

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 20

Dr. Sayan Chattopadhyay, IIT Kanpur

Hello and welcome to this last lecture on postcolonial literature. As the past nineteen lectures must have conveyed to you, the spirit of postcolonial studies has always been strongly informed by the desire to critique, question and dismantle the established, the mainstream, and the hegemonic. Now it is almost forty years since Edward Said's seminal text *Orientalism* was published and in these forty years the field of postcolonial studies which Said's text brought into being has itself become part of the academic establishment and to a large extent shapes the mainstream discourse within the field of humanities. In this lecture therefore I will try to apply the spirit of critical dismantling that informs postcolonial studies to the field of postcolonial studies itself and see if it can take us to a new ground.

Now as you might have noticed, the title of this lecture is "Postcolonial Futures". But according to some critics of postcolonial studies, the field has no future at all. Indeed, this death of postcolonial studies has been announced by no less a figure than Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who in 2013 relegated postcolonialism to the past. To quote Spivak, "I think postcolonial is the day before yesterday". Yet even after being renounced by Spivak, the term postcolonial keeps regularly appearing in the titles of academic journals, monographs and university courses, including this one. In fact, the book from which I borrowed Spivak's quotation is Ania Loomba's famous introduction to the field of postcolonial studies titled *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* which went into its third edition in 2015, just within seventeen years of its publication. Such continuing demand for introductory manuals and academic courses on postcolonial literary studies show that clearly the field is far from being dead. One

might even argue that each announcement of its demise has only led to a greater profusion of studies bearing the title postcolonialism.

So why is it that in spite of frequently being declared dead, postcolonial studies continue to remain a strong presence within the academia? Well, announcements of death of postcolonial studies are actually informed by deep-seated doubts and questions regarding what are considered by the criticising voice as the basic premises of this academic field. Yet, these questions and doubts, rather than making postcolonial studies irrelevant, merely help it mutate into newer forms. Indeed, postcolonial studies has not died because of this incredible mutability that it has proven itself capable of, and which has of course been helped by the sense of vagueness that surrounds almost every term associated with this field.

In all of my past lectures in this course I have tried to remove the vagueness that surrounds various terms associated with postcolonial literary studies so that you can have more clarity as a student, but in this lecture I would try and foreground this vagueness. This is because I think to understand the probable futures of postcolonial studies we need to know something about the transformative possibilities that these zones of vagueness hold out.

Colonialism

Let us start our enquiry with the term postcolonialism itself. Now if you go back to the initial lectures of this series where I was trying to define the term postcolonialism for you, you will see that I had deliberately limited the meaning of the term “colonialism” to take into account only that form of colonialism which was initiated by certain European countries since the sixteenth century, driven by the profit making imperatives of capitalism. Now if colonialism is to be defined as the forceful occupation of the land and resources of one group of people by another, then such practices had been continuing since long before the sixteenth century. So this very attempt to limit the term colonialism to signify a post-sixteenth century phenomenon

is ultimately arbitrary. But in my initial set of lectures, I had already alerted you to this arbitrariness. However, in these lectures I had also limited the use of the term colonialism in another arbitrary way, and I have not really spoken about it or drawn your attention to it. This is a zone of vagueness which I would like to comment upon now.

Well even if we chronologically limit our understanding of colonialism to being a post-sixteenth century phenomenon then you will know that this period has witnessed different kinds of colonialism by different European countries. Thus for instance the sixteenth century Spanish colonialism of Peru was markedly different from the eighteenth century British colonialism of India which in turn was quite different from the twentieth century Italian colonialism of Ethiopia. Yet as you will know, in this course whenever we have referred to colonialism we have disregarded this variety and have implicitly understood colonialism to mean just the British colonialism of the Indian subcontinent, Africa and the Caribbean islands. Such vague and indeed biased use of the term colonialism has been integral to the field of postcolonial studies in spite of the fact that Edward Said in his *Orientalism* has talked extensively of French colonialism and French colonial practices.

In their introduction to the book titled *Francophone Postcolonial Studies* published in 2014, the editors, Charles Forsdick and David Murphy notes this Anglophone bias and mentions it as the very factor which has led them to highlight the French or Francophone aspects of postcolonialism. Now, this is a major piece of criticism levelled against the vague and biased understanding of the term colonialism within the field of postcolonial studies. But this criticism has not made postcolonialism redundant. The field has merely transformed itself to now include various kinds of postcolonial studies, including Anglophone postcolonial studies, Francophone postcolonial studies, Lusophone postcolonial studies etc. Indeed, the term Postcolonial features very prominently in the title of Charles Forsdick and David Murphy's book.

Second Wave

The vagueness surrounding the use of the term colonialism has also another aspect to it. By limiting the use of the term colonialism to mean only British colonialism we have not really been able to focus on how colonialism is active even today, although the British Raj may well be over as a political entity. Here I am thinking of the actions of neo-colonial powers like America for instance, who continue subjugating vast parts of the world by economic as well as military means. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee in his book titled *Postcolonial Environments*, originally published in 2010, draws our attention to this continuation of colonialism when he says that “the ‘post’ in postcolonial marks not an end of colonialism, but an end of a particular mode of colonialism which then shifts its gears and evolves to another stage (obviously triggering a concomitant shift in the global struggles against it).” Here again, Mukherjee, by moving on to study the impact of this new form of colonialism on human and non-human aspects of the environment is not killing off the older form of postcolonial studies which primarily focussed on the discourse analysis of the European colonisers and texts of resistance emerging from the parts of the world once colonised by Europe. Rather Mukherjee’s intervention merely transforms the field of postcolonial studies by expanding its ambit. Indeed, Mukherjee identifies himself not as an anti- postcolonial critic but rather as a critic who represents what he calls the “second wave” of postcolonial studies.

Networks of Connection

Another problematic area which the critics of postcolonial studies regularly point out is the way this field constructs the Occident and the Orient as belligerent opposites. Such a world view, as the critics rightly argue, is a very simplistic understanding of the complex colonial reality. Not all Indians, for instance opposed the European colonial rule, nor did all Europeans support the project of colonial subjugation. A desire to recognise and address this issue has

again opened new research areas within the field of postcolonial studies, thereby transforming and expanding this field in new ways. For instance, new research has highlighted how sections of the subjugated population, including sections of middle-class nationalists, collaborated with the European colonisers to uphold and sustain the colonial rule. On the other hand, scholars like Leela Gandhi for instance have foregrounded how some Europeans collaborated with colonised subjects to form a united front against the colonial rule. So even though dismantling Eurocentrism still remains one of the central agendas of various postcolonial scholars, the field of postcolonial studies have gradually moved away from conceiving the relation between the West and the East merely in terms of antagonism and have become more aware of the various networks of connection that held together and indeed still holds together the subjugator and the subjugated within the frame of colonialism.

Role of Intellectual

Finally, I would like to comment on the role of the intellectual as conceived within the field of postcolonial studies. Here also we encounter a certain degree of vagueness which has opened up the field of postcolonial studies to some adverse criticism. Postcolonial studies, as you will know, emerged as a field of enquiry within English literary departments. This has meant that postcolonial studies had initially concerned itself with literary criticism and with discourse analysis. However, if we look at the career of Edward Said, the founding father of postcolonial studies we see that he was not only a literary critic but also a person who believed in engaging in direct political action. Indeed, one of the remarkable photographs we have of Edward Said is of him throwing a stone at an Israeli guardhouse to protest what he saw as Israel's hostile occupation of Palestinian land. Today Said is as much remembered as an activist as he is remembered as a literary critic. However, as Graham Huggan notes in his survey of the state of postcolonial studies in the introduction to his 2008 book *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies*, the value of literature has consistently gone

down within this field, while more active intervention has come to the foreground. We have seen examples of such active intervention by postcolonial scholars when we discussed Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work as a teacher among the landless villagers of West Bengal. But more recently, this has resulted in attempts by postcolonial scholars to rethink the value of literature vis-à-vis their socio-political activism. Huggan's own book *Interdisciplinary Measures* provides precisely such an attempt to make an argument for the value of literature in conceiving ethical action. To quote Huggan "Literature is a vital tool in what the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls the 'decolonisation of the mind'; in the continuing struggle to create new possibilities of thinking, as well as living, for previously exploited and dispossessed peoples, literature plays a formative role." Since we have mentioned Spivak as an example of a postcolonial critic who is known for her activism, it is worth noting here that Spivak's latest book *Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization*, published in 2012 also makes a strong case for literature and literary imagination as a basis for ethical action. So this reimagining of literature also presents itself as one of the many future directions which postcolonial studies might move towards.

With this we come to an end of our course on postcolonial literature. I hope you have enjoyed listening to the lectures, and more importantly I hope this course has been able to help you look at literature as well as to the world around you, which bears such indelible marks of colonialism, in a whole new light. Thank you for being with us through these lectures. Goodbye.