

FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION

Lecture Twenty-Four: Postcolonial Theory

The term “postcolonial” denotes the period following the dissolution of the colonial empires of Western European countries—Britain and France in the first place—but the scope of the theory extends far back into the colonial past.

■ In a more liberal sense, all countries formerly under oppressive European rule: the United States, Canada, Australia and even Ireland (the “white colonies”) may be studied from this particular angle. Currently, postcolonial theory is mainly an Anglophone and, to a lesser extent, Francophone affair.

Primary concern of the theory: the discourse of literature, criticism and scholarship both in colonial and postcolonial times, and in both the metropolitan and the colonial context.

Rejecting the discourse of the West

The problem was first brought to the attention of the English-speaking world by **Edward Said** in *Orientalism* (1978), in which he scrutinizes Western (English, French and American) perceptions of the “Orient”—the Arabs and Islam—from the eighteenth century to our time by examining “Orientalism” as a discourse. Major concerns:

- exploring “the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period”;
- demonstrating that the intention behind orientalism was not merely to understand, but—backed up by power (political, intellectual, cultural and moral)—“to control, manipulate and even to incorporate” the East;
- showing how representations of the East produced by Western scholars, outsiders to what they represented, were used as instruments of domination—cf. the convenient stereotype of the Oriental (the Arab) as culturally and spiritually retarded, unchanging, lazy and sensuous, which filled Westerners with a sense of superiority and reassured them about their “civilizing” mission.

Said was not the first to condemn Western misrepresentations. Consider memorandum in 1968 by East African scholars, **Ngugi wā Thiong’o**, **Taban lo Liyong** and **Henry Owuor-Anyumba** “On the Abolition of the English Department”:

- the wisdom of teaching English literature in former British colonies is questioned;
 - as an expedient, the language of the colonial power was retained for official use; literary education was confined to the University English Department;
- the metropolitan culture is dismissed: “We reject the primacy of English literature and culture. The primary duty of any literature department is to illuminate the spirit animating a people, to show how it meets new challenges, and to investigate possible areas of development and involvement”;
- the English and European traditions are not to be dropped from the university curriculum altogether, but primacy is to be given to the teaching of literature created by African, Caribbean and Afro-American writers not only in English, but in French, Portuguese and Spanish, and in the local languages, such as Swahili.
 - This proposition takes for granted a common African experience. But note that the connotations of “African” are racial and not geographical; “race,” in the context, implies “oppressed” and “underprivileged.”

Nigerian writer **Chinua Achebe**, in “Colonialist Criticism” (1974), rejects Western prescriptions of what constitutes good writing: universal truths, not African particularity; there is no direct correspondence between “a people’s level of [material] development” and “their total condition,” between their plumbing and their art—consider the avant-garde cult of African art (Picasso).

Achebe on Conrad in “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” (1975).

- The novella exudes the hegemonic spirit; it dehumanizes and depersonalizes “a portion of the human race” in order to make it a prop “to the disintegration of one petty European mind”;
- the Africans, whether portrayed in the mass or as individuals, appear as barbarous, inarticulate, subhuman. Marlow may feel the bond of a common humanity, but that feeling is accompanied by a shudder (the involuntary expression of his sense of superiority);

- the sense of white superiority permeating the text is heightened by the contrast between Kurtz's barbarous, though magnificent, African mistress and his delicate, pale, romantic European fiancée;
 - Africa as the antithesis of Europe is "the carrier on to whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate." It is a scandal that this thoroughly racist work has never been condemned.
- Is Achebe right in claiming that the white man "goes forward, erect and immaculate"?

The question of nationhood and the postcolonial nation

Cohesive and divisive forces, classes and/or national unity in postcolonial societies.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1983)

A tripartite division of society in relation to colonial (pre-independence) production: (1) the dominant international groups; (2) the dominant Indian groups at the national and the local level (the "comprador bourgeoisie"), the local group acting as a buffer zone to (3) "the people," the "subaltern classes," a large heterogeneous group of people who do not belong to the elite.

Answer to the question in the title is supplied by the suicide-case, in 1926, of a young middle-class woman in the buffer-zone, involved in armed resistance and committing suicide when unable to carry out an assassination.

The young woman (of elite group 2) was also a subaltern (group 3) on account of her gender. Her suicide, owing to its timing, was an action meant to speak—she delayed it until her menstrual period, creating an analogy with sati, the Indian tradition of burning the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband, which could only be done when she was "pure." The young woman's self-destruction is to be seen as an attempt to rewrite "the social text of sati-suicide in an interventionist way." But as her true motives had never been learned, the subaltern had failed to speak. The meaning of her death has been "muted," as is confirmed by a great-grandniece who, as an executive of a US-based transnational company, has joined the very empire builders against whom her distant relation had once been trying to speak out.

Homi K. Bhabha, the Third Space, hybridity and the postcolonial nation

Anecdotal account of failure of Scottish missionary to convert Indians to Christianity by stressing the reward of being "born again" (a second birth); audience not impressed because already familiar with the concept of rebirth from Hinduism (where it has different connotations, though)—why convert if you get for it what you already have? What is at work here is cultural difference, "the process of the *enunciation* of culture as 'knowledgeable', authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification" (for the missionary; for the Indian audience).

Bhabha: "in the very practice of domination the language of the master becomes hybrid—neither the one thing nor the other" = it ceases to be the language of the master (it becomes ineffectual in the alien situation), but neither does it mean what the audience take it to mean (rebirth in the Hindu sense)→a Third Space is produced, where the national culture functions as a safeguard against alien intrusions under colonial rule. After independence, it is in this Third Space that "the national text," the nation as discourse, gets "translated into modern forms of information technology, language; dress," that is, modernization takes place. ("The Commitment to Theory" [1989]).

■ The same applies to other situations, compare the British miners' strike of 1984-85 and what it led to: the self-assertion of the miners' wives, refusing to return to their traditional role.

Nation (discursively conceived!) is "a double narrative movement": (1) pedagogical (history: origins, past events)—a "continuist accumulative temporality"; people are "objects" of this narrative (i. e. it is about them); it is called pedagogical because it justifies nationhood and creates cohesion; (2) performative, with people as its "subjects"; it takes place in the present, is concerned not with the past but with the national life as actually lived day by day (cf. people are its "subjects": they create it by living/enacting it); it is repetitious and recursive. There is a split, an unstable zone between the two narrative movements; it is in this split—the Third Space—that writing the nation happens = that the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities (= different phases of development)—modern, colonial, postcolonial, native ("DissemiNation" [1990]).