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Postcolonial Studies

AMARDEEP SINGH

DEFINITION

At the broadest level, postcolonial studies is a multidisciplinary academic framework applied to the study of cultures, languages, literatures, and political ideologies in regions of the world formerly subject to European colonialism. While postcolonial studies originated with the study of particular narratives of national liberation and struggle (such as the independence struggles of Algeria or India), the emphasis of the field has on the whole been oriented toward transnational connections – toward commonalities based on shared experiences of marginalization and the traumatic advent of modernity during colonialism.

Thus, syllabi in postcolonial literature courses taught in universities around the world often feature texts by a mix of Asian, African, Caribbean, Latin American, and European authors, often presented in dialogue with one another. Increasingly, Irish studies scholars have made a compelling case that the history of modern Ireland makes its cultural orientation and literary canon "postcolonial," while the question of how to categorize other white-majority settler colonies – namely Canada, Australia, and New Zealand – continues to be debated. Many, if not most, scholars who have adopted the term "postcolonial" or who consider the term "postcolonialism" have also attached some ideological weight to the term. For them, postcolonial studies is not just the study of the culture, art, and history of the formerly colonized world, but a way of thinking that presumes opposition to the legacy of European colonialism and moral support for newly independent societies around the world.

Postcolonial studies is often discussed in connection with the related phenomenon of postcolonial theory. This entry will not deal with the important history of postcolonial theory in great detail; other entries provide discussions of theory and important theoretical figures such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Anthony Appiah. That said, postcolonial studies can

be provisionally separated into postcolonial theory, on the one hand, and the history of postcolonial studies as it has been developed and practiced in the social sciences and humanities, on the other. Thus, the main focus of this entry is on the influence of postcolonial studies on a select group of disciplines, including history, cultural anthropology, and religion studies. Postcolonialism has been since its inception an intensely interdisciplinary methodology, with many prominent scholars and theorists bridging multiple disciplines in their works (beginning with Edward Said himself; *Orientalism* had an impact on a large number of academic disciplines). Moreover, the advent of postcolonial studies in a particular discipline may be associated with that discipline rethinking its epistemological premises and orientation, especially where it might appear that the work of the discipline had been aligned with the interests of the colonial state. The fundamental disciplinary rethinking has been especially pronounced in cultural anthropology and history, both of which now emphasize self-reflexivity and the limits of what is knowable rather than the "pure" empiricism assumed as a given by earlier generations of scholars.

THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM

A basic understanding of the history and impact of European colonialism is necessary in order to explain why postcolonial studies has emerged in its current particular configuration. Other scholars have given useful overviews of this historical phenomenon, so only a very minimal sketch will be given here (for a more detailed account of colonial history see, e.g., Schwarz 2000). European colonialism began to develop in the sixteenth century, and accelerated through the following centuries until large areas of the world were under the dominance of a handful of European powers (mainly Portugal, Spain, Britain, the Netherlands, Italy, and France). Colonialism may be defined as the appropriation of land and resources by one nation from another nation or region. Colonialism may be essentially trade related, or it may be aimed at the formal annexation of land and the attainment of political sovereignty.

Colonialism manifested differently in different parts of the world, with differential impacts on local cultures depending on factors such as methodology and duration. That said, certain commonalities can be traced with regards to the cultural and aesthetic impact of modern European colonialism. One is the inculcation of a sense of European superiority and centrality and non-European marginalization, which may be felt both by the European power and by subject peoples. Another impact is linguistic: local languages were often displaced in favor of European languages, the teaching of which was supported by the creation of institutions of higher learning in colonized societies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. A third impact is demographic: many colonized regions, especially those with long and persistent European presence, saw the creation of ethnically hybrid populations, such as the Burgher community in Sri Lanka, Anglo-Indians in India, or mestizos in the Americas. Finally, colonialism led to the creation of what might be described as hybrid cultural formations: elite members of colonial societies educated in European languages and in the methodology of the Euro-American university transmitted the values acquired from that education to local cultural conditions, often with significant tension. Many scholars have pointed out that as a result of the advent of hybrid cultural formations, local cultural forms have blended with or been superseded by European concepts, meaning that the "authentic" versions of local literary forms or cultural practices may no longer exist.

Thus in religion, for example, it is difficult if not impossible to know what "Hinduism" might have meant before European scholars of religion studied various local religious formations and promoted the idea that this highly diverse plurality of practices might be constituted as a single religion in the nineteenth century (King 1999).

EVOLUTION OF THE TERM: POSTCOLONIALISM AND ITS PRECEDENTS

The common use of the term "postcolonial studies" can be traced back to the 1980s, and it seems fair to say that "postcolonialism" was first widely implemented in departments of English and comparative literature at universities in the Anglophone world. (The subaltern studies movement in Indian historiography can be seen as contemporaneous, but at least in the early and mid-1980s the two disciplines were not yet in dialogue.) Postcolonial studies has approximate precedents in three worlds theory and Commonwealth studies, both of which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. For theoretical and political reasons to be discussed below, those terms became less common among scholars as ways of identifying the regional literatures mentioned above. "Postcolonial" is now the dominant term describing the study of non-European literatures and cultures as well as studies of transnational and migrant cultural expression.

The shift from "Third World" to "postcolonial" was relatively gradual during the 1980s, with the two terms seen as largely overlapping within the Euro-American academy. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the Marxist connotations of Third World thinking made that term less appealing to many scholars and teachers as the humanities academy saw a broad decline in interest in Marxist theory. Additionally and perhaps more importantly, the political formation associated with the nonaligned movement – the three worlds theory, which provides the logical basis for "Third World literature" – seemed to evaporate. Robert Young (1998) summarizes these developments succinctly in "Ideologies of the Postcolonial":

> [T]he emergence of postcolonial theory could be viewed as marking the moment in which the third world moved from an affiliation with the second world to the first. The rise of postcolonial studies coincided with the end of Marxism as the defining political, cultural, and economic objective of much of the third world.

Recent critics have commented, often disparagingly, that postcolonial theory in particular seemed to emerge in the Euro-American academy as a less institutionally threatening alternative to Marxism. However, it seems more accurate to say that postcolonial studies as a broad academic formation has incorporated a diverse range of political perspectives, including Marxism as well as versions of progressive humanism and liberalism. Some Marxist scholars who have written essays and books offering critiques of postcolonial studies (see, e.g., Dirlik 1994) have seen their works included in postcolonial anthologies, becoming de facto participants in postcolonial discourse despite their dislike for the term.

It seems fair to say that to some extent the shift from "Commonwealth" to "postcolonial," at least in the Anglophone context ("Commonwealth" literature only applies to the Anglophone world), has been sharper and less incidental than the roughly parallel and contemporaneous shift from "Third World" to "postcolonial." "Commonwealth" refers, of course, to literature of the British Commonwealth of Nations, an organization with 53 member nations, all but two of which were former British colonies. The Commonwealth idea was conceived in the

1880s as a way to grant semi-autonomy to settler colonies like New Zealand and Australia, and it rapidly expanded after Indian and Pakistani independence (since both new nations joined the Commonwealth). Beginning with the Harare Declaration (1971), the Commonwealth has been more politically progressive and explicitly democratic – which is to say, it has clearly indicated that member countries are a group of sovereign states on an equal footing. It has also focused on alleviating poverty and fostering development in poorer countries. The organization is in fact continuing to grow as an international entity, even as the influence of the term "Commonwealth" as a cultural or literary reference has declined.

The most famous critique of the idea of Commonwealth literature is probably Salman Rushdie's 1983 essay "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist." And following Rushdie, the most significant event marking the decline of Commonwealth literature might be Amitav Ghosh's famous decision, in 2001, not to accept the regional Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia) for his novel *The Glass Palace*. Ghosh objected to the idea and term "Commonwealth," but he also took issue with the English-only requirement for the prize: "The issue of how the past is to be remembered lies at the heart of *The Glass Palace* and I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialization of Empire that passes under the rubric of 'the Commonwealth.'" In his comments, Ghosh does not use the word "postcolonial," but his political and intellectual premises might be seen as emblematic of the driving force behind the "postcolonial turn" in literary studies. In effect, Ghosh worries that the "Commonwealth" attribute, when combined with an English-only requirement, which would exclude literature written in the "national languages" of formerly colonized nations, must be seen as a "memorialization of empire." According to Ghosh, postcolonial writers should have the right to redefine their present selves separately from that legacy. For Ghosh, the term "Commonwealth writers" or "Commonwealth literature" cannot help but be a kind of celebration of British colonialism. Alternative formulations of a similar critique can be found in the influential early postcolonial anthology, *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002), and in Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge's 1991 essay, "What is Post(-)Colonialism?"

Despite the widespread critique of the idea of Commonwealth literature, some institutions have continued to adhere to the term and the idea behind it. The British *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, for instance, rejected a proposal in 1992 to rename itself, and the journal's editor, John Thieme, affirmed that decision in 2005, arguing that postcolonial studies has "frequently been rejected by writers and readers, who see it as a strait-jacket that encloses them within a limited and predictable range of political agendas." While there is some truth to the idea that the term "postcolonial" has remained somewhat limited to academic circles, Thieme's idea that postcolonialism may be overly ideologically restrictive would likely be vigorously contested by scholars in the field.

While the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* decided against renaming itself and in effect bucked the "postcolonial" turn in English studies, the British journal *World Literature Written in English* did rename itself the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* in 2004, in the interest of achieving greater "theoretical respectability," in the words of its editor at the time, Janet Wilson. This renaming suggests a growing privileging of "postcolonial" literature over the category of "world" literature. As indicated above, "postcolonial" implies an ideological position and a set of specific historical contexts, while "world

literature," though nearly timeless, is seen as somewhat intellectually inert.

As mentioned above, postcolonial studies has had an impact on a wide array of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences outside literary studies. Its impact on three disciplines, namely history, anthropology, and religion studies, will be explored below; a longer study might also explore its influence on disciplines such as sociology, political science, and philosophy.

POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES IN HISTORY

A form of postcolonial studies was being accomplished by a group of Indian historians as early as 1983, the year when Ranajit Guha published *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. The group involved with the *Subaltern Studies* journal, including Guha as well as scholars such as Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarthy, and Gyan Prakash, did pioneering work using ideas derived from French poststructuralist theory as well as the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to articulate radical historiographic approaches to "subaltern" voices and agency in colonial Indian history. The implicit links between subaltern studies and the emerging field of postcolonial literary studies became much more explicit after 1987, with the publication of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography." The subaltern studies group as a whole aimed to emphasize the agency of Indian underclasses, including peasants as well as lower-caste subjects, in producing historical change in the Indian subcontinent.

With Spivak's interventions, growing attention began to be paid to the agency of subaltern women; Spivak's groundbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" can be seen as a major feminist intervention in the discourse of both subaltern studies within the discipline of history and postcolonial studies more broadly. In addition to Spivak, important contributions to feminist postcolonial historiography were made by Lata Mani (1987), Kumkum Sangari and S. Vaid (1990), and Mrinalini Sinha (1995). Antoinette Burton's (1994) scholarship demonstrated the links between the discourses of race and gender in the British Empire, arguing that British women in the colonies aimed to assert their rights as imperial subjects abroad in part in order to strengthen their bid for political rights at home.

POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Just as a version of postcolonial studies was practiced in the discipline of history before the term "postcolonialism" came into wide usage, examples of self-critique were present in the discipline of anthropology well before anthropologists like Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai began to introduce postcolonialist ideas into cultural anthropology in the early 1990s. A classic example of a highly influential disciplinary critique might be Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983), which argued that the discipline of anthropology was largely constructed on an idea that the most common subjects of anthropological study are cultural "others" that the discipline is incapable of recognizing as "coevals" – alive at the same time and subject to the same forces of modernity as the Western scholars who study them. Fabian's critique rhymes closely with Edward Said's foundational critique in *Orientalism* in 1978, which asked pointed questions about how anthropologists and other social scientists have constructed knowledge to suit preexisting paradigms. *Orientalism* questioned the premise, taken essentially as a given by many European and American social scientists and

humanities scholars since the nineteenth century, that there is in fact a fundamental cultural divide between East (Orient) and West (Occident). This premise, Said argued, is essentially an artifact of colonial dominance.

Since the postcolonial turn in anthropology, considerably more attention has been paid to the limits particularly of Western knowledge about the non-Western world, to the motivations of scholars in asking certain kinds of questions about culturally different groups, and to the presumption that the values of subjects under study are inherently or absolutely different from those of the scholars who study them. Scholars have also developed a greater awareness of cultural fluidity and a greater interest in the diversity of responses to modernity around the world.

POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES IN RELIGION STUDIES

The influence of postcolonial studies on religion studies has roughly followed the pattern set by anthropology. Here also, Said's critique in *Orientalism* has provoked considerable debate, though the specific categories of knowledge under contestation relate to religious communities, beliefs, and practices. Postcolonial religious studies has questioned the presumed fundamental difference between "Eastern religions" and the Abrahamic "religions of the book."

A particularly influential theorist of religion who has raised questions along these lines has been Talal Asad, who in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) applied a Foucauldian framework to question the historical emergence of the category and concept of "religion" in Western thought. Just as Asad has argued that "religion" emerged as a historical artifact, in his subsequent work he has argued that the category of the "secular," as a construct of a particularly Western epistemology with strong Christian overtones, may be equally ideologically fraught. Asad's critiques, along with the arguments made by subsequent "postsecular" scholars of religion such as Saba Mahmood, have implications for postcolonialists across multiple disciplines, especially given the widespread interest in Islamic beliefs and practices in particular in the post-9/11 moment.

In all three of the examples given, the question of origins and influences is very much open. While the structure of this entry might imply that postcolonial studies originated in English departments and spread to other disciplines, historians, anthropologists, and scholars of religion might contend that forms of critique that resonate with postcolonialist ways of thinking were already well under way before the idiom of postcolonial theory was adopted. The critique of European colonialism and the questioning of Western forms of knowledge have been widespread elements of humanities and social sciences self-critique since the 1960s; postcolonial studies might be seen as merely an umbrella under which all of these different types of critique have occurred.

SEE ALSO: Chatterjee, Partha; Colonialism; Commonwealth Literature; Decolonization; Empire; Ghosh, Amitav; Guha, Ranajit; Imperialism; Indian Anti-Colonialism; Marxist Postcolonial Criticism; Orientalism; Postcolonial Theory; Religion; Rushdie, Salman; Settler Colonies and Settlement Literature; Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty; Subaltern Studies; *The Empire Writes Back*; Young, Robert J. C.

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Postcolonial Theory

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Postcolonial theory analyzes the legacy of violence of over 500 years of Western colonialism and the ways in which non-Western people resist it. Its interest lies in the continuing significance of the colonial encounter for both Western and non-Western people. Postcolonial theory is also interested in the shapes of neocolonial domination. Theorists such as Robert J. C. Young have identified that the economic and cultural frameworks of the postcolonial have not ended with the receding boundaries outlining colonial power before the twentieth century, or with the liberation of colonized spaces that marked the second half of the twentieth century. Postcolonial theory is engaged in contesting Western master narratives that conceal the workings of oppression in canonical literature; it is, simultaneously, engaged in contesting itself. This, however, is a limited definition of a sprawling, multifaceted, ever-evolving field. Grounded in deconstructionist, feminist, and Marxist approaches to literary texts, postcolonial studies constitutes a subfield of cultural studies even as it complicates not only the other subdisciplines that comprise cultural studies, but also the broader rubric of cultural studies itself. Its influence continues to increase as it inflects other fields in English studies as well as those outside the discipline such as history, sociology, geography, psychology, urban studies, philosophy, and political theory. In fact, these relationships reveal themselves as artificially separate and mutually strengthening, as the foundational texts in postcolonial studies draw from a wide array of analytical techniques and schools of thought.

To speak of postcolonial theory as a singular formation is misleading. It is most appropriate to speak of postcolonial theory, not as a singular field of variegated subdisciplines that share a vague sense of unity, but as a range of fields, a plurality of methodologies. Postcolonial theory is therefore perhaps most appropriately used in the plural: it is a gathering of studies grounded in an ethics of reading.