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Could Post-Colonialism Be More “Post-Colonial” Than It Actually Is?

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Abstract

The burgeoning discourse of postcolonialism in Africa, Asia and Latin American is not without criticism. More recent theorists such as San Juan and Arif Dirlik have indefatigably attempted to redefine what it means to be postcolonial either in fiction or non-fiction. Their argument is that postcolonial theory, as currently practised (irrespective of Mongia Padmini’s interesting distinction between postcolonialism as a psychological condition and postcolonialism as a historical phenomenon) is « less postcolonial than it should be ». However, my contention that, without suggesting that an age of post-postcolonialism has to begin, the major focus should not be on « Re’s » but on « P’s ». That is to say, the African writers’ literary production is not just responding to the West’s hegemonic thought, revalorising the cultures, rehabilitating the past, re-assessing the colonial history, revisiting the Orientalists’ assumption, reviving the tradition, reconsidering the colonial legacies. Rather, the postcolonial discourse has to be postcolonial, political, pragmatic and propulsive to action (of course the classical form, as it were, of postcolonialism is not apolitical). It has so far been stated that the actual writings, however postcolonial they claim to be, are complicit with the imperialist thought that they presumably attack. We shall see in this paper that neither position is fully justified and that a fruitful redefinition of postcolonial thought must consider the “nervous condition” engendered by globalisation both as an ideology and as a historical necessity, so to speak.

The title of this paper may come to you as a surprise, for it may suggest at best a revisiting of a concept that is undoubtedly gathering momentum in the province of literary and cultural studies, and at worst a criticism of this very notion. Indeed, the aim of this paper is neither to question the postcolonial nature of postcolonialism nor to call for a potential stage of “post-postcolonialism,” to borrow from Arif Dirlik. Rather, it might seem desirable to explore the recent versions of postcolonialism that have been advocated by critics like Alfred Lopez and San Juan who have been at pains to redefine postcolonial theory. It might be observed that postcolonial writing and criticism have been overwhelmed by words that begin with “re” such as re-narration, re-telling, re-assessing, re-considering, re-writing, “remembering”, “responding” and reacting. My contention, however, is that the current post-Orientalist discourse should include, but not be exhausted, by the decolonisation rhetoric of the sixties and the early seventies. To begin with, postcolonialism, more than “filling an empty space” (Shohat 1992: 100), can be roughly defined as a critique of colonialism: it is the discourse that made it legitimate, its experience as felt by the subjugated masses, and its aftermath. According to Kristi Bohata, the term “postcolonialism” itself might be viewed as problematic since it entails that “colonialism is over, thus ignoring neo-colonialism” (Bohata 2004: 1).

But this paper rests firmly on the premise that postcolonialism is also a fierce indictment of neocolonialism and the discourse of globalisation, if only because they are no less hegemonic than the orthodox thought of the Orientalists and the colonialists.

For a good number of scholars, “postcolonial” refers to both text and practice, to theory and a given historical condition. But our interest here is to explore the term insofar as it denotes a theory or an approach to specific experiences rather than the experiences themselves. In this vein, postcolonial studies problematise postcoloniality, which had begun with colonisation rather than after decolonisation. Although Edward Said’s works have, ever since their publications, been a subject of controversy (by, say, Aijaz Ahmed), Edward Said is usually regarded as the founding patriarch of postcolonialism by virtue of writing two so-often-quoted books (namely, *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*). More significantly, postcolonialism arose out of a host of theories or ‘isms’ such as Structuralism, Poststructuralism, Historicism, Post-Marxism, and Postmodernism with the aim of questioning and ultimately discrediting the colonial assumptions and allegations together with a critical scrutiny of such relevant questions as difference, modernity, globalisation and identity formation. That is why “it becomes difficult to ascertain the precise and proper content, scope and relevance of postcolonial studies” (Couze Venn, Qtd in Sil 1998: 21), without suggesting that, as observed elsewhere, the field of postcolonial studies is incoherent, if not totally bankrupt (to use Emily Apter’s term) or indefinable and amorphous in its outlines. In short, postcolonialism means chiefly an opposition to the hegemonic colonial discourse. However, this definition runs of the risk of reducing the whole body of postcolonial cultural production to that of an oppositional discourse. But this is not to say that “writing back to the Empire”, as stressed by Bill Ashcroft et al. in their seminal *The Empire Writes Back* is not central to the counter-hegemonic narratives, and this is exemplified in such works as Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons* and Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* that are, if anything, a vengeful response to the Western power’s discourse of domination. The stale old notion of postcolonial literature as empire writing back has to give way to literary production that is more responsive to the true challenge faced by the nascent nations in Africa and the Third World at large.

In theory, one of the salient objectives of the postcolonial discourse is to dissolve the very dichotomies that arguably characterise its antithesis, the colonial ideology. But does it do so? Alfred Lopez aptly observes that Manichaeism still persists in the thought that is supposed to repudiate it. He says that “whilst one must disengage from the master discourses of the West and the monolithic ambition of Western categories, one must beware of reinscribing dualism and tying oneself to the double-bind of otherness” (Lopez 2001). Therefore, mighty efforts were truly made by Homi Bhabha (“the superstar of postcolonial studies”), Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall and Gayatri Spivak, to name but a few, to go beyond the simple opposition of coloniser/colonised. Besides, though the Master’s tools can dismantle the Master’s house, in Lopez’s view postcolonialism can never be considered radical unless it rids itself of the imperialist’s well-established categories, for he contends that “it is possible to object to postcolonial theory altogether precisely on the grounds that it relies on such theories and must import into a way of thinking Western canons and paradigms that cripple it from the point of view of radically oppositional theorization or from the standpoint of informing resistance”

(*ibid.*). But it is virtually impossible to escape the dichotomy of coloniser and colonised, as Bill Ashcroft once argued, as the post-colonial world, whether we like it or not, is a world that was profoundly influenced by the sweeping historical phenomenon of the growing Western Empires. For this reason, certainly among others, Messay Kebede wisely puts it, the scholars willing to decolonise mentally “either fail to totally emancipate their views from Western constructs, or cannot produce an alternative to Eurocentrism” (Kebede 2004: 107). So this begs the question: Is my thought colonial when I want it to be postcolonial? Can my discourse be imperialist while it is meant to combat imperialism? Nonetheless, the epistemological distinction between the West and the Rest does not always carry the implication that the former has to dominate the latter.

It is apposite here to comment upon Diana Brydon’s eye-catching remark that “deconstructing imperialism keeps us within imperialism’s orbit” (Moore-Gilbert 1997: 20). And this is more explained by Tiffin and Lawson who point out that “postcolonial subjects-races as well as individuals- continue to be interpellated by a range of imperial mechanisms just as effectively as they were previously coerced by the overt and formal institutions of Empire” (Tiffin & Lawson 1994: 230-1). This may entail that a post-Manichean discourse is being called for in the latest versions of postcolonialism. For Aijaz Ahmed, a major contemporary cultural theorist, “the capitalist world today is not divided into monolithic oppositions: white/non-white, industrialized/non-industrialized”, and his main argument is that “the system itself [capitalism] is undergoing a new phase of vast global restructuring” (Ahmad 1992: 311-2). In other words, the binary oppositions that were rife during the heyday of the classificatory discourse of capitalism/imperialism fall short of accounting for the complexity marking the local situations of the nascent African nation-states on the one hand and the global context on the other. This is very congruent with Dirlik’s espousal of a thought that not only “abolishes the binarisms” that are allegedly a legacy of colonialist ways of thinking” but also “to reveal societies globally in their complex heterogeneity and contingency” (Dirlik 1996: 294). Accordingly, this paper purports to vehemently oppose what is duly referred to as “orthodox postcolonialism”, though one might wonder about the dangers of seeing the post-colonial world in Manichean terms.

Even worse, many critics have accused postcolonialism of not only lacking a “clear opposition to colonial oppression”, as Ella Shohat does, but also of being, to one’s surprise, complicit with the very ideology that it intends to dismantle. For instance, it has been contended that the postcolonial theorists’ “neglect of the present material conditions in favour of historical colonialisms constitutes a collusion and complicity with First World imperialism itself” (Lopez, *op.cit.*) Worse still, a recent observation has been made that “the rise of postcolonialism is both contemporaneous and complicit with the emergence of global capitalism, in the sense that the one is a condition for the other” (Dirlik, *op.cit.*) However, one may find it extraordinarily difficult to subscribe to this view. Even though postcolonial discourse can reveal setbacks and inconsistencies, believing in this complicity may shatter the whole body of research on “the effects of the Empire”.

It may be inferred that postcolonialism needs to be more Marxist than it actually is (Marxism is here to be simply understood as attending to the populaces’ baser concerns). Despite the

tremendous influence of Marxism and socialism on the growth of the anti-imperialist rhetoric, many critics still hold the view that the growing counter-discourse to Eurocentrism neglects class and thereby runs the risk of being a synonym or a substitute for globalisation. Notice at the beginning that an argument was made that postcolonialism is, among other things, a reaction to globalisation. Indeed, it is no longer “appropriate” to win a certificate of humanity from the white people to rediscover one’s dignity. What is indeed the use of rehabilitating one’s cultural past, gaining one’s lost sovereignty and restoring one’s identity if this is not pursued in connection with material improvement, social welfare, and real progress? And indeed, Ngugi’s famous call for transcending black consciousness into class consciousness is a case in point. Therefore, the colonial terms “progress, “development”, and “improvement” have to be revisited, for the utter rejection of the entire corpus of the colonial heritage is unpractical. In addition, the appropriation of such white philosophies as Marxism and nationalism are not to be construed as a thorn on the flesh of anti-colonialism. Postcolonial cultures in Africa, Asia and Latin American cannot but be hybrid. That is to say, postcolonial cannot be more postcolonial by rejecting totally Marxism and the concept of the nation on the one hand and cultural hybridity and the colonial discourse of modernity and development on the other. As far as the opposition between textualism and political activism is concerned, one might well assume that the postcolonial theory, at best, gives birth to what Leela Gandhi dubs “the battle of ideas”. But this is not to play down the counter-discourse that its theoretical practitioners are producing, and this is in tune with Robert Young’s astute remark that “rather than berating postcolonialism for its textualism, we recognise that in many ways it has created possibilities for new dynamics of political and cultural practice” (Young 1998: 1). That is to say, the counter-hegemonic texts must be the departure point rather than the endpoint for the entire undertaking of de-imperialisation.

Thus, it is no longer an issue that the postcolonial thought is political for it can be taken to be overtly subversive concerning the objective structures of the neocolonial dependency. But is it politically energising enough? Formulated differently, does it politicise or repoliticise the deprived masses? The Post-Orientalist discourse in the epoch of after-modernity is political because at least it unveils the depoliticising intentions of the neo-imperialist agents, both local and international. In spite of the fact that postcolonial ideology can be construed as “an ethico-politics of becoming”, to take up the phrase of Ferguson, it is for San Juan culpable of “mystification and moralism”(San Juan 1998: 9). It is, in other words, castigated as being metaphysical and idealistic. San Juan argues elsewhere that postcolonialism suffers from a number of inadequacies and the most virulent of these is that it “produces a discourse that privileges cultural and linguistic differences over concrete historical and economic conditions of colonisation and its aftermath” (Cited in Persram 2007). This charge is stressed by Persram in her insightful comment that “postcolonial theory veers away from materialism and the attendant paradigms of development and dependency out of a concern to keep culture and the discursive in view” (Ibid.). That’s why Dirlik aptly claims that “postcolonial discourse has become an academic orthodoxy in its self-identification with hybridity, in-betweenness, marginality , borderlands, a fatal move from the language of revolution infused with the vocabulary of political economy to a cultural language of identity politics”(Dirlik 2000:5, quoted in Hawley 2003: 127-8).Without downplaying the importance of cultural identity in

the so-called globalised epoch, material prosperity and economic growth ought not to take a back-seat in the non-Western critique of Eurocentrism.

Postcolonialism much be best seen as anti-colonialism plus a great deal more. After all, it has to be pragmatic, so speak, as Said once said following the Blochian mode: “one must not only hope, but also do.” This suggests that, as cogently put by Henry Schwarz, “postcolonial studies would be pointless as a mere intellectual enterprise” unless it “changes the world, providing interpretations that have practical consequences” (Schwarz 2002: 04) lest it will be, as interestingly put by Patrick Williams, “vitiating by its utopian futurism” (Williams 2010: 97). But this is not to say that the present has received a textual aside by the anti-imperialist writers, but what is amiss is that their discourse is either preoccupied with the past (revisiting colonialism, rewriting history, etc) or with the future in some ideal way. What is needed today is not as much as writing in opposition to the Western hegemonic thought, that has recently come to prominence under the umbrella of globalisation, as envisaging a true development to the world of the ex-coloniser by offering perspectives of building, say, a new Africa and benefiting from the colonial past. The latter, it must be stressed, was not solely a period of doom and gloom. However, this undertaking is very painful because, as argued elsewhere, “the once-colonised dilemma is on the one hand the responsibility of a complete break from the language, the cultural practices, political institutions, and so forth, of the former regime, and on the other the impossibility of ever achieving full identification with it” (Lopez 2001). Decolonisation does not necessarily imply a complete break away from the past; nor should development be dismissed as the new western religion, as contended by the ardent Afrocentrists.

All in all, postcolonialism must go beyond the stage of privileging the grammatical difference and the historicist resistance, and hence becoming less aggressive and less rancorous. That is to say, it has to be “rerouted” rather than “rerooted”, to borrow from Patrick Williams. It need not be overwhelmed by dialectical and conflictual ideas. While Postcolonial ideology represents a shift away from the stage of “matters of course” to the epoch of “matters of discourse”, Those who speak on behalf of the subaltern views have recently gone even further as to take the stance of “matters to endorse” for the detrimental side of imperialism must not be the only criteria in terms of which the imperial powers are to be represented. This suggests that postcolonialism need not be identified with the rhetoric of revenge or an antagonistic sentiment towards the West. No matter how anti-colonial the postcolonial discourse is, what should be borne in mind is that the answer to the question of the extent to which that discourse is postcolonial is not as important as answering the question: how relevant is the postcolonial discursive project to the needs and preoccupations of the subaltern communities in the post-colonial epoch? And thus our concluding terms will be: what is the use of being postcolonial if the post-colonial communities’ concerns are not adequately addressed?

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