

The Neocolonialism of Postcolonialism: A Cautionary Note

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Abstract

Why is it that, in a conspicuously neocolonial global environment, the term «postcolonialism» has achieved such widespread academic currency? This paper analyzes the current vogue for postcolonial studies in western universities, presenting both a challenge to its commodified intellectual status and a defense of its capacity for cultural critique. «Postcolonialism,» the paper argues, does not imply that the colonial era is over; on the contrary, it confronts the «neocoloniality» of our present times.

Key words: Postcolonialism, Neocolonialism, global hegemony, commodity culture.

There appears to be in both [the] subdisciplines [of «Third World Literature» and «Colonial Discourse Analysis»] far greater interest in the colonialism of the past than in the imperialism of the present.

(Ahmad, 1992: 93)

We live in neocolonial, not postcolonial, times. US military intervention in the Gulf and the Horn of Africa; structural dependency in the Caribbean and Latin America; continuing racial oppression and factional strife in South Africa, much of Asia, the Pacific, and the Middle East; the global hegemonies exercised by multinational companies and information industries; favoured-nation treaties and trade blocs that reinforce economic divides; a variety of internecine struggles tacitly supported by the former imperial powers; widespread corruption in sponsored autocratic regimes across the so-called «Third World»; rising ethnic violence everywhere, including in «Fortress Europe»: all of these afford unwanted reminders of Fanon's dictum that colonialism doesn't come to an end with the declaration of political independence, or with the symbolic lowering of the last European flag. As Fanon says in his impassioned study of the effects of colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), «Centuries will be needed to humanize this world which has been forced down to animal level by imperial powers» (Fanon, 1963: 100). The withdrawal of the colonizers from their erstwhile colonial territories is by no

means adequate for the settling of old scores. Fanon again: «We should flatly refuse the situation to which the Western powers wish to condemn us. Colonialism and imperialism have not paid their score when they withdraw their flags and their police forces from our territories» (Fanon, 1963: 101). For Fanon, then, decolonization is an ongoing —and necessarily violent— process which involves a constant vigilance to recurring colonial threats.

It is, ironically, in this conspicuously neocolonial global environment that the countervailing term «postcolonial» is achieving widespread currency. As with other commodified terms favored mostly by academics, «postcolonialism» has come to prominence even as it lurches into crisis. Critiques of postcolonialism are rampant, yet postcolonial studies prosper; the postcolonial field has grown rich, it seems, on accumulated cultural capital while being acknowledged increasingly as intellectually bankrupt.

The reach of postcolonial studies far exceeds its grasp: its totalizing theories suffer from both temporal and spatial indeterminacy. When does the postcolonial period begin and when, if ever, will it end? Which parts of the world are affected, or not, by enduring colonial legacies; where are the latest Empires, the latest centers, their latest peripheries? Postcolonial studies' fascination with the structural forms of colonial power has, at best, brought with it an inattention to cultural specifics and historical details; at worst, the oppositional force of postcolonial writing risks being reduced to textual politics and aestheticized modes of resistance.

This apparent discrepancy between oppositional aesthetics and emancipatory politics is further reinforced by the Anglocentrism of most contemporary postcolonial criticism. Granted, English is the undisputed international language of academic research, but at least some of those who make claims for areas where English is not the primary language lack proficiency in, and therefore access to, indigenous sources of information. Anti-European diatribes, conducted in European languages, are in danger of merely reinscribing the Euroamerican cultural dominant; meanwhile, metropolitan book businesses, always eager for «hot» new writers, merchandise the latest literary products from «exotic» places such as Africa and India, assimilating «marginal» literatures to an ever-voracious mainstream, and plying a moderately lucrative trade —in straightened economic circumstances— by transporting cultural products seen as coming from the peripheries to an audience that sees itself as being located at the center. (A good example here is the popular Heinemann African Writers Series. The world's largest publisher and distributor of African literature in English, Heinemann has done a great service in bringing «Africa» to its, mostly Euroamerican, reading public. Yet the «Africa» that it promotes arguably differs from the one that its writers present; for while these writers mostly see themselves as *demystifying* African cultures, Heinemann's marketing policies continue, to some extent, to cater to Euroamerican myths. This mythicized «Africa» remains a profitable source for the marketing of cultural «otherness» —the very «otherness» on which the Western academy is currently fixated.)

Could postcolonial studies be described, then, as inadvertently neocolonial, or as implicitly exoticist in its assumptions about foreign cultures?¹ Yes, up to a point, if it subscribes to intellectual tourism, or if it seeks to capitalize on the «otherness» of marginalized peoples and cultures. Certainly, its precursor, Commonwealth studies, carries in its name an imperial freight that has proved remarkably difficult to dislodge. However, as the academic vultures circle over another moribund category, we need to ask ourselves if any category could ever be sufficient. Postcolonial studies, although it is more theoretically refined than its predecessors —more forthright in its leftist politics and in its contextualized rearticulations of gender, nation, ethnicity, «race»— is bound to suffer the consequences of its intellectual ambitions, which spring largely from its emergent, though still peripheral, status within the institutional framework of the Western (Euroamerican) academy.

This newfound status has much to do with the arrival at Western universities of an increasing number of writers and intellectuals from the so-called «Third World». As Arif Dirlik argues, the rhetorical space currently occupied by the term «postcolonialism» is similar to the space that was previously occupied by the term «Third World». «Postcolonialism», for Dirlik, among others, remains a somewhat hazy theoretical concept; it is best understood in practical terms as a sign of «the increased visibility of academics of Third World origin as pacesetters in cultural criticism» —above all in the United States (Dirlik, 1994: 329). Many of these American-based intellectuals are self-consciously cosmopolitan, at home with different cultures and relativistic in their approach. They are also aware that their critical stance is inevitably compromised by their privileged position as members of an intellectual elite. This awareness of complicity is an integral part of postcolonial criticism —Gayatri Spivak, one of the most vocal of the new legion of self-avowed postcolonial critics, has this for example to say about the perils of resistance: «[R]ather than continue pathetically to dramatize victimage or assert a spurious identity, [the postcolonial critic] must say 'no' to the 'moral luck' of the culture of imperialism while recognizing that she must inhabit it, indeed invest it, to criticize it» (Collier, 1990: 228).

Spivak's deconstructive approach might itself be accused of masking privilege; for other, more beleaguered individuals and groups an assertive identity-politics is arguably more effective in staking anti-authoritarian claims.

1. Exoticism may be provisionally defined here as an aestheticizing process through which the culturally strange or «other» is filtered through the familiar. Exoticist representation is not necessarily tied to (neo)imperial practice; as Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo argue in their introduction to a collection of essays *The Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism* (1991), exoticism refers to «the aestheticizing process by which the pain of [imperial] expansion is converted to spectacle, to culture in the service of empire» (Arac and Ritvo, 1991: 3). Postcolonial studies arguably contributes to the spectacle of cultural «otherness», even as it attempts the *critique* of empire and of imperialisms past and present.

Nonetheless, Spivak's rhetorical gesture, which accepts the responsibility for authority while systematically undermining it, reminds us that in the neocolonial world of postcolonial studies, resistance and complicity are inextricably intertwined. It also reminds us that resistance operates on many levels, and in many different sites: the battlefield, the lawcourt, the government office, the university classroom. Nor should resistance be seen as the exclusive domain of «Third» or «Fourth World» cultures, as the monopolized expression of their struggles for nationhood and emancipation. Canada and New Zealand, for example, might both be seen as postcolonial, insofar as they are locked in struggles with their more powerful economic neighbours, or are striving to overturn European cultural models now seen as being inappropriate; but they might also be seen simultaneously as neocolonial in their policies and attitudes toward their respective indigenous peoples, or in their attempts to dis-guise white rule with a show of tolerating ethnic difference.

One of the prime objectives, after all, of postcolonial studies has been to show the inadequacy of binary anti-colonial rhetoric. The world is not divided evenly between «colonizers» and «colonized»; it is quite possible to liberate with respect to «race» or nation while remaining bound by oppressive notions of gender or social class. The term «postcolonialism», it could be argued, has arisen to *account for* neocolonialism, for continuing modes of imperialist thought and action across much of the contemporary world. It certainly does not imply that the colonial era is over: that a stake has been driven through the heart of Empire, that it might never again return. The «post» in postcolonial remains, nonetheless, irritatingly cryptic. If it doesn't mean «after» colonialism, then what exactly does it mean? Does it, like the «post» in postmodernism, risk becoming an empty signifier, a perennial open question or merely a sign of intellectual fatigue?

The confusion surrounding the prefix «post» is often unproductive, more a marker of the inbuilt obsolescence of commodity culture than a descriptive term for intellectual, and/or political, unrest. Postcolonial studies is emphatically not just the latest academic fashion; yet it participates, in spite of itself, in the widespread commodification of cultural knowledge: the control of information flows by the Western superpowers; the interested assertion of a mediated «global culture»; the manufacture and transnational trafficking of ideas about the «other» —ideas that are emptied into the hungry maw of the Western «alterity industry».

Is postcolonial literature, in this context, just another response to the metropolitan demand for consumable cultural difference? Clearly not, yet an obvious discrepancy continues to exist between the anti-colonial thrust of postcolonial writings and the colonialist —or better, the recrudescant *neo-colonialist*— uses to which those writings are often put. Examples are legion here in the Euroamerican publishing industries, or in the corporate support for writers seen both as politically viable and as economically beneficial to the future of the company. Successful postcolonial writers —one thinks, for instance, of Achebe or Rushdie— can hardly be accused of being «sell-outs»;

but they have certainly learnt how to manage the *realpolitik* of metropolitan economic dominance, how to negotiate a secure position for themselves while maintaining in their work an uncompromisingly anti-establishment critical stance. (Rushdie's award-winning *Midnight's Children* (1981) is an excellent example of a novel which appeals to Western readers while mocking their orientalist fantasies of «magical» Eastern cultures).

A final, double-edged point might briefly be made about the term «post-colonial literature.» This point concerns, in part, the elitist implications of the word «literature,» and in part the downplaying of «literature» in postcolonial studies. «Literature,» as Levi-Strauss among others has argued, has discernible links with Empire; while it has functioned, by and large, as an agent of enlightenment, it also has a less flattering history as an instrument of oppression. As Levi-Strauss argues, provocatively, in his anthropological study of the Amazonian Indians, *Tristes Tropiques* (1992 (1955)),

[W]riting has always been concomitant with the creation of cities and empires, that is the integration of large numbers of individuals into a political system, and their grading into castes or classes... [Writing] seems to have favored the exploitation of human beings rather than their enlightenment... The use of writing for disinterested purposes, and as a source of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure, is a secondary result, and more often than not it may even be turned into a means of strengthening, justifying or concealing [its primary function: the facilitation of slavery].

(Levi-Strauss, 1973 (1955): 299)

Postcolonial studies investigates this history of exploitation; it also acknowledges that many of the current discussions surrounding the status of «literature» —the seemingly interminable quarrels, for example, over the canon—distract from, rather than address, the marginalization of non-Western cultural products, many of which draw upon indigenous aesthetic traditions, or emanate from a variety of oral/performative sources.

The broad-based «cultural» approach of postcolonial studies helps redress the balance by juxtaposing literary texts with other cultural forms. All the same, one might be forgiven, after glancing at some of the latest postcolonial criticism, for thinking that the study of literature, of any kind, is almost subsidiary: that it tends to be annexed to sociopolitical debate. And this debate is often conducted on a highly abstract level, using a variety of sophisticated theoretical arguments to account for a relatively limited body of «exemplary» cultural texts. Many of these texts are of metropolitan (colonial) provenance; postcolonial studies, in this context, becomes a method of re-reading rather than an attempt to explore and analyze new forms of cultural expression. In addition, it could be argued that the self-reflexive dimension to postcolonial criticism —the preoccupation it shows for investigating, and revising, its own methodologies—risks compromising the great diversity of postcolonial literatures/cultures. It is as if the, admittedly powerful, engines of post-colonial theory were mostly discovered to be running on a series of parallel tracks.

«Theory» too, has its own potentially imperialist agenda; it too can dominate, even as it professes to open critical debate. There seems as little sense in rearguard «anti-theoretical» action as there is in proposals for a «non-ideological» approach to literary interpretation. There is something to be said, though, for the reemergence of postcolonial *literary* studies: as a, sometimes radical, alternative to the revisitation of the Western canon; as a confirmation of the internationalization—and indigenization—of the English language, and as an inducement to the study of other, non-European languages; as an index of continuing resistance to (global) cultural imperialism, a resistance that can also be played out in primarily «textual» terms; and as a reminder, above all, that the work of cultural decolonization is far from over, that it represents an ongoing process of physical, but also mental, labour. The tribunal is out, apparently, on postcolonial studies, but the literatures are alive and kicking—against the neocolonial times.

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