The Irrelevance of "Postcolonialism" to South Asian Literature

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Note: *I read this paper at the 2003 meeting of the South Asian Literary Association in San Diego. I've been told by several people who attended it that it impressed them, but my efforts to get it published in* South Asian Studies *came to naught. It was not rejected—it just disappeared. Although some of the references are a bit dated, it may still be useful. The term "postcolonialism" has become only more firmly linked to South Asian literary studies in the intervening years.*

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It may be premature to speak of theory being "finished" as did the title of a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* (Shea 94), but more and more voices are being raised questioning how useful cultural studies as a whole has been as a political tool. That *Times* piece was responding in part to Terry Eagleton's assessment of the lack of originality in high theory for the past couple of decades, since documented in great detail in his book, *After Theory,* in which he calls for a rethinking of what literary theory can and should do. In a recent article in *PMLA,* James R. Kincaid cleverly and pointedly twitted his colleagues for repeating endlessly the same truisms about power relationships and "resistance" while a wide variety of other approaches to literature languish. Meanwhile, looking around the contemporary political scene, including the anti-globalization movement, one is hard to pressed to identify any concrete products of political literary theory. Literary scholars like to feel they are doing important political

work, but nobody outside their constricted world seems to be listening to their repetitious analyses.

But if such theory is nearing exhaustion, the subspecies called "postcolonial studies" appears at first glance to going from triumph to triumph. New articles, monographs, and even journals continue to appear at an ever-accelerating pace. Job ads frequently include postcolonialism as a desired specialization, and postcolonial analyses have penetrated deeply into the study of 19th-century English literature and ventured even further back in search of new territory to conquer. When I last proposed to teach my graduate survey of African, Caribbean, and South Asian fiction I was informed by the director of graduate studies that I could not do so unless I retitled it "Postcolonial Literature" because "that's what it's called now" despite my well-publicized opposition to both the term and the concept.

Yet despite all this apparent success, "postcolonialism" is a troubled concept in English literary studies. Almost every major book on the concept or survey of the field challenges the logic and coherence of the term. As is suggested by the title of the classic critical anthology *Past the Last Post*, the "post" in the term was always more of an opportunistic pun alluding to poststructuralism and postmodernism than a well-defined concept in itself. Almost immediately scholars began to ask whether works written before independence, like *Things Fall Apart*, belonged under this rubric; and others asked whether colonialism could truly be said to be "past." The ideas associated with postcolonialism seemed to lend themselves to an boundless variety of analyses of international politics, including those involving never-colonized nations like Thailand, and colonizing settler nations like Australia and the United States.

Although postcolonial studies aimed at first at shedding light on emerging noncanonical literature, the temptation to use it instead to critique the traditional

classics was irresistible; and much of the writing in the field centers on the same old familiar Anglo-American canon. The rise of terminology like "center/periphery" and "hybridity" continuously reinforce Eurocentrism even while purporting to challenge it, for such terms depend upon the concept of a European self as a starting point. In addition, while supposedly multiplying perspectives, scholars have frequently given in to the temptation to fall back into such absurdly simplistic essentializing terms as "*the* postcolonial condition."

Most these critiques and more were given their classic form by Aijaz Ahmad in his 1992 polemic *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures.* Although the arguments he deploys are embedded in a Marxist ideological viewpoint which I do not share, he seems to me to have definitively pointed out the numerous contradictions and incoherencies embedded in postcolonial studies theory. It is striking that though he is often quoted, his more powerful arguments have been until recently rarely addressed head-on. Scholars would rather argue with each other about what exactly Homi Bhabha means than come to grips with the devastatingly clear and incisive arguments of Ahmad. Peter Hallward does address himself in detail to Ahmad and other critics of postcolonialism in his brilliant *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific;* but in the process he accepts most of their criticisms and dismisses the vast bulk of what has been written so far in the field in his attempt to create a new, more logically coherent postcolonialism.

Although much postcolonialism is Marxist-inspired, other Marxist critics continue to assail it on the grounds that it is insufficiently grounded in political economy. One of the fiercest attacks yet is Epifanio San Juan's *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*; and even Gayatri Spivak, the most frequently cited of all postcolonial theoreticians, has been edging away from both the term and the concept, trying out

substitutes like "transnationalism" and a new comparative literature invigorated by cross-pollination from area studies (*Death of a Discipline*), mounting a sustained attack on much of the field in the final chapter of her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason.* She, and several other prominent scholars in the field, increasingly refer to postcolonialism in the past tense.

The essentially arbitrary nature of postcolonial studies is made clear by the fact that although nothing in the usual definitions of postcolonialism would logically exclude studies exploring the plight of Eastern European nations in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire, on this sort of topic the scholarship is silent. The pronounced leftward tilt of the field blinds it to damage done by non-capitalist empires.

One of the few postcolonial scholars to note the mismatch between the field's ambitions and its achievements is Ella Shohat, who notes the absence of the term from the debates surrounding the First Gulf War in her article "Notes on the Post-Colonial" (126). It is similarly absent from the public discourse about the Second. Can it be that not even committed activists discussing international affairs have found it useful? Marxists and anarchist activists and Establishment area studies scholars alike seem not to find the term useful. Given its enormous success within the academy, why should this be?

One answer is that, stripped of its jargon, a great deal of scholarship labeled "postcolonial" is revealed as being in essence thinly disguised Leninist or New Left neo-imperialism theory focusing on the issues of Western capitalist influence or race-and-gender-based identity studies in an international context. Postcolonialists doing theory labor endlessly to distinguish between postcolonialism and these earlier approaches, yet when they turn to the actual analysis of literature, there is little distinctive or original about the majority of their findings as they draw up lists of the

privileged, the marginalized, and the silenced in fiction. And increasingly, it is just a handy label for all literature in English emanating from elsewhere than the U.S. and England. In its current state, trying to use postcolonial theory to do political work is like trying to drive a spike into a plank with a cloud—or, better—a handful of wriggling tadpoles.

Apart from these general objections to postcolonial studies, I wish to briefly consider a few specific to the study of South Asian literature. When I read postcolonial scholarship by political scientists or historians, I am struck in contrast by how clearly the label fits their work. Such scholars tend to discuss—literally—the processes at work during and in the wake of colonialism. Most of the work of the Subaltern Studies group falls into this category. It is notable that Spivak—strongly committed to feminist and Marxist positions—has more and more shifted to discussing such nonfictional, real-world issues, increasingly rarely dealing directly with literature.

Part of her discomfort seems to stem from being asked more and more often to represent a view from South Asia, a role which she resists the more closely she scrutinizes the complexity of life and thought in South Asia itself. While her question "Can the subaltern speak?" is often parsed as if she were substituting her own voice for that of the inarticulate masses, a close reading of her recent work reveals an anxiety to disabuse her audience of any notion that she, or any other postcolonial critic, can speak for them.

Of course all of the feverish scholarly activity surrounding South Asian Anglophone fiction is stimulated by the overwhelming success of writers like Rushdie, Roy, Mistry, and Lahiri. Brilliant new books continue to appear by writers with South Asian roots, making the current period the Age of South Asia in fiction, in the way that the sixties and seventies were the heroic age of modern Latin American fiction. Whereas

the traditional Anglo-American writers dissected by cultural studies critics belong to an old canon of whose very existence the vast majority of modern American college students is happily ignorant; these new writers have an enthusiastic following in book groups, and among legions of individual readers who read them purely for pleasure.

The problem facing postcolonial critics is that the authors at hand seldom seem to share their world-view. Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan novelists, like other novelists, tend to create works that are ambiguous rather than polemical, individualistic rather than social, exceptional rather than typical, and—dare we say it?—entertaining rather than instructive.

Such a complaint may seem naïve: isn't the very purpose of scholarly criticism to reveal the patterns obscured by the fictional surface? But all too often this amounts to little more than ticking off the political inadequacies of the author, reminding me of a stereotypical Victorian book reviewer sniffing at each new novel appearing in the market and labeling it "unedifying." The scholar winds up committing the classic sin of poor book reviewing: discussing the book the author *should* have written rather than the actual text at hand. Since the political ideas involved in most postcolonial criticism are few and thrice-familiar, the possibility of useful and surprising insights is small.

But there are exceptions: South Asian writers who would seem to cry out for postcolonial exegesis: Salman Rushdie being the most obvious. And indeed Jaina C. Sanga in her book *Salman Rushdie's Postcolonial Metaphors: Migration, Translation, Hybridity, Blasphemy, and Globalization*, does an admirable job of arraying and discussing the themes announced in her subtitle; yet the book is largely redundant, for Rushdie famously explicates his own themes and ideas, both within his fiction and in essays like those collected in *Imaginary Homelands,* from which Jaina quotes profusely. Most of the ideas associated with the opaque formulations of Homi Bhabha are much more

lucidly—and amusingly—set forth by Rushdie in his own essays. Scholars wanting to elucidate Rushdie's political ideas are faced with the fact that by and large he has already done their job for them.

With a few exceptions like Zola's *Germinal,* novels have not proved efficient vehicles for radical political thought. A notorious case is *Untouchable* by India's most famous Marxist novelist, Mulk Raj Anand. In the end, his portrait of the sufferings of an oppressed latrine cleaner provides little impetus for a revolutionary movement, but instead reflects traditional liberal abhorrence of discrimination based on caste. His solution for the problem of human waste management is to reject the Gandhian ideal of every individual his own "sweeper" in favor of the proliferation of modern flush toilets in the subcontinent.

Postcolonial analyses can and have been done of *The God of Small Things,* but most readers cannot help noticing that the central and most powerful themes of the book deal not with the left-over influences of the British or even with the incursions of American popular culture, but with the injustices perpetrated by traditional upper-caste Indians in rural Kerala in the name of purity and with the failures of the Communist Party there. Indeed, many early leftist readers assumed Roy was a conservative until she revealed her true sympathies by abandoning fiction and turning to overt political protest writing (*The Cost of Living* and *War Talk,* and other essays that continue to appear in prominent venues). In this move to the nonfiction realm she resembles Spivak.

As for the many fictions of intergenerational conflict among South Asian immigrants to Western nations like Jhumpa Lahiri's recent novel *The Namesake*, they have less affinity with anything properly called "postcolonial" than with other immigrant-group traditions such as those of Eastern European Jews or Italians, as was

suggested recently when more than one critic punningly referred to *Bend It Like Beckham* as *My Big Fat Sikh Wedding*.

Let us suppose for a moment that the proper subject of postcolonialism ought to be that to which the word itself literally alludes: life in the emerging nation states of South Asians in the wake of British imperialism with an emphasis on the damage wreaked by the colonial power and its lingering influences. It is striking how little interest modern writers have in this subject. R. K. Narayan, for instance, was often excoriated for the general absence of the British and of the Independence struggle in his works. I argue in my new book, *Modern South Asian Literature in English,* that in a sense by ignoring the British he was saying to them: "this isn't *about* you." In a 1984 *New York Times* article he articulated this position clearly, criticizing the view that "India is interesting only in relation to the 'Anglo' part of it, although that relevance lasted less than 200 years in the timeless history of India" (Narayan 222). Narayan deliberately snubs the British, and the nourishment to be derived from complaining about that fact is very thin gruel in comparison to the rich feast provided by the Malgudi Narayan actually created for us.

Rushdie, more famously than Narayan, also famously complained about the 1980s tide of *Raj* fiction and film which he viewed as glamorizing the colonial period ("Outside the Whale"). A generation of younger novelists has taken up the challenge implied in his criticism by writing anti-*Raj* novels, going back to explore the British period from various Indian perspectives, like David Davidar's *The House of Blue Mangoes* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace.* One would think such novels would attract intense interest from postcolonial critics, but in fact they have been largely ignored. They are too nuanced, too ambivalent, to be celebrated as polemics, and too clear to need much exegesis.

Sometimes, as mentioned above, postcolonial critics reprove authors for failing to celebrate the struggle for independence in South Asia sufficiently. In the Indian context there is a huge problem in the way of such a project: the dismal specter of the massacres carried out in the wake of Partition. Almost every notable novel set during the period, like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan,* Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India,* winds up dealing less with the indisputable crimes of the British than with the inhumanity of Indians to each other. Complaints that are lodged against the British about Partition include their unprincipled fostering of preexisting sectarian divisions (especially their use of Sikhs and Muslims against Hindus); and the abruptness of their departure which left the newly established states poorly equipped to deal with the ensuing chaos. But neither of these criticisms—while fully justified—lends itself to particularly radical analysis, and the topic is not popular among postcolonial critics. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is the great exception among novels about the Independence movement, having had the good fortune to have been written *before* Partition.

Modern political South Asian fiction is far more likely to deal with the period of the Emergency than with Independence, and scant blame is assessed to the British for that catastrophe in novels such as *Midnight's Children* and *A Fine Balance.* Following the pattern established by Nigerian writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, modern Indian writers, while not for a minute doubting the criminality and inhumanity of aspects of the colonial era, focus instead on internal causes for national chaos—a focus that does not particularly lend itself to being described from a postcolonial perspective.

Novelists like Mistry who depict negatively the trade restrictions imposed by India's formerly left-leaning government are off an an entirely different tangent than the antiglobilization sentiments which inform most postocolonial criticism, though one

would think it might be useful to make a close examination of what national economic controls inspired by socialist philosophy did to India during the heyday of the Congress Party. Unsympathetic but undeniably realistic fictional portraits of this period are an embarrassment to the antiglobalization cause, and are rarely discussed.

Finally, postcolonialism tends to assume that independence, nation-building, and progressive politics ought ideally to go hand in hand. The problem is that in the modern Indian political situation, the rehearsal of ancient colonial grievances is dominated by the Hindu supremacist right, and directed not against the Colonial British but against the much handier Muslim populations of Gujurat and Maharashtra—to single out just two regions infamous for recent outbreaks of "communal" violence—blaming them for the wounds caused by the Mughals. It is too simple to assume that rehearsing the grievances of the past leads to progressive politics. In India it is far more likely to lead to reactionary ones.

A parallel problem is caused in Sri Lanka by the identification of nation-building with Sinhala supremacy over the Tamil minority and the ensuing catastrophic civil war. The most powerful tools those who would resist this sort of politics have available to them are the very liberal traditions of egalitarianism and human rights which are scorned by Marxists and postcolonialists alike (see Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghos*t). More and more critics of postcolonial studies, including Terry Eagleton (140-73), are rejecting the antiuniversalizing postmodern strain in postcolonial thought to call for some sort of shared human values (see especially Bruce Robbins: "Toward a New Humanistic Paradigm"). Clearly the leftist critique of Enlightenment values has made very little impression on the world at large beyond the academic ivory tower. Oppressed groups seeking freedom and prosperity are far more likely in the

contemporary world to appeal to the UN *Declaration of Human Rights* than to any of the hazy notions of marginality circulated by postcolonial scholars.

Let me be clear that I freely admit that studies labeled "postcolonial" have achieved much and that at least in the early days, they provided a refreshing shift in perspective; but it is time to acknowledge that the subsequent wholesale incorporation of South Asian literature into the postcolonial realm is limiting, misleading, and of dubious political worth. There is a vast readership eager for help in reading this tidal wave of important new fiction, with little to help them besides the desultory reading group discussion guides provided by publishers. We will need to get beyond the narrow agendas set by postcolonial theory to make ourselves useful to those readers, and though we may not thereby transform the world, it is worthy work.

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