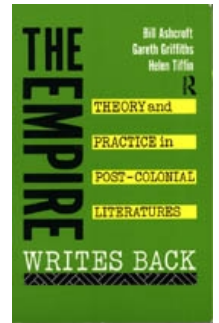

Introduction to Postcolonial Studies

The field of Postcolonial Studies has been gaining prominence since the 1970s. Some would date its rise in the Western academy from the publication of Edward Said's influential critique of Western constructions of the Orient in his 1978 book, *Orientalism*. The growing currency within the academy of the term "postcolonial" (sometimes hyphenated) was consolidated by the appearance in 1989 of The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. Since then, the use of cognate terms "Commonwealth" and "Third World" that were used to describe the literature of Europe's former colonies has become rarer.



Although there is considerable debate over the precise parameters of the field and the definition of the term "postcolonial," in a very general sense, it is the study of the interactions between European nations and the societies they colonized in the modern period. The European empire is said to have held sway over more than 85% of the rest of the globe by the time of the First World War, having consolidated its control over several centuries. The sheer extent and duration of the European empire and its disintegration after the Second World War have led to widespread interest in postcolonial literature and criticism in our own times.

The list of former colonies of European powers is a long one. They are divided into settler (eg. Australia, Canada) and non-settler countries (India, Jamaica, Nigeria, Senegal, Sri Lanka). Countries such as South Africa and Zimbabwe which were partially settled by colonial populations complicate even this simple division between settler and non-settler. The widely divergent experiences of these countries suggest that "postcolonial" is a very loose term. In strictly definitional terms, for instance, the United States might also be described as a postcolonial country, but it is not perceived as such because of its position of power in world politics in the present, its displacement of native American populations, and its annexation of other parts of the world in what may be seen as a form of colonization. For that matter, other settler countries such as Canada and Australia are sometimes omitted from the category "postcolonial" because of their relatively shorter struggle for independence, their loyalist tendencies toward the mother country which colonized them, and the absence of problems of racism or of the imposition of a foreign language. It could, however, be argued that the relationship between these countries to the mother country is often one of margin to center, making their experience relevant to a better understanding of colonialism.

The debate surrounding the status of settler countries as postcolonial suggests that issues in Postcolonial Studies often transcend the boundaries of strict definition. In a literal sense, "postcolonial" is that which has been preceded by colonization. The second college edition of The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as "of, relating to, or being the time following the establishment of independence in a colony." In practice, however, the term is used much more loosely. While the denotative definition suggests otherwise, it is not only the period after the departure of the imperial powers that concerns those in the field, but that before independence as well.

post·co·lo·ni·al (pōst'kə-lō'nē-əl) *adj.* Of, relating to, or being the time following the establishment of independence in a colony: *postcolonial economics.*

The formation of the colony through various mechanisms of control and the various stages in the development of anti-colonial nationalism interest many scholars in the field. By extension, sometimes temporal considerations give way to spatial ones (i.e. in an interest in the postcolony as a geographical space with a history prior or even external to the experience of colonization rather than in the postcolonial as a particular period) in that the cultural productions and social formations of the colony long before colonization are used to better understand the experience of colonization. Moreover, the "postcolonial" sometimes includes countries that have yet to achieve independence, or people in First World countries who are minorities, or even independent colonies that now contend with "neocolonial" forms of subjugation through expanding capitalism and globalization. In all of these senses, the "postcolonial," rather than indicating only a specific and materially historical event, seems to describe the second half of the twentieth-century in general as a period in the aftermath of the heyday of colonialism. Even more generically, the "postcolonial" is used to signify a position against imperialism and Eurocentrism. Western ways of knowledge production and dissemination in the past and present then become objects of study for those seeking alternative means of expression. As the foregoing discussion suggests, the term thus yokes a diverse range of experiences, cultures, and problems; the resultant confusion is perhaps predictable.

The expansiveness of the "postcolonial" has given rise to lively debates. Even as some deplore its imprecision and lack of historical and material particularity, others argue that most former colonies are far from free of colonial influence or domination and so cannot be postcolonial in any genuine sense. In other words, the overhasty celebration of independence masks the march of neocolonialism in the guise of modernization and development in an age of increasing globalization and transnationalism; meanwhile, there are colonized countries that are still under foreign control. The emphasis on colonizer/colonized relations, moreover, obscures the operation of internal oppression within the colonies. Still others berate the tendency in the Western academy to be more receptive to postcolonial literature and theory that is compatible with postmodern formulations of hybridity, syncretization, and pastiche while ignoring the critical realism of writers more interested in the specifics of social and racial oppression. The lionization of diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, for instance, might be seen as a privileging of the transnational, migrant sensibility at the expense of more local struggles in the postcolony. Further, the rise of Postcolonial Studies at a time of growing transnational movements of capital, labor, and culture is viewed by some with suspicion in that it is thought to deflect attention away from the material realities of exploitation both in the First and the Third World.

Major Issues

Despite the reservations and debates, research in Postcolonial Studies is growing because postcolonial critique allows for a wide-ranging investigation into power relations in various contexts. The formation of empire, the impact of colonization on postcolonial history, economy, science, and culture, the cultural productions of colonized societies, feminism and postcolonialism, agency for marginalized people, and the state of the postcolony in contemporary economic and cultural contexts are some broad topics in the field.

The following questions suggest some of the major issues in the field:

How did the experience of colonization affect those who were colonized while also influencing the colonizers? How were colonial powers able to gain control over so large a portion of the non-Western world? What traces have been left by colonial education, science and technology in postcolonial societies? How do these traces affect decisions about development and modernization in postcolonies? What were the forms of resistance against colonial control? How did colonial education and language influence the culture and identity of the colonized? How did Western science, technology, and medicine

change existing knowledge systems? What are the emergent forms of postcolonial identity after the departure of the colonizers? To what extent has decolonization (a reconstruction free from colonial influence) been possible? Are Western formulations of postcolonialism overemphasizing hybridity at the expense of material realities? Should decolonization proceed through an aggressive return to the pre-colonial past (related topic: Essentialism)? How do gender, race, and class function in colonial and postcolonial discourse? Are new forms of imperialism replacing colonization and how?

Along with these questions, there are some more that are particularly pertinent to postcolonial literature: Should the writer use a colonial language to reach a wider audience or return to a native language more relevant to groups in the postcolony? Which writers should be included in the postcolonial canon? How can texts in translation from non-colonial languages enrich our understanding of postcolonial issues? Has the preponderance of the postcolonial novel led to a neglect of other genres?

Major Figures

Some of the best known names in Postcolonial literature and theory are those of Chinua Achebe, Homi Bhabha, Buchi Emecheta, Frantz Fanon, Jamaica Kincaid, Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. A more comprehensive although by no means exhaustive list follows.

LITERATURE: Chinua Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo, Peter Abrahams, Ayi Kwei Armah, Aime Cesaire, John Pepper Clark, Michelle Cliff, Jill Ker Conway, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Anita Desai, Assia Djébar, Marguerite Duras, Buchi Emecheta, Nuruddin Farah, Amitav Ghosh, Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, Merle Hodge, C.L.R. James, Ben Jelloun, Farida Karodia, Jamaica Kincaid, Hanif Kureishi, George Lamming, Dambudzo Marechera, Rohinton Mistry, Ezekiel Mphahlele, V. S. Naipaul, Taslima Nasrin, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Flora Nwapa, Grace Ogot, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Gabriel Okara, Ben Okri, Michael Ondaatje, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Allan Sealy, Shyam Selvadurai, Leopold Senghor, Vikram Seth, Bapsi Sidhwa, Wole Soyinka, Sara Suleri, M.G. Vassanji, Derek Walcott, etc.



FILM: Shyam Benegal, Gurinder Chadha, Claire Denis, Shekhar Kapoor, Srinivas Krishna, Farida Ben Lyazid, Ken Loach, Deepa Mehta, Ketan Mehta, Mira Nair, Peter Ormrod, Horace Ove, Pratibha Parmar, Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ousmane Sembène, etc.



THEORY: Aijaz Ahmad, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Bill Ashcroft, Homi Bhabha, Amilcar Cabral, Partha Chatterjee, Rey Chow, Frantz Fanon, Gareth Griffiths, Ranajit Guha, Bob Hodge, Abdul JanMohamed, Ania Loomba, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Vijay Mishra, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Arun Mukherjee, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Benita Parry, Edward Said, Kumkum Sangari, Jenny Sharpe, Stephen Slemon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Aruna Srivastava, Sara Suleri, Gauri Viswanathan, Helen Tiffin, etc.

Author: Deepika Bahri, Fall 1996



Representation



Representation

1. Presence, bearing, air; Appearance; impression on the sight. 2. An Image, likeness, or reproduction in some manner of a thing; A material image or figure; a reproduction in some material or tangible form; in later use, a drawing or painting. (of a person or thing); The action or fact of exhibiting in some visible image or form; The fact of expressing or denoting by means of a figure or symbol; symbolic action or exhibition. 3. The exhibition of character and action upon the stage; the performance of a play; Acting, simulation, pretense. 4. The action of placing a fact, etc., before another or others by means of discourse; a statement or account, esp. one intended to convey a particular view or impression of a matter in order to influence opinion or action. 5. A formal and serious statement of facts, reasons, or arguments, made with a view to effecting some change, preventing some action, etc.; hence, a remonstrance, protest, expostulation. 6. The action of presenting to the mind or imagination; an image thus presented; a clearly conceived idea or concept; The operation of the mind in forming a clear image or concept; the faculty of doing this. 7. The fact of standing for, or in place of, some other thing or person, esp. with a right or authority to act on their account; substitution of one thing or person for another. 8. The fact of representing or being represented in a legislative or deliberative assembly, spec. in Parliament; the position, principle, or system implied by this; The aggregate of those who thus represent the elective body.

from The Oxford English Dictionary



Representation is presently a much debated topic not only in postcolonial studies and academia, but in the larger cultural milieu. As the above dictionary entry shows, the actual definitions for the word alone are cause for some confusion. The Oxford English Dictionary defines representation primarily as "presence" or "appearance." There is an implied visual component to these primary definitions. Representations can be clear images, material reproductions, performances and simulations. Representation can also be defined as the act of placing or stating facts in order to influence or affect the action of others. Of course, the word also has political connotations. Politicians are thought to 'represent' a

constituency. They are thought to have the right to stand in the place of another. So above all, the term representation has a semiotic meaning, in that something is 'standing for' something else. These various yet related definitions are all implicated in the public debates about representation. Theorists interested in Postcolonial studies, by closely examining various forms of representations, visual, textual and otherwise, have teased out the different ways that these "images" are implicated in power inequalities and the subordination of the 'subaltern'.

Representations-- these 'likenesses'--come in various forms: films, television, photographs, paintings, advertisements and other forms of popular culture. Written materials--academic texts, novels and other literature, journalistic pieces--are also important forms of representation. These representations, to different degrees, are thought to be somewhat realistic, or to go back to the definitions, they are thought to be 'clear' or state 'a fact'. Yet how can simulations or "impressions on the sight" be completely true? Edward Said, in his analysis of textual representations of the Orient in *Orientalism*, emphasizes the fact that representations can never be exactly realistic:

In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation. The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such real thing as "the Orient".
(21)

Representations, then can never really be 'natural' depictions of the orient. Instead, they are constructed images, images that need to be interrogated for their ideological content.

In a similar way, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes a distinction between Vertretung and Darstellung. The former she defines as "stepping in someone's place. . .to tread in someone's shoes." Representation in this sense is "political representation," or a speaking for the needs and desires of somebody or something. Darstellung is representation as re-presentation, "placing there." Representing is thus "proxy and portrait," according to Spivak. The complicity between "speaking for" and "portraying" must be kept in mind ("Practical Politics of the Open End," The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues.) Elsewhere, Spivak addresses the problem of "speaking in the name of": "It is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem." Spivak recommends "persistent critique" to guard against "constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others because of the ones who are getting access into public places due to these waves of benevolence and so on" ("Questions of Multi-Culturalism" The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues).

If there is always an element of interpretation involved in representation, we must then note who may be doing the interpreting. Ella Shohat claims that we should constantly question representations:

Each filmic or academic utterance must be analyzed not only in terms of who represents but also in terms of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address. ("The Struggle over Representation: Casting, Coalitions, and the Politics of Identification," Late Imperial Culture, 173)

This questioning is particularly important when the representation of the subaltern is involved. The problem does not rest solely with the fact that often marginalized groups do not hold the 'power over representation' (Shohat 170); it rests also in the fact that representations of these groups are both flawed and few in numbers. Shohat asserts that dominant groups need not preoccupy themselves too much with being adequately represented. There are so many different representations of dominant groups that negative images are seen as only part of the "natural diversity" of people. However, "representation of an underrepresented group is necessarily within the hermeneutics of domination, overcharged with allegorical significance." (170) The mass media tends to take representations of the subaltern as

allegorical, meaning that since representations of the marginalized are few, the few available are thought to be representative of all marginalized peoples. The few images are thought to be typical, sometimes not only of members of a particular minority group, but of all minorities in general. It is assumed that subalterns can stand in for other subalterns. A prime example of this is the fact that actors of particular ethnic backgrounds were often casted as any ethnic "other". (Some examples include Carmen Miranda in *The Gang's All Here* (1943), Ricardo Montalban in *Sayonara* (1957), and Rudolph Valentino in *The Son of the Sheik*). This collapsing of the image of the subaltern reflects not only ignorance but a lack of respect for the diversity within marginalized communities.



Shohat also suggests that representations in one sphere--the sphere of popular culture--effects the other spheres of representation, particularly the political one:



The denial of aesthetic representation to the subaltern has historically formed a corollary to the literal denial of economic, legal, and political representation. The struggle to 'speak for oneself' cannot be separated from a history of being spoken for, from the struggle to speak and be heard. (173)

It cannot be ignored that representations effect the ways in which actual individuals are perceived. Although many see representations as harmless likenesses, they do have a real effect on the world. They are meant to relay a message and as the definition shows, 'influence opinion and action'. We must ask what ideological work these representations accomplish. Representations or the 'images or ideas formed in the mind' have vast implications for real people in real contexts.

Both the scarcity and the importance of minority representations yield what many have called " the burden of representation". Since there are so few images, negative ones can have devastating affects on the real lives of marginalized people. We must also ask, if there are so few, who will produce them? Who will be the supposed voice of the subaltern? Given the allegorical character of these representations, even subaltern writers, artists, and scholars are asking who can really speak for whom? When a spokesperson or a certain image is read as metonymic, representation becomes more difficult and dangerous.

Solutions for this conundrum are difficult to theorize. We can call for increased "self representation" or the inclusion of more individuals from 'marginalized' groups in 'the act of representing', yet this is easier said than done. Also, the inclusion of more minorities in representation will not necessarily alter the structural or institutional barriers that prevent equal participation for all in representation. Focusing on whether or not images are negative or positive, leaves in tact a reliance on the "realness" of images, a "realness" that is false to begin with.

Finally, I again turn to Spivak and her question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak'. In this seminal essay, Spivak emphasizes the fact that representation is a sort of speech act, with a speaker and a listener. Often, the subaltern makes an attempt at self-representation, perhaps a representation that falls outside the 'the lines laid down by the official institutional structures of representation' (306). Yet, this act of representation is not heard. It is not recognized by the listener, perhaps because it does not fit in with what is expected of the representation. Therefore, representation by subaltern individuals seems nearly impossible.

Despite the fact that Spivak's formulation is quite accurate, there must still be an effort to try and challenge status quo representation and the ideological work it does. The work of various 'Third world' and minority writers, artists, and filmmakers attest to the possibilities of counter-hegemonic, anti-colonial subversion.

It is obvious that representations are much more than plain 'likenesses'. They are in a sense ideological tools that can serve to reinforce systems of inequality and subordination; they can help sustain colonialist or neocolonialist projects. A great amount of effort is needed to dislodge dominant modes of representation. Efforts will continue to be made to challenge the hegemonic force of representation, and

of course, this force is not completely pervasive, and subversions are often possible. 'Self representation' may not be a complete possibility, yet is still an important goal.



"Untitled Heads" by Jin Lee

Author: Ann Marie Baldonado, Fall 1996