

Postcolonialism and Its Changing Configurations

Isma Hamid

Assistant Professor

Department of English Language and Literature
Islamic University of Science and Technology, J&K

Abstract

Perhaps no other term of an academic discourse has risen to ascendancy so quickly and comprehensively as Postcolonialism. Concerned with issues of self-representation both in the political and cultural sense, Postcolonialism encourages emphasis on issues of identity, racial and cultural difference, social and economic empowerment particularly with regard to people of Asian and African descent. Its endless abrogation and appropriation of colonial texts in the language of the colonizer; its rereading of colonial history and proposing alternative critical and reading practice; its critical interrogation of colonialism in its continuing political and cultural effect upon the world and its literature have encouraged an enormous flowering of New Literatures in English.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Globalization, New Literatures, Cosmopolitanism

Postcolonialism comes across as a marker of racial, historical and cultural change that stimulated the spark of nation centric sensibilities and deep dwelled loyalties for one's nativeness. In dismantling the colonial structure and the shifting power relationship between different parts of the world, it promoted cultural theory and natural identity of the former colonies. For Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, the terms "postcolonial/post-colonial" encapsulate

an active and unresolved dispute between those who would see the postcolonial designating as 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 became 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 characterize the societies of the post-colonial world from the moment of colonization to the recent 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. (*The Empire Writes Back* xv)

The genesis of Postcolonialism in the world history can be traced to the time when the European empire lost its power strings on its colonised nations after World War II. The newly independent nations witnessed the clamouring rise of nationalism. The common sentiment of strong resentment against the West bound these nations into one common voice that was loud and clear. The new self-awareness of freedom, self-identity and nationhood found its expression in all the mediums of communication available around the globe. The Third World rose to an international stage through its immense production of literary texts and artistic expression. The Third World intellectuals like Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi K Bhabha ushered an awareness of the Western representation of the East and the workings of manipulative forces of colonialism. Emanating from Europe's former colonies, these writers addressed questions of history, identity, ethnicity, gender and language. Postcolonialism thus came to designate the intellectual productions of formerly colonized peoples.

Frantz Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, is a psychological study of the operations of colonialism. Fanon describes the psychology of the colonizers. He asserts that in order to justify their rule and occupation of the natives' territory, settlers and administrators create a 'Manichean Society'; they classify the world of the 'native' as the opposite of everything the European supposedly represents: civilization, morality, cleanliness, law and order. The native is deemed to have no historical monuments, no literature, and hence no history. Fanon also describes the way in which colonizers usurp the history of the colonized: "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. This work of devaluing precolonial history takes on a dialectical significance today" (34). Fanon sternly denounced the cultural imperialism of the former colonizers and believed that violent revolution is the only means of ending colonial oppression and cultural trauma in the Third World. He argued that "Violence is a cleansing force. It frees a native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and in action, it makes him fearless and restores his self respect" (94).

Fanon's work provided a foundational critical framework for future theorists like Edward Said, a Palestinian-American literary theoretician to shape his thought-provoking *magnum opus* - *Orientalism* that forms an important background for Postcolonial Studies and is a seminal work to study the forays of Postcolonialism. The book was published in 1978. The main argument presented by Said was that all Western literary production was governed by the motive of establishing the supremacy of the West by depicting the East not only as inferior but also as static and incapable of change. Said perceived *Orientalism* as "... subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice" against the Eastern people and their culture. Said uses the term 'discourse' in the Foucauldian sense. Foucault thinks that knowledge is power and gaining it is the way of gaining power. Therefore Said too questions the concept of knowledge and scholarship for its own sake. According to him, "knowledge is always connected to political, sociological economic and other power systems. It is formed by interactions with the political power such as colonial or imperial institutions, intellectual power such as dominant sciences and among them comparative philology, and with cultural power" (12).

Said, says Orientalism is a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient”. Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial administrators have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate accounts concerning the orient, its people, customs “mind”, destiny and so on...” (2). Said claims that the whole of European scholarship, literature and cultural representation and stereotypes creates and reinforces prejudice against the non-western cultures, putting them in the category of Oriental or “others”. He further asserts that according to Occidentals the Orientals had no history or culture independent of their colonial masters. Thus it served as an implicit justification for Europe’s colonial and imperial ambitions.

According to Said, Orientalist writing should thus be viewed less as a commentary on the Orient itself than as a reflection of the Occident, showing that Europeans establish their identity in opposition to non-Europeans establishing themselves always in a superior, hegemonic position. *Orientalism* offered a challenging theoretical framework and a new perspective on the interpretation of Western writing about the East (and other non-Western cultures) and of writing produced under colonial rule— all of which began to be read for signs of counter-hegemonic stances like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and the Caribbean novelist George Lamming’s Calibanic reading of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in *The Pleasures of Exile*.

Writers from erstwhile colonies across the world have successfully articulated their own unique identities and their postcolonial experiences, not only by focussing at their physical and geographical surroundings but also by subverting and transforming the dominant colonial language. Writers from Africa like Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* questions the Western narrative paradigm in which an author-anthropologist fabricates the other and clearly illustrates the sensationalism and inaccuracy of Western anthropology and history. Similarly Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s *Petals of Blood*, Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* and *The Dance of the Forests*, Mulk Raj Anand’s *The Untouchable*, Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, R K Narayan’s *Waiting for Mahatma*, Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Nayantara Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us* surface as notable examples of postcolonial literature that reverberate with representations of their indigenous culture, history, political reality and the complexities of colonial experience. Caribbean writers like Edward Brathwaite’s *The Arrivants*, Wilson Haris’ *Palace of the Peacock*, George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*, V.S Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*, Jean Rhys’ *Half of A Yellow* and *poems* by Derek Walcott are significant postcolonial texts that voice the tensions between the colonized and the colonizer and the impact of colonial rule.

Homi K Bhabha another leading theorist of Postcolonial and Subaltern Studies argues against Edward Said’s reading of the colonial enterprise as unidirectional. He questions the relationship between the colonizer and colonized as fixed and instead upholds the binary characteristics of the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. This argument is supported by his analysis of “stereotypical discourse”. His concepts such as “Ambivalence”, “Hybridity”, and “Mimicry” show that the consciousness of the colonised cannot be excluded while analyzing the colonial encounter. In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) the colonial experience has the effect of turning the ivory collector Kurtz into a megalomaniacal barbarian and in E.M. Forster’s *Passage to India* (1924) the two British women Mrs Moore and Adela Quested suffer traumatic experiences in India.

Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* urges that every stereotype must be examined through a unique lens that casts away normalizing judgements and individually examines its effects on both the colonizer and colonized. Bhabha's analysis largely focuses on colonial ambivalence. Bhabha refers to this subversive destabilization of colonial power as "mimicry". The mimicry of the natives combines 'difference' and 'disobedience' what Bhabha terms as "sly civility" (132). To Bhabha, "Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed recognizable other, as a Subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence" (122). This mimicry is not a mere imitation nor is it embracing of the dominant culture but it is embedded with shades of difference that sets the native into a different category and marks the starting point of resistance.

Bhabha puts forward the concept of 'Hybridity' to explain the feel that many writers have of belonging to both cultures. Bhabha asserts that hybridity emerges from a deconstruction of this binary relationship between self and other upon which colonial authority basis its power. Hybridity can be seen in Bhabha's interpretation as a counter-narrative, a critique of the canon. Hybridity is

...the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects....it unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identification in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of the power.... for colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the right to power is enacted on the site of desire making its object at once disciplinary and disseminatory or, in my mixed metaphor, a negative transparency. (*The Location of Culture* 160)

Hybridity becomes an important concept in Postcolonial theory referring to the integration or mingling of cultural signs and practices from colonizing and colonized cultures. Hybridity defines people who transmit into alien cultural patterns their own structures of understanding thus producing something new but familiar. The assimilation and adaption of cultural practices, the cross-fertilization of cultures can be seen as positive, enriching and dynamic as well as oppressive. Hybridity is also a useful concept for helping to break down the false sense that colonized cultures are monolithic or have essential unchanging features. As a result, the dominant culture is modified by the linguistic and racial differences of the native self. The elements of the periphery and the margin threaten the exclusive claim of the imperial center. The encounter between the colonizer and colonized produces a third space that represents neither the decisive victory of one over the other nor a combination of the two, but a third entity (the hybrid) that is itself the productive and aesthetic space of a new cultural formation and consists of all the doubts, split selves and the ambivalences that constitute the colonial encounter itself.

Postcolonialism encompasses varied strands of meanings. Notwithstanding the diversity of term, it becomes convenient to recognise its dominant characteristics 'Resistance', 'Retrieval' and 'Confrontation'. Transgression and Opposition surface repeatedly. These terms in themselves are indicative of the conflict inherent in Postcolonialism. The growing phenomenon of emigration and expatriation particularly in post-colonial societies in the second half of the twentieth century further intensified this conflict and accentuated the complexity of the term postcolonialism. This experience of inhabiting two geographical and cultural spaces simultaneously is wrought with subtle and

involutional tensions which get polarised into patterns such as dislocation versus location, domicile versus diasporic consciousness, dispossession versus integration, heritage versus hybridity and exile versus involvement. This tension however proved to be an active source of creative energy and resulted in the emergence of a powerful and impressive body of expatriate or diasporic writing. This creative output fell in line with postcolonial bearings and came to be grouped under the ambit of postcolonial studies as the continuing unequal treatment of non-western/non-indigenous people still viewed as the 'other' to alienation and estrangement and embarrassment at the hands of their western counterparts.

A fundamental ambivalence is embedded in the term diaspora: a dual ontology in which the diasporic subject is seen to look in two directions - towards an historical cultural identity on one hand, and the society of relocation on the other. In the diasporic subject, then, we see in stark relief the hybrid and those dual characteristics that are most often associated with postcolonial discourse. For Salman Rushdie this leads to the emergence of 'Imaginary Homelands' which continue to be written and re-written as the world takes on an ever more complex global character. Diasporic writing becomes strategic because the identity of the diasporic subject is actively inscribed. (Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Studies Reader* 425)

Robin Cohen in *Global Diasporas* defines diaspora as a community of people who have settled outside their native country but acknowledge their loyalties towards and ties with the country of their origin by voicing or implying a sense of co-ethnicity with the people of their country back home or as fellow members of their diaspora. Over the centuries the meaning has altered to accommodate many ethnic groups who have left their homeland for a variety of social economic and political reasons. Consequently the culture produced by Diaspora cannot but contain resonances of their imaginary homelands, The circumstances of their removal and the reaction to the places they currently live in. The descendants of the diaspora, more often generated by colonialism, have developed their own distinctive cultures which both preserve and often extend and develop their original cultures. Diaspora in the current context keeps on reinventing itself transversing between the margins and the centre. Whereas the term diaspora earlier signified the persistence of a yearning for one's homeland and the nostalgic desire to cling and reclaim it; the newer notions emphasize transnational circulations multidirectional flows and the capacity to occupy and assimilate multiple locations in the foreign space. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* also helped to redirect this analysis from nation-based study toward the consideration of multiple diasporic formations, traveling cultures and traveling theories in the 1990s. Gilroy's theorization of "the Black Atlantic as a counterculture of modernity" based on diaspora resonates with a general shift within the post-colonial field toward privileging mobility and deterritorialization.

These diasporic and hybridized peoples renew the contentions of postcolonialism and make it all the more significant when we analyze that all post-colonial societies notwithstanding their political independence are still subjected in one way or the other to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial dominion. Expansion of information technology has catalysed the processes of migration, cultural transmission, exodus of technical and non technical labour and the tendency to monopolize economic resources. The transnational flow of ideas, goods and services through media markets is controlled and operated by the economically stronger West. This has further given way to cultural influence and domination. Insidious forms of hegemony and control are exercised by the West. Henceforth all postcolonial societies are

still subject in one way or the other to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination. Therefore mere political independence has not solved the problem. Ashis Nandy explains this view when he makes a blunt distinction between two distinct types of colonialism. The first type of colonialism, according to him, aimed at the conquest of territories while the second was directed towards the conquering of minds, selves and cultures. "This colonialism colonizes the mind in addition to bodies and it releases forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all... The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in minds"(xi). With emergence of concepts like globalization, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism the focus is now on a phenomena where national boundaries and national ideologies are transcended. While writers might have different interpretations of the exact meaning of globalization or its long-term effect on the institutions of knowledge production in the modern world yet it is concerned with explaining forms of social and cultural organization with the predilection to transcend the boundaries of the nation-state. Globalization is characterized and critiqued in two main senses: as economic, in the sense of the postcolonial economic colonization of the Third World through the transnationalization and deterritorialization of capitalism and industry; and as cultural, in the sense of contemporary cultural imperialism via the global diffusion of American cultural products and values. For scholars trying to understand cultural and social production in the new millennium, globalization is attractive because of its implicit universalism and its ability to reconcile local and global interests. Furthermore, globalization is appealing to social analysts because of its conjunctive and disjunctive form and function. In the former sense, as Jan Nederveen Pieterse has noted, globalization brings the universal and the local together in a moment of conceptual renewal and "momentum of newness" (75). In the latter sense, it leads to what Arjun Appadurai calls the site of tension between "cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization" (32). Thus hybridity and cultural transition inherent in globalization come directly from the postcolonial theory. Although Globalisation allows cross cultural interaction yet it can be seen as a monolithic and hegemonic force that functions to efface national/local identities and cultures. As Robert Young notes:

...the globalisation of western imperial power was to fuse many societies with different historical traditions into a history which, apart from the period of centrally controlled command economies, obliged them to follow the same general economic path. The entire world now operates within the economic system primarily developed and controlled by the West, and it is the continued dominance of the West, in terms of political, economic, military and cultural power, that gives this history a continuing significance. (*Postcolonialism* 16)

Globalization thus comes up as a radically homogenizing force, one that inexorably spreads Western foods, fashion, music, patterns of consumption, and values wherever capital expansion and the media go, laying waste to local forms of identity and cultural expression. Ania Loomba has put it, celebrate globalization as the producer of a new and liberating hybridity or multiculturalism, terms that now circulate to ratify the mish-mash of cultures generated by the near unipolar domination of the Western , particularly United States, media machine" (256).

In his essay "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality", Simon Gikandi argues that the process of decolonization which promised to produce sovereign nation-states that could "fulfill the nationalist mandate" of economic opportunity has failed in the face of a

contemporary globalization which remains rooted in Enlightenment modernism. The celebrated hybridity that arises from cultural flows and encounters under globalization has come to undermine the attempt at development, security, and prosperity within the postcolonial nation-state because these influences end up being hegemonic representations of the West. As a result “the nation becomes both the form that structures modern identities and the sign of their displacement and alienation” (627–58). The process of decolonization was often girded by an expressly cultural turn which attempted to give coherence to the scattered remnants of pre-colonial communities through the construction of a single culture in the form of the nation-state.

Therefore with recent postcolonial focus shifting to borders and crossing and recrossing of physical imaginative, linguistic and cultural space, the claim for a homogeneous postcolonial identity politics or the concept of solidarity appear to be naive. In other words Narratives of Belonging and Narratives of Nationalism cease to have relevance in the altered world situation as identity is now decentered, shifting and ambivalent. The impact of cultural globalization on literature studies is gauged when diasporic writers no longer promulgate the development and proliferation of national/local cultural identities but focus on cultural hybridity and remain inclined towards extension and reinforcement of the imperialistic enterprise. On the surface it seems that the objective is to erase the distinctions between centre and periphery and in this endeavour ironically what we witness is the erasure of that unique distinction which retained the notions of native identity and nationality. This has led to the proliferation of one popular culture and one homogenous world or a global village that could be ruled by one global power masking itself under the guise of bringing all peoples and all nations on the plane of equality. Thus the sense of holding back to one’s distinct native indigenous history culture nation and roots that authenticated ones sense of unique identity and sense of belonging have been metamorphosed and henceforth lost ground. In the postcolonial context writers are seen creating varieties of new hybridities and complexities not only through the expatriate, experience theme but also through portrayal of the cosmopolitan consciousness. With the result what we come across is that postcolonial literary production cuts across regions, nations and boundaries repudiating the past concerns and celebrating new ways and modes of living that adhere to the new world situation generated by ideologies like global capitalism and global culture. Globalization, diaspora and cosmopolitanism have each emerged as contenders for describing a new-problem space. This change and replacement of notions and views ushered in by the contemporary global/world situation by phenomenon of global mixing, hybridity, transnationalism has thrown up new complexities in understanding post colonial thinking and postcolonial literary production with reference to new framework of identification and citizenship. In "When Was the Postcolonial?" Stuart Hall emphasizes the need to rethink post-colonialism in relation with globalization, now that these new trends have shifted its terminology and defining space (242-60).

Ulf Hannerz in “Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture” expresses the basic tenets of cosmopolitanism as “an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other”. He continues by adding that “it is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity” (239). Cosmopolitanism maintains a respect for the welfare, safety, and rights of all individuals regardless of race, class, gender, nationality, or other demarcations of difference. Understanding these characteristics, which can be included in both theoretical and practical endeavors, allows for a distinction between

cosmopolitan projects and projects which simply provide moments of contact across culture or through transnational organizations. Cosmopolitanism is often reduced simply to cross-cultural encounters. While working across culture may be a component of cosmopolitanism, it also carries with it an ethical component which requires the regard for the humanity of others. This argument that cosmopolitanism caters to an elite few is one that is echoed by other critics. Craig Calhoun in “The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travelers: Towards a Critique of Selvadurai”

Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism” charges cosmopolitanism as having the potential to be a part of Western hegemonic structures, specifically capitalism. Ultimately, Calhoun sees the greatest problem of cosmopolitanism as its reinforcement of the status quo. He argues that “advocates of cosmopolitan democracy often offer a vision of political reform that is attractive to elites partly because it promises to find virtue without a radical redistribution of wealth or power” (108). In such a system, further stratification between the local and global occurs through the privileging of who has access to connect across borders. In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy acknowledges this appropriation of cosmopolitanism for political and military purposes, noting that “the meaning and ambition of the term “cosmopolitanism” has been hijacked and diminished by a belief that failed states rather than poverty and hopelessness are the breeding ground of terror and envy” (59).

In Fludernik’s essay, “Cross-Mirrorings of Alterity,” Fludernik represents globalization in largely cultural terms, that is, as the transculturation and hybridization of the cosmopolitan colonial subject as a result of travel between the colonial periphery and the Western metropolis. Fludernik protests against the easy celebration of hybridization in postcolonial work on migrancy and hybridity. Preferring to emphasize the nostalgia and disorientation that attends the condition of exile, Fludernik is careful to acknowledge the stubborn persistence of nationalist traditions. She is also careful to acknowledge the complexity of the expatriate’s subject position given the reconstitution of social and political relations under globalization:

Whereas the colonial subject used to be always in the position of a victim of external forces, in the globalization scenario expatriates have begun to participate in the processes of cultural dominance — a constellation that is elsewhere described only in relation to the Third World elite’s implication with neo-colonial relations. (84)

As a result of the transformation of inter and intra-national relations, the former colonial subject often occupies a position of domination in relation to the poor and disadvantaged, and is consequently able to strategically redeploy and recirculate colonial stereotypes about the native against a new other. This reproduction of the economy of the stereotype against immigrants and the lower classes, and the guilt-ridden position of the postcolonial elite that follows, represents what Fludernik refers to as the “dark underside of globalization” (85).

“In conclusion, it could be said that postcolonialism is caught between the politics of structure and totality on the one hand, and the politics of the fragment on the other” (Gandhi 166). In the context of the twenty-first century’s new imperialism, it is clear that the urgency of those postcolonial agendas has not diminished but has a renewed significance in understanding the complexities thrown up by the contemporary global condition.

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