

POSTCOLONIALISM: A BRIEF CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonialism over the years has become a hot bed of literary discourses and has emerged as an umbrella term which covers vast and diverse areas. The major focus of the approach is to view at the reality from the perspective of the marginalized and oppressed. It focuses on how differences in material conditions disempowers people and how the master discourses strive hard to maintain the status quo. In the paper I have charted the history of development of the approach and have elaborated the various concepts propounded by the main thinkers.

Key words: *Postcolonialism, marginalized*

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INTRODUCTION

Postcolonialism is a broad term which includes a wide gamut of issues like creation of nations and nationalistic movements, cultural hybridity, (post)colonial discourse analysis, racial identity and gender issues. Some of the major theorists who have contributed to the development of postcolonialism are Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. All the

theorists hail from a wide variety of backgrounds and have contributed significantly in the development of the field.

DEVELOPMENT OF IDEA

The historical experience of colonialism helps Postcolonialism develop as a form of representation which is opposed to repression of the dominated class and is anti status quo of conditions developed by the colonial powers. The gist of what Postcolonialism stands for has been expressed by Bill Ashcroft as follows:

‘Post-colonialism/ Postcolonialism’ is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquest, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of the empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre and post-independence nations and communities’ (*Key Concepts* 187).

Under colonialism, the native is always treated as the other. The colonised subject is never in control of his own life, he is never the subject of discourse and he is always spoken about by others. Frantz Fanon, an important thinker, revolutionary and writer in the field of Postcolonialism, found out the harsh reality for himself when he visited France. He found that the native Algerians were treated as the objects to be observed, as things which were not human and totally different from the powerful French. In *Black Skins, White Masks* he writes:

“I came into the world [France] imbued with a will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects” (109).

Postcolonialism is thus the study of the text/ worldview from the perspective of the dispossessed. Under it, the assumed values about the order of things are questioned and efforts are made to find out as to how the colonised were subjected to extreme exploitation and how the colonial masters benefitted from this exploitation.

Edward Said published *Orientalism* in the year 1978 and it is considered as a watershed moment in the course of development of Postcolonialism. Said’s theory was based on the Marxist concept of power, in particular the work done by Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said points out that the ‘Orient’ as it is known today did not actually exist. It was the way the Western eye wanted to see the ‘Orient’. Thus it can be rightly stated that the East/ Orient/ Dominated world was, and continues to be constructed through the lens or gaze of the West/ Occident/ Dominating Class. Said defines Orientalism as a Western tool for “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3).

One of the most important points of ‘Orientalism’ is that it constructs binary oppositions. West/ Coloniser / Occident is considered superior while East/ Colonized/ Orient is considered inferior. The knowledge thus created about Orient was used in a wide variety of fields like anthropology, biology, etc to develop theories through which the Orient could be subjugated and exploited more and more. Edward said in *Orientalism*, writes, that the Orient became an object

“ suitable for study in the academy , for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for

theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national religious character (pp 7-8).

Another important voice in the field of Postcolonialism since 1980s has been Homi Bhabha. He is influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud on psychoanalysis, the Poststructuralist Jacques Lacan and Frantz Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Discussing ambivalence Bhabha starts from a similar stance like Edward Said's. He states that the Western powers create an assumed image of the Orient which is different from the reality. In such a scenario the East/ Orient is presented as backward and barbaric whereas the Occident is the place of the sophisticated and superior races, thus legitimising the control of the colonisers over the colonies. In his book *The Location of Culture* Bhabha categorically states:

“The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as the population of the degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish system of administration and instruction” (70).

But the similarity with Said ends here, because Bhabha points out that Orientalist discourse fails to generate the desired stereotypes wherein the dominated is always the loser. This happens because there are two contradictory forces pulling in different directions at once in Orientalist discourse. The first pull relates to the fact that colonialist discourse tries to make and perceive the colonised subject as something totally bizarre and unfathomable. It tries to change the living colonised subject to the level of an object which cannot be assimilated into the

Western culture. The second contradictory pull happens because the colonial discourse tries to create knowledge about the colonised subject (on the basis of assumptions which are presented as scientific facts) in order to create stereotypical images that define the colonised as inferior beings (and thus defining themselves as superior beings). The colonial discourse ends up bringing the colonised subject inside the ambit of Western understanding. A colonised subject becomes a completely unknown entity which at the same time is known/familiar as well. Thus the construction of otherness is split because of this ambivalent position of the colonised subject. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* writes that “colonial discourse produces the colonised as a social reality which is at once an “other” and yet entirely knowable and visible” (Bhabha pp 70-71).

An important point that comes up is how colonies can gain freedom from the colonisers. Another theoretical idea related to the question is that of creation of nation and nationalist movements. The first thing that needs clarification is the concept of nation. The truth about nations is that nations don't exist on their own, they are made, and their borders set up after a lot of deliberations and then defended at the cost of lives of many a human being. This means that nations are not something that grow and exist naturally; they have to be built. They can both rise and fall depending upon the then existing social, political, economic and military conditions of the region. A nation is thus an imagined political entity. Benedict Anderson in his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*) clarifies that, “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 6). Thus the inhabitants of a nation believe that they belong to a particular community. This community feeling can be there on the basis of religion or caste wherein a

particular group will come together and make the minority group the other. The central notion in forming of any nation is the idea of belonging. The birth of the nation entailed the birth of nationalism. A national identity is forged by devising some common symbols, rituals and traditions which are repeated and give a feeling of oneness to the group. People start identifying with each other through these shared rituals. Thus through the repetitive nature of these symbols and continuity of rituals a bridge is made between the nations past and present and the people start sharing a common history which gives a unique identity to the group.

Attainment of freedom from the colonial masters brings in the much needed euphoria at the success and is marked by optimism for the future of the country. But the optimism is short lived as the government is formed by the educated middle class which using the imperial apparatus starts looting the natural resources of the nation. In such a situation, the toiling masses become the subalterns who are eternally dominated and subjugated. The study of how marginalised are ignored became the main agenda of study of the Subaltern Studies Group. Gramsci in his landmark collection *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* categorized the peasants into the marginalised or the subaltern groups. The term refers to a person or a group which has an inferior position in society and is discriminated against on the basis of ethnicity, race, caste, creed, religion and/or gender. Subaltern Studies has been an integral part of Postcolonialism as it theorises about the voices and rights of the dispossessed. It gained popularity in 1980s because of the work of critics/ historians like Dipesh Chakraborty, Partha Chatterjee and Ranajit Guha. It was given an international hue by the groundbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak. Ranajit Guha carried forward the work done by Gramsci while discussing and analyzing the historiography of colonial India. Guha, writing about subalterns, used the term to denote common, underprivileged person. In

“On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India” he elaborates, “the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we [the Subaltern Studies group] have described as the ‘elite’ ” (7).

Elite in the above quoted text referred to dominating groups which colonized and dominated the underprivileged Indians and made profits by subjugating the masses.

In the preface to *Subaltern Studies Vol 1* Guha defines subaltern as follows:

"The word "subaltern".... stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that, is of inferior rank. It will be used as a name for the general attitude of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way." (Guha, *Selected* 35)

Under Subaltern Studies project, the scholars covered a lot of issues like problems of marginalization faced by peasants and even insurgencies in colonial and postcolonial India. An attempt was made to treat them as strong reference points to trace the history of the nation. In the field of literary criticism it was the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” by Gayatri Spivak which made subalterns studies an important force to reckon with. Spivak categorically gave the answer to her question in an assertive “No” (Spivak 309). According to Spivak the conditions and circumstances of a subaltern are so constrained that he does not have the access to any form of representation. Subaltern voices have been recorded or represented by people who themselves were from the dominating class and thus could not present the true conditions, feelings and problems of a subaltern. Thus subaltern voices remained silenced throughout history. The urgent

requirement is that the marginalised should be made the subjects rather than objects of historical representations. .

Postcolonialism favours total resistance to all forms of exploitation, be it human exploitation in any form or even environmental exploitation by groups of people with their own vested economic ends in mind. Postcolonial philosophy appreciates the role of the anti colonial nationalist movements in colonial days; and after independence it lauds any kind of movement which is against the establishment of neo-colonialism. It is because of its stance against the propagation of neo-colonialism that it opposes even internal racism in any nation. It also challenges capitalism's commodification of social relations and the prevalent doctrine of individual success. It is because of the philosophy of success at any cost and monetary gains that dominating class goes to any and every extent to make profits. On the way it bulldozes any and every individual or institution. Initially this exploitation by the capitalist class is at the level of breaking some rules for economic gains but soon it degenerates to the level of untoward atrocities on the natives/downtrodden to have control over the natural and other resources, (American invasion of Iraq can be taken as one such recent instance). It introduces and extracts unjust prices of commodities that are produced in the colonial countries and are sold in the colonies, and even initiates and controls international sex trade. Postcolonialism raises its voice against all such forms of exploitation. It champions the cause of the downtrodden by asserting that everyone should have the right to security, sanitation, health and education. Robert J.C Young states:

“Postcolonialism stands for the right to basic amenities—
security, sanitation, health care, food and education—for all
the peoples of the earth, young, adult, and aged; women

and men. It champions the cause not only of industrial workers but also those under classes, those groups marginalised according to gender or ethnicity, that have not hitherto been considered to qualify for radical class politics” (pp 113-114).

CONCLUSION

Postcolonialism has an underlying sympathy with those who have been pushed to the margins, people or communities which have long been dismissed and forgotten as having no say in the main discourse of the nation. It stands for removal of inequalities in each and every sphere be it domestic, social, national or international. As long as the inequalities remain domination of people who have the monetary power and political clout will always be there and the marginalised/ dominated people will always be exploited.

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