

Nationalism and the Postcolonial: from Edward Said's *Orientalism* to Graham Huggan's *Postcolonial Exotic*

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Abstract

As interest in the field of postcolonial studies has grown in recent decades, the theoretical issues with which it is concerned have been applied to an increasing number of areas. As a branch of literary theory, it has provided one of the most important critical platforms for modern theorists and writers who attempt to address issues of cultural identity. However, the analytical potential of postcolonial theory has not gone unnoticed in other academic disciplines. In particular, research into global economics and politics has recognised its relevance to an understanding of the balance of world order and its political dynamics. As was earlier suggested, historians have also demonstrated an increased interest in the area of postcolonialism, particularly in terms of the challenge that it offers to received models of history. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the path along which postcolonial studies has travelled to recognise the differences between what used to be pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, as Ashcroft et al would name it. The paper will discuss the main issues as postulated by the proponents of postcolonialism starting from Edward Said and finishing off with Graham Huggan. Particular attention will be paid to the notion of nationalism and how it provided the fuel to the subaltern (Spivak's term) to make the colonial the post-colonial, that is, how to construct a new (national) identity in the former colonised.

Key terms: postcolonial, nationalism, Edward Said, Graham Huggan

Introduction

In spite of such an increased interest in the general area of postcolonial studies, fears have been raised over the danger of placing such issues under the microscope of academic institutions. In particular, the fact that many such institutions are based in countries, which were once colonial powers, such as Britain, has raised suspicions that postcolonial study is little more than a form of cultural imperialism itself. To qualify this, it needs to be added that research often takes as its focus only the work

of those writers who choose to work in English. In this sense, locating postcolonial studies within an academic context may have the effect of limiting its scope to those texts and issues, which are of most relevance to academics and critics rather than to writers or to the millions of people for whom life in a postcolonial society is a daily reality.

One possible contention arising from Huggan's attack on the "critical industry" of postcolonial studies in *The Postcolonial Exotic – Marketing the Margin* (2001) would be his use of the terms centre/periphery. His phrasing of this issue is particularly telling: certain "cultural products" are "regarded" as signifying the existence of the periphery, while the audiences who receive these products "see themselves" located at the centre of long established channels of imperial communication, trade and exchange. The verbs chosen by Huggan are, perhaps, deliberately intended to reflect the concept of appearance, thus indicating that the distinction between centre and periphery is dependent upon an act of perception rather than a fixed and stable relation. However, a binary model in which centre now equates with Western dominance and periphery with subaltern dependence is perhaps no longer entirely appropriate given the globalised range of contemporary economic and political networks.

One example of the transforming relationship between an impoverished former colony and its erstwhile colonial master, for example, would be that of Brazil and Portugal. Now a member of the so-called BRIC nations of emergent economies, Brazil is increasingly attracting young professional workers from the debt-ridden European nation. Now a member of the so-called BRIC nations of emergent economies, Brazil is increasingly attracting young professional workers from the debt-ridden European nation. Indeed, a BBC report into the Portuguese economy reveals that many of its young, well-qualified citizens look beyond Europe to Brazil. Consequently, the binary of centre/periphery has become more porous and less rigidly defined – at least in terms of economic disparity – than Huggan's formulation might allow, particularly given the banking crisis in Europe which has gone some way to redressing the balance between the financial power of the former "imperial centre" and its "peripheral" dependencies.

Indeed, the centre/periphery binary model of colonial relations was challenged as far back as 1978 by French theoreticians Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their eponymous book, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. The abstraction of global capitalist economics, they argue, has led to a form of socio-economic 'deterritorialization,' in which 'traditional sectors' or 'archaic territorialities' are displaced by 'modern industries and plantations. It must be stressed that observations concerning the changing relationship between former colonies and colonisers do not let postcolonial theorists off the hook so far as their duty to reflect existing forms of political and cultural disenfranchisement is concerned. In this respect, the actual channels through which theory operates are called into question.

If, it is argued, the concept of the postcolonial is subject to justification by Western media and academia, how can it expect to offer genuine insight into the lives of people who live on what are assumed to be the peripheries of that system, or beyond its boundaries altogether? In what ways do such forms of cultural representation assist those who experience postcolonial existence as a daily reality? In seeking an adequate response to these questions, attention has been drawn to the independence of theory as a counter-discourse to prevailing social and political assumptions as has been articulated in Edward Said's classical book *Orientalism* (1978):

Above all, critical thought does not submit to state power or to commands to join in the ranks marching against one or another approved enemy. Rather than the manufactured clash of civilisations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception we need time and patient and sceptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction. (Said 1978: xxii)

This was Edward Said's location of critical thought as the basis for a genuine challenge to the ideology and prejudice, which could result in international conflicts. The above citation is an expression of faith in theory as an act of rebellion. Writers and academics, Said claimed, may work within the context of Western cultural institutions, but this does not have to result in the undermining of critical integrity. Indeed, he suggests, the role of the scholar is *vita!* in reminding a government of its responsibilities, both to the state, and to other nations. Far from condoning the crimes of the West, criticism may serve as a lone, even courageous voice of dissent. Postcolonial literary theory is perhaps best defined in terms of its capacity for self-interrogation. In this respect, critics have demonstrated a preoccupation with the search for an appropriate theoretical framework upon which treatment of issues ranging from historical representation to nationalism can be based. At stake here is the relevance of discourse theory to analyses of cultural identity in a contemporary, globalised context. While many theorists are prepared to accept the notion of culture as a product of its own discursive strategies, the question has been raised: to what extent does this insight actually assist those people forced to live with the legacy of imperialism? Might not the deconstruction of ideology and cultural narrative in fact make life far more difficult for those struggling to come to terms with the changes wrought upon their history and language? Interestingly, Foucault himself anticipated such a risk when he posed the following question in his *Archeology of Knowledge* (1969):

Is there not a danger that everything that has so far protected the historian in his daily journey and accompanied him until nightfall (the destiny of rationality and the teleology of the sciences, the long, continuous labour of thought from period to period, the awakening and the progress of consciousness, its perpetual resumption of itself,

the uncompleted, but uninterrupted movement of totalizations, the return to an ever-open source, and finally the historico-transcendental thematic) may disappear, leaving for analysis a blank, indifferent space, lacking in both interiority and promise? (42-43)

The challenge set before writers and theorists has been to seek a compromise between this perception of culture as construct and empathy with the needs of the postcolonial subject. It is this dynamic which has functioned as the impetus for much postcolonial literature, manifested in the tension between aesthetic/ theoretical awareness on the one hand, and the urgency of political commitment on the other. In this sense, postcolonial writing is distinguished by a dual responsibility: to provide appropriate forms of cultural representation and to respond to the changing face of postcolonial subjectivity within a contemporary, globalised context.

References

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