-colonial mode to be active in many societies. (1995:xv)

In the last few lines of this quotation it seems as if Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin are directly echoing their own earlier *The Empire Writes Back*, where they had used the term «post-colonial» to «cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day,» and this because they found there to be «a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression» (1989:2). In fact, their statement in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* is much milder, by-passing all references to «European imperial aggression.» This, in practice, brings them close to Thieme, in the «Introduction» to his anthology. Thieme recognizes the seminal role of *The Empire Writes Back* in that expansion of interest in the area that has created the demand for his anthology in the first place. He also recognizes the crucial role played in this by «conceptual assumptions usually contained within [the term 'post-colonial'] (resistance to, or at least a movement beyond, colonial agendas)» (1996:1). At the same time, he still finds the term as used by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) problematic, and this precisely because of its association with «writing and other forms of cultural production which display an oppositional attitude towards colonialism, which are to a greater or lesser degree *anti-colonial* in orientation» (1996:1-2). Specifically, he feels that such usage «discriminates between those [writers] that contest colonialism and those that exist in a complicitous relationship with it» (1996:2). For himself, therefore, he prefers to view the term «post-colonial» as «describing a continuum of experience, in which colonialism is perceived as an agency of disturbance, unsettling both the pre-existing 'Aboriginal' or 'Native' discourses of the cultures it penetrates *and* the English (or European) discourses it brings with it» (1996:2). For Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin as well as Thieme the use of «post-colonial» remains restricted to «writing by those peoples formerly colonized by Britain» (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989:1) and «the anglophone literatures of countries other than Britain and the United States» (Thieme 1996:1).

Boehmer's use of the terms «postcolonial» and «post-colonial» is at one and the same time more comprehensive and more restrictive. To begin with, as we will see shortly, she certainly does not use «postcolonial» in the sense given to the term by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, i.e. as referring to «an amorphous set of discursive practices, akin to the postmodern» (1995:xv). In fact, with her the term pretty much assumes the coloring of Thieme's «*anti-colonial* in orientation.» Secondly, she resolutely opts for the «post-colonial» as «another period term designating the post-Second World War Era,» (1995:3) without specifying whether she sees this as applying only to England's former colonies —thus roughly equating her «post-Second World War» with Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's «period after the colonies become independent» (1995:xv)— or to the world at large, meaning, in this case, primarily England. This is perhaps the occasion to stress again, if only in passing, that although Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, as well as Thieme and Boehmer make passing noises to the effect that what they have to say might well also be valid for literatures in other European languages, in practice they restrict themselves to anglophone literatures. Here might well be a major area for future research by students of literatures other than anglophone, and for comparative literature scholars. Presumably, Boehmer intends her definition of post-colonial to also reflect back upon England itself, and this because of an analogy with an earlier distinction she has made with regard to «colonial» and «colonialist» literature. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, and Thieme divide anglophone writing of «the period from the moment of colonization to the present day» along the lines «English literature» vs «post-colonial literature,» and therefore implicitly according to the place of origin of the writer concerned, while spurning chronology. With Boehmer, in contrast, the dividing lines fall, chronologically, between «colonial» and «post-colonial,» and ideologically between «colonialist» and «postcolonial» literature. As to the dichotomy colonial/post-colonial, this is simply a matter of dates: roughly speaking, of the periods before/after empire. As to the second pairing of terms, Boehmer takes «colonial literature, which is the more general term, ... to mean writing concerned with colonial perceptions and experience, written mainly by metropolitans, but also by creoles and indigenes, during colonial times,» whereas «colonialist» literature «was that which was specifically concerned with colonial expansion ... when we speak of the writing of empire it is this literature in particular that will occupy our attention» (1995:2-3). *Postcolonial* literature, «rather than simply being the writing which 'came after' empire ... is that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship ... it is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives» (1995:3). Just as colonialist literature, then, is the ideologically committed part of colonial literature, so postcolonial literature fulfils the same role within post-colonial literature. And just as nothing categorically excluded a colonial «creole» or «indigene» from producing colonialist literature, though of course this, as Boehmer posits, in practice «on the whole was a literature written by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European lands domi-

nated by them» (1995:3), so —we presume— nothing emphatically excludes a post-colonial white English male from breaking ranks and joining the post-colonial camp, though, again in practice, postcolonial in Boehmer's definition is mostly «a way of bracketing together the literatures written in those countries which were once colonies of Britain» (1995:4).

When comparing Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's, and Thieme's views with Boehmer's, then, we notice that their respective uses of the term «post/colonial» only partially overlap. Yet, both Boehmer and Thieme claim successor rights to the inheritance of the terms enumerated in my first paragraph. Boehmer asserts that «postcolonial writing in English also goes by the names of new writing in English, world fiction, and Commonwealth literature,» (1995:3). Thieme claims that «the field hitherto variously known as 'Commonwealth Literature', 'New Literatures in English' and 'World Literature in English' has been reinvented and reinvigorated as 'Post-Colonial literature'» (1996:1). Whose claim is best depends on what we want the new term to signal. If we want it to cover as closely as possible the old designations, the better claim is Thieme's. If, on the other hand, we want to emphasize the difference between the old terms and the new, the pennant goes to Boehmer. Her inflection of the term, in fact, brings her rather close to Edward Said's coinage «resistance culture» in his 1993 *Culture and Imperialism*. This is probably not to be wondered at, as her view of the role literature plays in the relationships between Europe and its colonies, colonizers and colonized, reads as if directly descending from Michel Foucault's ideas on textuality, representation and power — ideas Said likewise acknowledges as having initially shaped the thinking that led to his own 1978 *Orientalism*, a landmark publication that itself greatly contributed to the explosive growth of «post/colonial» studies. By the same token, Boehmer's use of «postcolonial» also takes her close to the border enabling the metaphorical spread of the term into fields such as women's and minority studies, and hence to the work of such other highly influential theorists of post/colonialism as Gayatri Spivak.

Pushing Boehmer's use of «postcolonial» to the very brink of the potentialities inherent in it, as I did in my previous paragraph, I think helps to bring out the difference finally invested in the use of the term «post/colonial» as compared to older denominations roughly covering the same archive of texts. What each time is implied is a different relationship between the texts covered and the silent senior partner involved: the literature of England itself. In other words, each time a different hierarchy between center and periphery is articulated. Consequently, the choice for one or other term also comes to carry a political charge. «Commonwealth Literature» stresses the interrelationship in dependence between non-European works of literature in English with regard to a common center, seeing all such literature (not literatures!) as radiating out from yet always also looking at the metropolis England/London. Obviously, it is the center that sets the standard in this relationship. «World Literature in English» struggles to maintain not only the centrality of

the English language as enabling factor after the waning of the tighter Commonwealth bonds, but also as normative gauge. «New Literatures in English» stresses the separateness of each literature concerned, allowing room for nationalist aspirations, while still maintaining the colonial language as a bonding factor. «Post/colonial», in contrast to all its predecessors, stresses rather the interrelatedness between an indeterminate number of literatures — not necessarily anglophone — sharing a similar situation. The semantic composition of the term also embodies the kind of «syncretism» or «hybridity» Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) and Homi Bhabha (1994), respectively, see as characteristic of the concept: rather than stress the filiative dominance of the mother literature or the putative genealogical purity of any one new-born national literature, «post/colonial» signals both its connectedness to *and* its emancipation from the «colonial.» In this sense, too, Boehmer perhaps most fully realizes the potential of the term. In a «post/colonial» *reading* such as advocated by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* she turns a «syncretic» gaze on not only the literary production of England's former colonies but also that of the mother country itself. Thus, she reads the literature of the center through the postcolonial glasses of the periphery, thereby neatly reversing existing hierarchies.

It is now also easy to see why the term and concept of «post/colonial literature» should cause such unrest, at least in certain more conservative quarters. As Thieme puts it in a slightly different context: it «implicitly question[s] the former canonical orthodoxies of 'English Studies'» (1996:1). To use some terms dear also to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) to refer to the work done by post/colonial works of literature, «post/colonial literature» as term and concept first «abrogates» the language, traditions and values traditionally empowered in/by «English» literature and subsequently (re)«appropriates» them as overhauled in any number of «english» literatures. The lowercase «e» here indicates that the various developments away from the central standard implied by the capital «E», and which were originally branded deviations from the same, have become naturalized as entities in their own right. To simply offer an indication as to the theoretical potential attached to these terms, and hence to the construct of «post/colonial literature» itself: Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's «abrogation» and «appropriation» easily translate into Deleuze and Guattari's *de- and re-territorialization* from their *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* (1975), a work that within the field of French literature or «French Studies» inspires revisions comparable to what is going on in «English Studies.» For instance, it provides (together with other work by the same philosophers) the theoretical underpinning to Edouard Glissant's *Le Discours antillais* (1981), a major «post/colonial» re-reading of the (primarily French) Caribbean. The same potential, by the way, resides in the easy translatability *tout court* of «post/colonial literature.» Again, though, these possibilities at the same time diminish the centrality of «English» and «English literature,» or «English Studies,» and therefore do not necessarily go over well with proponents of orthodoxy and monodisciplinarity.

However, the «post/colonial» does not only cause a stir on the conservative side. At the very opposite end of the spectrum too a certain animosity is involved, as can be gauged from my initial quotation from the *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. There, it will be remembered, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin somewhat disparagingly referred to the unhyphenated «the postcolonial» as «designating an amorphous set of discursive practices, akin to the postmodern» (1995:xv). As happens so often, the real venom here is hidden in a subclause: obviously Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin do not have a very high opinion of «the postmodern.» In fact, their seemingly throw-away remark is indicative of a long-standing distrust of «the post/colonial» *vis-à-vis* «the postmodern.» In his introduction to *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English* Thieme invokes the power of these literatures to «interrogate Eurocentric conceptions of culture» (1996:1). What scholars of «the post/colonial» particularly hold against «the postmodern» is precisely the «Eurocentric conception of culture» they claim the latter betrays, and which they see as translating itself in universalizing ambitions. Simon During, in «Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today» (1993), attacks what he sees as the totalizing drive of postmodern theory, and particularly in the work of Fredric Jameson, one of postmodernism's leading theorists. And Kumkum Sangari, in «The Politics of the Possible» (1990), complains that «postmodernism does have a tendency to universalize its epistemological preoccupations — a tendency that appears even in the work of critics of radical political persuasion . . . the postmodern problematic becomes *the* frame through which the cultural products of the rest of the world are seen» (1990:242). Consequently, for Helen Tiffin, in Adam and Tiffin, postmodernism amounts to «a way of depriving the formerly colonised of 'voice', of, specifically, any theoretical authority, and [of] locking postcolonial texts which it does appropriate firmly within the European episteme» (1991:viii). Finally, Kwame Anthony Appiah (1991) answers the question «Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?» with a resounding no! For all these critics, to submit to the discourse of «the postmodern» implies bowing to what they see as a form of neo-colonialism in the intellectual sphere. Ironically, of course, the point can be made that post/colonial theory itself is directly tributary to Euramerican theory, as is obvious from my earlier references to Said's self-confessed indebtedness to Foucault. In fact, the point *has* indeed repeatedly been made especially by critics writing from within formerly colonized territories, and from a «non-Western» perspective — for instance in some of the interviews with Gayatri Spivak collected in *The Post-Colonial Critic* (1990).

Perhaps even more ironically, the very rejection by the post/colonial of the postmodern can itself be seen as postmodern, at least if we are to follow one of the most recent theorists of the postmodern. Hans Bertens, in *The Idea of the Postmodern: a History* (1994), rather than seeing the postmodern as signalling the triumph of an all-pervasive American-led consumerism evocative of the hegemony of late capitalism (as Fredric Jameson does), or as a poststructuralist struggle between language-games (as Jean-François Lyotard

does), sees it as merely the latest «round of democratization» in a process that has been ongoing since the Enlightenment, and in which «the Enlightenment is —belatedly— forced by its own momentum to confront the problem of the Other» (1995:245). Post-colonial literature, then, as the literature of the «Other,» naturally and democratically takes its place as one of the literatures of the postmodern. I myself have written along similar lines (1994, and forthcoming a and b), though sometimes taking issue with some of Bertens' positions (D'haen, forthcoming c).

To now finally turn back to my initial questions: «post/colonial literature» is and is not another name for something that has been with us for a long time. It all depends upon how you look at it, and that is precisely what causes the heat of the discussion.

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