

Postcolonialism

Hermeneutical Journey through a Contentious Discourse

*Too much theory and not enough literature. What do I know about “terror” and the “colonial encounter”?*¹

*I came to theory because I was hurting ... Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.*²

The British government’s Home Office has recently produced a booklet *Life in the United Kingdom* – a booklet which is essential reading for those who wish to apply for British citizenship. Let me quote a passage from the booklet to illustrate how the prospective candidates are informed about the British empire:

However for many indigenous peoples in Africa, the Indian sub-continent, and elsewhere, the British Empire often brought more regular, acceptable and impartial systems of law and order than many had experienced under their own rulers, or under alien rulers

Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice, First Edition.

R. S. Sugirtharajah.

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other than European. The spread of the English language helped unite disparate tribal areas that gradually came to see themselves as nations. Public health, peace and access to education, can mean more to ordinary people than precisely who are their rulers.³

What this supposedly peaceful and progressive colonial history fails to disclose to the soon-to-be British citizens is the other face of imperialism – the atrocities committed by the empire. Apart from calling the Atlantic slave trade an “evil,” the Home Office’s version of colonial history is silent about the unsavory aspects of the empire.

There are four tyrannical “isms” which have played a dominant role in recent history: fascism, communism, racism, and colonialism. In the vanquisher’s version of history, two of these “isms” – fascism and communism – are projected as heinous crimes. Since it was the West which had a major role in bringing down the cruel regimes and ending the atrocities of Hitler and Stalin, fascism and communism are seen as inhuman and unparalleled in human history. To this, the crimes of other despots – China’s Mao, Cambodia’s Pol Pot, North Korea’s Kim Il-sung, and Ethiopia’s Mengistu – are also added. But when it comes to colonialism, there is a willful amnesia and a moral blindness. For most of the last century, many countries in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean were under the governance of Western nations which never fail to remind others of their proud liberal and democratic credentials. But the atrocities of colonialism are not given equal attention to those of Nazism and communism. There are works on Nazism which record the evil committed by those who pursued this ideology. Then there is the highly acclaimed *Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* by a group of European academics which tries to catalogue the murders, tortures, extrajudicial killings, deportations, and artificial famines faced by those under communist rule. The report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission deals with the question of apartheid in South Africa. There has, however, been no similar comprehensive documentation or condemnation of the colonial record except for sporadic disapproval of slavery. The question

which the late Edward Said posed is still a valid one: "We allow justly that the Holocaust has permanently altered the consciousness of our time: why do we not accord the same epistemological mutation in what colonialism has done, and what Orientalism continues to do?"⁴

To revert to the Home Office's booklet, this citizenship exam is likely to be taken not only by those who were part of the former British colonies but also by those who were affected by British imperial adventures in China, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. The booklet maintains a total silence about the British imperial buccaneering in these regions: the Opium Wars caused by the British attempt to force the drug on China; the three Afghan Wars where the British were trying to impose their authority and will; the British occupation of Mesopotamia (Iraq) from 1918 to 1958 and the brutal suppression of several national uprisings; and the violent restraint of the Dervish uprising in Somalia. In the colonies themselves, in Kenya for example, the Mau Mau uprising resulted in thousands of detainees dying as a result of starvation, torture, exhaustion, and disease in the "British gulags" organized well before Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Then there are examples of the British gassing the Kurds, and the massacre of the Malaysian communists by the Scots Guards. Besides these political atrocities, there were disasters created entirely by willful political and commercial decisions. For example, millions died in the famine in India between 1876 and 1908, which Mike Davis calls a "Victorian holocaust" – a misfortune caused not by the weather but by a mixture of British insensitivity and free-market ideology. These misdeeds were not exclusive to the British empire. In the early 1900s, nearly 10 million Congolese died because of the forced labor and mass murder by the Belgian government, while during the 1960s, when Algerians fought for their independence, nearly a million of them died at the hands of French forces.

The Home Office's booklet and current commentators, politicians, historians, and theologians talk about the benefits that came in the wake of modern colonialism, such as the railways, the rule of law, and education. But they conveniently forget the tyranny,

torture, poverty, desolation of lands, and destruction of cultures that accompanied the empire. If you look at places like Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Palestine, and Sri Lanka, where conflict is raging, a close scrutiny will reveal that the cause of the conflicts goes back to colonial administrative mismanagement and policies. These are stains on the seductive story of the British empire's civilizing mission which its sympathizers would prefer to overlook. The current advocates of humanitarian intervention conveniently write out these colonial atrocities.

Also omitted from the Home Office's booklet are any references to the "native" resistance to the empire except for a brief passing comment about the growth of "liberation or self-government movements" in India in the 1930s. The booklet also notes that the British did not try to impose Christianity on India, which prompts the comment that "the English tolerance of different national cultures in the United Kingdom itself may have influenced the character of their imperial rule in India."⁵

The litany of British imperial misdemeanors is recalled not to apportion blame or to induce guilt feelings, but as a reminder that along with all well-meaning measures like health, education, transport, law and order, and parliamentary democracy, there were also brutality and intolerance. The purpose of this rehearsal is not to impose and judge an earlier generation by contemporary values but to recognize that the past is problematic and that it cannot be reduced to one tidy version. To phrase it differently, the empire is not a straightforward story of success, as the apologists want to portray it, but a complicated ensemble of atrocity and generosity.

I started with the Home Office document to demonstrate how totalizing forms of knowledge production are at work, and the need for a critical revision. Postcolonial criticism offers such a rereading. Its utility lies in its ability to question both the idea of colonialism as a structure of economic exploitation and profit, and the idea of colonialism as a structure of systematic gathering of reliable knowledge about the colonized.

Postcolonialism: A Compendious History

This book is mainly aimed at readers who are interested in postcolonial biblical criticism. Before we look at that, a brief note about the status of postcolonialism as a field of inquiry. Its arrival, its historical reach (where does colonialism start? Columbus's voyage?), its geographical scope (should one include settler colonies like Australia?), and the range of responses varying from antagonism to appreciation that the term "postcolonial" has invoked, have been competently documented in various anthologies and therefore there is no need for me to repeat them here.⁶ What I propose to do in the rest of the chapter is to recall some key events and issues related to postcolonialism which have relevance to biblical studies. Postcolonial critical approaches first made their mark in the humanities, especially in English literature departments in the 1980s and mainly on British and American campuses, and made an impact which was contentious, to say the least. Postcolonial theory developed from a variety of sources, critical traditions, and historical experiences such as anti-colonial resistance writings, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism.

It is worth remembering that postcolonialism did not begin its career in the academy. Before postcolonialism became a potent scholarly discourse in the Western academies, there was a variety of anti-colonial practices which were later incorporated into the discourse as connected to and consonant with what is now known as postcolonial criticism. It had a lengthy, heterogeneous, and complicated history before it made its mark nearly two decades after the end of formal colonialism. The critique of colonialism was initiated by two sets of people – activists and creative writers – who participated in anti-colonial struggles and reflected on them. The current theory owes an intellectual debt to theorist-activists, such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, and C.L.R. James, whose resistant writings and strategies were energized by colonial racism and Marxist thinking. Novelists like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in their writings explored colonial

prejudices concerning African peoples and the cultural havoc caused by the introduction of Christianity to the continent. To this initial list of novelists, which was confined to Commonwealth countries under British control, other theoreticians and creative people were added when postcolonialism was expanded to include the Spanish, the Portuguese,⁷ the French,⁸ and the current superpower, the USA.⁹ Robert Young, in his near-encyclopedic history of postcolonialism, has found historical and theoretical significance in Irish, Algerian, negritude, and pan-African liberation movements which were absent in the earlier literature.¹⁰

The text which is often credited with the inauguration of postcolonialism is Edward Said's *Orientalism*. This book produced a cluster of disciplinary approaches, and among them were postcolonialism and colonial discourse analysis. It is worth remembering that Edward Said, in his lifelong pursuit of the study of literature, rarely used postcolonialism as a mode of inquiry. In an interview he called it a "misnomer." Abstract theories did not enthuse him. In the same interview, he said that he "was always trying to gear [his] writing not towards a theoretical constituency but towards a political."¹¹ For a systematic analysis, his preferred term was "secular criticism." What he was dismissive of was the vacuous and notably tedious and at times unreadable stuff which passed for high theory and not the sort of postcolonial political and cultural concerns that he championed in his life. To the writings of Edward Said, one could add the works of Homi Bhabha¹² and Gayatri Spivak¹³ who were in a way responsible for providing a theoretical and much less readable framework.

Any critical theory which has "post" as its prefix is not easy to pin down, and its definition remains unsettled. Postcolonialism is no exception. Postcolonialism, as a term, has both historical and theoretical nuances. In one sense, as an expression, it marks the formal decline of Western territorial empires. On the other, as a theory, it has several functions: (a) it examines and explains especially social, cultural, and political conditions such as nationality, ethnicity, race, and gender both before and after colonialism; (b) it interrogates the often one-sided history of nations, cultures, and

peoples; and (c) it engages in a critical revision of how the “other” is represented.

Postcolonialism is largely an intellectual and political pursuit and has unashamedly a committed stance. Unlike other theoretical categories, it is not too preoccupied with detachment and neutrality. It emerged from both indigenous and diasporic contexts. Its critical stance is a creative adoption of the practical insights gleaned from those involved in anti-colonial and neo-colonial struggles and the theoretical tools and perspectives gained from a wide variety of disciplines. This includes a combination of clashing and contradictory voices from literary theory, philology, psychology, anthropology, political science, and feminist studies, with a view to exposing the collusive nature of Western historiography and its hidden support for imperialism. It is an attempt to explore the often one-sided, exploitative, and collusive nature of academic scholarship.

Right from its inception, postcolonialism has functioned as a political indicator and a literary critical tool. One of the least troublesome ways to describe postcolonialism is to recall the words of John McLeod. For him, it is an exploration of “the inseparable relationship between history and culture in the primary context of colonialism and its consequences.”¹⁴ To put it at its simplest: it is about the impact created by Western colonization on individuals, communities, and cultures. As with all theoretical practices, the purpose and serviceability of postcolonialism have changed over the years. In the initial stages Homi Bhabha, one of the triumvirate who were at the forefront in shaping the theory, wrote that the aim of postcolonialism was to

intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent movements within the “rationalizations” of modernity.¹⁵

A later definition brings out the larger agenda of postcolonialism which embraces political ideals of transnational social justice and its praxiological nature. Robert Young, who played a critical role in clarifying the field and even came up with a new term, “tricontinentalism,” perceived postcolonialism as a theoretical and political position which not only “attacks the status quo of hegemonic economic imperialism, and the history of colonialism and imperialism, but also signals an active engagement with positive political positions and new forms of political identity in the same way as Marxism or feminism.”¹⁶ The Marxism which Young refers to is the non-Western form which was developed to scrutinize the historical forms of imperialism, and similarly the feminism referred to by him includes the aims and practices of Third World feminism. Like most scholarly analysis, postcolonialism is about interrogating texts with certain kinds of question – in this case, those which come with colonial and neo-colonial history and experience. It is about disputing and confronting the after-effects of imperial and the new effects of neo-imperial control.

Concerns and Preoccupations

Postcolonialism is a cluster of disparate writings, and it would be helpful to herd together some of its key interrelated activities and themes which have evolved over the years and energized the field:

- 1 Investigating the social, cultural, and political impact of colonialism on individuals and indigenous cultures.
- 2 Reopening different genres of colonial archive in the form of historical documentation, novels, travel writings, and translations which both colluded with and confronted imperial interests in the building and maintaining of the empire. This involves revisiting the literary productions, rereading and reinterpreting them, and exposing the revisions or reinforcements of colonial or national history.

- 3 Recovering the resistance of the subjugated. This looks not only at the dynamics of colonial domination but also at the capacity of the colonized to resist, either openly or covertly.
- 4 Identifying postcolonial conditions caused by a set of historical, political, and cultural contingencies – migration, diaspora, refugees, internally displaced persons, and hyphenated identities. It studies the process and effects of cultural displacement on individuals and communities and the ways in which the displaced have defined and defended themselves.
- 5 Decentering universal and transhistorical values of Western categories of knowledge. It questions the three mainstays of the Enlightenment: objectivity, rationalism, and universalism.
- 6 Transgressing the contrastive way of thinking. The binary categorizations include colonizer/colonized, center/margins, modern/traditional, and static/progressive. It queries the presences of such dualistic thinking, and applies deconstructive techniques to show that though the histories and orientations of colonized and colonizer are distinct, they overlap and intersect. It encourages productive crossings between the two.
- 7 Interrogating colonial and contemporary practices of representation of the “other” and the power relations that lie behind the production of such knowledge.
- 8 Placing women in patriarchal culture, and especially the “double colonization” faced by women who were colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies.
- 9 Examining the interdependency of race and class and the variety of ways racism was exercised.
- 10 Scrutinizing debates about multiculturalism and the intermingling of races and religions and their connections to the colonial past.
- 11 Studying the lingering legacies of colonialism extended and incarnated in the forms of neo-colonialism such as globalization, free-market and multinational firms, and the media.
- 12 Decentering of dominant forms of knowledge which envisioned the world from a single privileged point of view which simultaneously elevated the cultures of the colonizer – religions, arts,

dances, rituals, history, geography – and undermined those of the colonized.

- 13 Questioning the privilege accorded to the written over the oral literature of peoples.
- 14 Paying attention to the nationalist movements for their failure to fulfill and deliver their promises after decolonization, and especially the way they overlooked the needs of dalits, women, and indigenous people.

To these one could add other concerns, notably the environmental crisis and the development policies of international agencies. The current ecological devastation of lands, forests, and rivers is partly rooted in colonial despoliation.

To sum up, postcolonialism is essentially an interventionary tool. Its argumentative and contestatory nature makes the practice defy boundaries and disciplines.

Changing Faces of A Discourse

Colonial discourse analysis began with several theorists who studied colonialism in the Arab world, such as Albert Memmi in Tunisia, Frantz Fanon in Algeria, and Edward Said. Since then it has seen several changes.

First, the way of doing postcolonialism has changed. In the initial stages, following Said, Spivak, and Bhabha, postcolonialism was based on, in Spivak's phrase, a "South Asian model"¹⁷ and was seen as an anglophone affair limited to the imperial adventures of the British. Now, postcolonial studies has widened its scope to include not only the other old European empires like the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Belgian, and French, and Eastern ones like the Japanese, but also the newer empires like that of the United States of America. To this one could add the Soviet empire as well, demonstrating that not all colonialism was from the far right. As Spivak points out, with such a changed and widened focus of attention, the old model derived from South Asia, which was basically "'India' plus the

Sartrean 'Fanon' will not serve ... We are dealing with heterogeneity on a different scale and related to imperialism on another model."¹⁸ This also means that the earlier texts of Fanon, Memmi, and Cabral, which supplied exemplary theoretical underpinning in their time, may not have as much purchase as they did with the old colonialism. To meet the different demands of the decolonization process which started soon after the Second World War, and was soon to be caught up in the Cold War and the new imperialism in the form of globalization, new texts are required. One such, which accommodates the new political geography and neo-colonial context, especially in Asia, is Kuan-Hsing Chen's *Asia as Method*.¹⁹ In this volume, Chen takes into account Japanese military occupation, US imperialism after the Second World War, and the emergence of China as both territorial and economic superpower.

Second, the nature of colonialism has changed. The old territorial colonialism has given way to new forms under the heading of neo-colonialism. Unlike the old empires, where one knew the boundaries and identified their power structure, now it is difficult to specify the parameters. The new empire has no territorial center of power or clearly delineated boundaries. As Hardt and Negri put it, it is "a *decentered* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers ... The distinct national colors of the imperial map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow."²⁰ In this barrierless world it is not the traditional nation-states that wield power but the transnationals, which have become the "fundamental motor of the economic and political transformation of postcolonial countries and subordinated regions."²¹

One such borderless empire is environmental colonialism. Just as the old colonialists tried to redeem the savages for the Christian Church, the new conservationists try to save the natural resources not so much for the local people as for the multinationals. With the professedly altruistic motive of preserving the tropical rainforests, Western corporations are buying them up as resources. The lands in which the indigenous peoples lived for long ages have been declared idyllic and turned into wildlife sanctuaries, and local

people are forbidden to hunt, cut trees, and quarry stone. The eviction of the aborigines of Palawan Island in the Philippines, and the bushmen in Botswana, in order to create national parks are egregious examples of this type of green colonialism.²² Physical occupation may be a thing of the past but there is still the desire to extend sovereign rights in a place like Antarctica where the seabed is rich in gas, oil, and minerals.

Colonialist tactics, too, have become much more nuanced. The old colonialists preached Christianity as a way of saving souls, whereas the current neo-colonialists spread the virtues of democracy and human rights in order to prepare countries for a liberalized market economy. According to *The Guardian* columnist Simon Jenkins, democracy has become the new Christianity.²³ The word "mission" has been replaced with the word "intervention." The former British foreign secretary, David Miliband, called for a moral intervention as the West's new mission to encourage democracy through "soft or hard power."²⁴ The old colonizers saw themselves as masters and used brute force to achieve their goals, but the new colonizers, no less violent, project themselves as liberators, or, to use the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, "tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection."²⁵

Third, there is a remarkable change in the geopolitical landscape. In the north, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the old ways of drawing boundaries determined by the Cold War are no longer politically tenable. In the south, the emerging markets have altered the old classification of developing and underdeveloped world. The emergence of China, India, and Brazil as new economic forces on the world stage has unsettled the traditional Western hold on the economy. Rapid globalization and the free-market economy have called into question what is local and indigenous. But the structuring of the world is not as rigid as it used to be. The old stringent oppositional division of colonizer/colonized, East/West, oppressor/oppressed, and First World/Third World has slowly lost its ideological purchase. The world has become more unipolar and more singular, and as such it is now much more nuanced and interrelated.

Fourth, a critical practice which started as a political frame of reference and a tool for literary analysis has moved beyond its general theorizing to a specific, deeper, and more practical phase of engagement. Some of the recent literature offers evidence of engagement of postcolonialism with particular subjects, thus bringing to the fore a variety of fields which are underrepresented in the various earlier anthologies and compilations. To name a few: legal studies, disability,²⁶ development,²⁷ international terrorism,²⁸ environmentalism,²⁹ film, tourism, popular music, dance,³⁰ and the history of book production.³¹ These studies extend the central debates and concerns of the theory beyond its rich theoretical manifestations. More importantly, these engagements have not only answered the earlier accusation that postcolonialism was pure theory and very much slanted towards high literature, culture, and philosophy, but also introduced popular cultural forms such as music, films, and sport.

Interestingly, a theoretical practice which has its roots in humanistic tradition has now become a serviceable tool providing challenging reflections on religions. There are books using postcolonial insights to study Hinduism,³² Buddhism,³³ Islam,³⁴ the Bible,³⁵ and Christian theology.³⁶ These books not only demonstrate how ideologies of empire shaped the construction of the Eastern religions but also show how the religions themselves offered a form of resistance to colonial rule.

Meanwhile, postcolonialism has embraced a wide variety of disciplinary fields which have not usually been open to postcolonial inquiry. It has now expanded to include all forms of oppression and subjugation ranging from disability studies to queer studies. It has moved back in time to embrace subjects such as classics³⁷ and medieval studies which at first glance might not have been seen as having any postcolonial interest. As Barbara Goff, the editor of *Classics and Colonialism*, put it, "it is no longer appropriate to account for e.g. British Romanticism without an acknowledgment of the emergence of the British empire."³⁸

Perceptive readers will have noticed the absence of feminism from the above list. Postcolonialism and feminism evolved more or

less at the same time, sharing remarkable theoretical and political resemblances but rarely interconnecting. In recent years there has been not only notable interest in each other's concerns but also mutual critiquing. Postcolonialism has exposed the racial and gender bias of Western feminism, while feminism has uncovered patriarchal tendencies in postcolonialism. For a succinct debate surrounding these two theoretical practices, and for extracts from leading feminist practitioners, see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin.³⁹

Fifth, the nature of the postcolonial condition has perceptively changed. In the early stages, it was as seen as a newly acquired territorial freedom enjoyed by former colonized countries soon after the physical departure of Western countries. Then, with forced and voluntary migration, diasporic status became a new postcolonial status. The resultant border-crossing anguishes such as yearning for home and recovering the cultural soul were treated as new forms of the postcolonial condition. While this predicament of dislocation reified the plight and distresses of the metropolitans, the material conditions of the rural poor were altered by state development policies, agrarian capitalism, and technological changes in food production in the rural economy, which, in Akhil Gupta's view, have led to a condition of postcoloniality for the rural poor and peasants.⁴⁰ The definition of postcoloniality was thrown into further confusion with the recent wars in Iraq, Iran, Sri Lanka, and the Balkans, which resulted in a great number of internally displaced people forced to live in detention centers and welfare camps in their own countries.

Sixth, the narratives which postcolonialism dealt with in its initial stages have given way to newer grand narratives. The earlier anti-colonial writers and activists were wrestling with European expansionism, Enlightenment values, and neo-liberalism. The new metanarratives are "war on terror," "ethnic cleansing," "environmental catastrophe," and religious fundamentalisms. The earlier grand narratives resulted in destruction and annihilation of the benighted people, whereas the new ones speak about the redemption and salvation carried out on behalf of the hapless victims.

Seventh, there is a move to go beyond the narrow and restricted confines of theoretical parameters and the academic environment and to see a connection between scholarly commitment and active involvement. Three books which embody this new mood are Akhil Gupta's *Postcolonial Developments*, Robert Young's *A Very Short Introduction to Postcolonialism*, and Simon Featherstone's *Postcolonial Cultures*. Gupta's book, which comes out of a field study of farmers in Alipur, India, challenges a monolithic understanding of the post-colonial condition, and also explores how postcolonial theory was put to use to represent or conceptualize poor people's resistance and social transformation. Young examines the theory not in an abstract fashion from the top down but evidentially from below, and rearticulates the theory within the history of practice. He uses examples like Algerian Rai music, book burning, veiling of women, postcolonial feminism, the plight of dispossessed people, and environmental movements, to name a few, and seeks to place the components of postcolonialism within the history, culture, and politics of ordinary people. Similarly, Simon Featherstone provides in-depth case studies of the indigenes' and the invaders' perceptions of the land in the colonial geographies.⁴¹ What these books have done is to restore social and political agency to the heart of the theory and write back to those critics who accuse postcolonialists of being speculative and lacking popular engagement and political practice.

Lastly, the utility and the application of postcolonial criticism have changed. When it emerged, its perspectives were seen as "the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of 'minorities' within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South,"⁴² but now it is not confined exclusively to that group. Its approaches, positions, and traits are extended to any group who face discriminatory practices. To borrow the words of Paul Gilroy, addressed primarily to the descendants of African slavery, the insights gained from the anti-colonial and anti-racist resistance "will belong to anybody who is prepared to use them. This history of suffering, rebellion, and dissidence is not our

intellectual property, and we are not defenders of cultural and experiential copyright."⁴³

Discursive Interjections

There are two innovations championed by Edward Said which are relevant to biblical studies. One is the contrapuntal method. It is a mode of reading that tries to deal with the often fractious and awkward nature of the relationship between the texts of the colonizer and the colonized. It was an idea that Said borrowed from the world of classical music. For Said, reading contrapuntally is a means of examining the cultural documentation of the West with "a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts."⁴⁴ Thus, as in contrapuntal music, Said points out, "various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege" granted to each narration.⁴⁵ In transforming this musical technique into a critical practice, Said provides a means of interrogating those texts and moments which slip and spill into each other's discourse. This could mean thinking through and interpreting not only texts but also incompatible experiences such as "coronation rituals in England and the Indian durbars of the late nineteenth century."⁴⁶ Articulating together the works of the margins with those of the mainstream, the marginal texts are treated no longer as interesting and informative ethnographic samples valuable only to a few experts but as a challenging and resisting alternative. Such an act of reading brings these texts out of the neglected and minor status to which they were unfairly consigned for all kinds of political and cultural reasons and positions them in a global setting. The contrapuntal method worked out by Said is a useful tool for biblical studies. For how it works in biblical studies, see Chapter 6.

The second critical practice advocated by Said which has relevance to biblical studies is the restoration of philological studies. He persistently reminds us in his writing that all leading Orientalists

like William Jones and Max Müller were linguistic experts involved in the classification of languages and the study of comparative grammar. For Said, philology has two interrelated functions. One is the traditional business of the patient tracing of the original meaning of words, placing them in their cultural and political contexts and recording their reception histories. Added to this is the stigmatization added to words. As Said put it, "a true philological reading is active; it involves getting inside the process of language already going on in words and making it disclose what may be hidden or incomplete or masked or distorted in any text we may have before us."⁴⁷ How a meaning is attached to a word is complex and shrouded in cultural, religious, and political mystery. Philological investigation is important not only for unravelling the meaning of ancient texts but also for deciphering how words are used in contemporary public discourse. For instance, naming those who are in a position of vulnerability is a sensitive matter. Descriptions like "illegal immigrants," "economic migrants," and "Islamic terrorists" are all loaded terms which have negative connotations and tend to polarize debate. Similarly, there are other politically driven language constructions which prevent any constructive debate. The language used by the populist Western media during the first Iraq War could serve to illustrate the point. "Our" (i.e., Western) troops are "professional," "confident," "loyal," "resolute," and "brave," whereas "their" (i.e., Iraqi) troops are "brainwashed," "desperate," "blindly obedient," "ruthless," and "fanatical."⁴⁸ Said provides examples from American political discourse where language was used as an instrument of polemics – for instance, expressions such as "threat to our way of life" and "axis of evil" – or to camouflage the actual reality. Such phrases, in Said's view, "need laborious dismantling, unpacking, documentation, and refutation or confirmation."⁴⁹ The task of the biblical exegete is to make "demystification and questioning" central to his or her enterprise.

The historical-critical method employed by biblical studies largely depends on the study of words. But the work of biblical scholars is principally confined to dry and technical details and is written as if the study of words has no contemporary or ethical

consequences. Most of their work is driven by religious motive and confessional interest, and as such there is a failure to note the varied colonial contexts which provided the language for biblical texts. Philological commitment is not simply a matter of poring over ancient manuscripts and fixing the literal meaning of words, but also involves a combative mode of humanistic resistance which should shield one from political misinformation. As Said put it, philological investigation should become a technique of trouble.

Misperceptions, Flaws, Accomplishments

Let me bring this chapter to a close by referring to some hermeneutical issues and concerns that are related to postcolonial criticism. First, it is vital to point out that not all resistance is postcolonial. The investment bank managers who resist tax on their bonuses, the members of the Countryside Alliance in the United Kingdom who protest to protect their privileges, or the fairly well-to-do members of the Tea Party movement in the USA who demand fiscal restraints, lower taxes, and smaller governments, are not only simplifying issues but also making a mockery of the oppositional stance of the economically and politically disadvantaged. These are prosperous and well-connected people and are a million miles away from the angry voices of the grassroots. Narrowing it down to mere protest and resistance could be construed as an act in bad taste. The principal trait which sets apart and distinguishes postcolonial resistance is resentment against the uneven cultural equation and distorted representation.

Postcolonial studies tends to be obsessed with diaspora, migrancy, border crossing. Important though these are, they have only a limited purchase. Although there are massive movements of population, the vast majority of the displaced people in Asia and Africa continue to stay in their own countries and are not diasporic migrants. The obsession with diaspora further fuels the popular criticism that postcolonialism has taken identity issues more seriously than the conduct of the International Monetary Fund, and is

animated more by the concerns of the market than by those of marginality. Missing from its literature are terms like capitalism, casteism, land rights, and class struggle. The critical categories popularized by postcolonialism – “mimicry” and “hybridity” – have now almost become clichés. Hybridity is preoccupied with metropolitan issues only; it overlooks the internal cross-fertilization that takes place within vernacular and regional traditions. Hybridity is seen as one-way traffic. It has to do with immigrants fusing creatively the cultures they left behind and the cultures of their new home. But this cultural blending has not been matched by any sort of reciprocal synthesis at the political level on the part of metropolitan masters. Most European governments want the immigrants to absorb and integrate into Western ways of life. The vote against the building of new minarets in Switzerland and the proposed banning of the burqa in public places in France are notable examples of how unilateral is the cultural exchange. What hybridity does is to display and articulate the mesmeric effect of globalization. In doing so, it has forgotten the initial and primary tasks of postcolonialism – “writing back” and “listening again.” In the world of the diasporan, postcolonialism is seen no longer as recovering distorted and defamed histories and injustices, but as reframing and recovering the cultural soul in the widening global market.

There is still an understandable but needless fixation with the West. An imaginary and invented West has performed a variety of functions in the postcolonial discourse. As Chen has put it, the West “has been an opposing entity, a system of reference, an object from which to learn, a point of measurement, a goal to catch up with, an intimate enemy, and sometimes an alibi for serious discussion and action.” To rephrase it, the West became the model, content, and form for knowledge production. The task now is not to offer even a stringent ideological critique of the West but to discover ways to transcend this obsession. Eschewing the earlier attempts to dismantle the West either by regionalizing or provincializing it so that it became another contextual entity, or by resorting to indigenous resources to counter it, Chen proposes shifting the point of reference towards Asia. His contention is that Asia’s historical experiences

and practices can be seen as an alternative perspective and can offer a method which can bring out a different understanding of world history. Asia becomes an anchoring point and “societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt.”⁵⁰ Such a shift is undertaken not with a view to opposing the West or to essentializing Asia but with the aim of loosening and diluting our fascination with the West, which can lead to a productive new critical work. This method of continental self-reference could act as a potential model for Africa, Latin America, and Oceania as well.

Postcolonialism is also guilty of constructing its own canon and privileging certain texts and championing certain theoreticians. It needs to seek and uncover other voices which lie outside Western universities and publishing houses. I shall come back to this issue in the final chapter of this book. Postcolonialism certainly has its fair share of minor accomplishments. It is seen as both a liberatory and a constructive project. As an emancipatory venture, it provided visibility and an entry point into the Western academic discourse. At a time when there is a loss of faith in history, what postcolonialism does is to retell the story of the indigenous subjects of past colonialism and the victims of current neo-imperial policies, not with the intention of idealizing and glorifying them but to make it clear that the narrative is complicated and disputed. The aim is to treat the native narrative as diverse and contested. The idea is not to coopt this history in the service of some fashionable theory but to understand it and treat it with respect. Negatively, as a frame of reference, postcolonialism has flattened all cultural and national differences.

The most frequently asked question about postcolonialism is: does it change anything? It is not an easy question to answer. To be frank, no one knows. The question also has an air of self-importance. Postcolonial criticism has helped us to frame the question slightly differently and does not necessarily encourage us to come up with neat answers. It has served to underline very vividly that colonialism is an ongoing predicament. Postcolonialism teaches that there is no going back to a time when tradition, or identity, or civilization

might be recuperated as a whole. What it does is to give us the confidence to question the pieties of the powerful. It has brought home the unpalatable truth that whatever earnestness and sincerity past generations brought to their work, their behavior, actions, and thoughts often now look erroneous and scandalous. It has made scholars conscious of the type of knowledge they produce and disseminate. It has provided us with a healthier understanding of the way the dominant hermeneutics operates. It has helped to encourage a new kind of dealing with the “other” and has tried to move beyond the standard contrastive way of thinking that both the master and the nationalist narratives want us to be locked into – Occident and Orient, the pure indigene and the contaminated invader. In its modest way, it has helped us to unlearn the subtle ways the dominant discourse operates and to relearn how to confront and reshape it. To twist the words of Raymond Williams for our immediate purpose, wherever the mainstream commentators started from, with the arrival of postcolonialism they have been forced to listen to others who started from a different position.⁵¹

Notes

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