Positioning the Subject: Locating Postcolonial Studies

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SINCE THE VARIOUS English-language literatures produced by writers from the former British colonies began to make their impact on the curricula of English departments in the West during the 1960s, a variety of labels have been attached to these "New English Literatures," labels which continue to compete with each other to the present day.[1] However, in the last decade or so a new term entered the discussion that—with surprising rapidity—gained currency and acceptance not only in publications but also for the reorganization of English departments. "Postcolonial studies" is now a subject in which students of the humanities can specialize at an ever-growing number of universities in the West. Although the rapid advent and impact of this latest label has been impressive, its application has worried many scholars working in this field who are concerned about its specific effect on the ways in which the various English literatures are being studied and taught.

The first reservation that has been formulated against the use of this label is one that in fact applies to all umbrella terms for the various English literatures from the former British colonies—that is, it is dangerous to homogenize the experiences of colonization and the present status of the various former colonies within the world economy, which influences processes of production, circulation, and reception of these literatures. Many have argued that it is problematic to choose a term that covers up the differences between the so-called "white" settler colonies such as Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, on the one hand, and the so-called "black" colonies such as India, the various African coun-

ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature, 26:1, January 1995

tries, or the Caribbean countries, on the other. As Anne McClintock argues,

> the singular category "post-colonial" may license too readily a panoptic tendency to view the globe within generic abstractions voided of political nuance. The arcing panorama of the horizon becomes thereby so expansive that international imbalances in power remain effectively blurred. (86; see also Shohat)

Defining the literatures of these diverse areas as "postcolonial" is considered problematic for yet another reason. The term suggests a privileging of the relationship between the former colonies and the British imperial centre at the cost of a variety of power relations *within* the former colonies that can be accounted for only by studying these literatures within the specific cultural, political, and economic contexts from which they emerged. What about, critics have asked, the hierarchical relationships that exist between ethnic groups within the so-called settler colonies, the different political, economic, and cultural contexts of, for instance, the Maori in New Zealand, the Aborigines in Australia, those between black and white South African writers? And what about gender relations? Not only have men and women been affected differently by the experience of colonization but gender relations have been utilized on a discursive level to conceptualize the relationship between colonizers and colonized.[2] How have women responded to these discursively designed concepts of femininity, which are expressions of patriarchal societies and at the same time are interconnected intimately with the conceptualization of race relations? Or, finally, how to account for class/caste differences? The Subaltern Studies Group, for example, has set out to formulate a corrective to elitist nationalist Indian historiography in order to investigate afresh the ways in which subaltern classes were affected by and reacted towards the colonial encounter.[3] How have the subaltern classes been depicted in Indo-English literature, for example? To choose the label "postcolonial studies," the argument runs, invites neglect of these differences *between and within* the various former colonies, and thus precludes any accounting for their peculiarities. Instead, the term puts emphasis on what all postcolonial societies are said to share: the experience of coloniza-

tion. Some critics have gone a step further and argued that to speak of a postcolonial world not only implies that "fundamental issues—of periodization, social and linguistic formations, political and ideological struggles within the field of literary production" are being homogenized (Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric" 4)[4] but also, as Arun Mukherjee, for instance, suggests, that the various English literatures are in fact suspended in their oppositional relationship to the West:

> The postcolonial theorists' generalisations about "all" "postcolonial people" suggest that Third Worldism and/or nationalism bind the people of these societies in conflictless brotherhood, that the inequalities of caste and class do not exist in these societies and that their literary works are only about "resisting" or "subverting" the colonizers' discourses. ("First World" 27)

The third major reservation that has been formulated against the use of the label "postcolonial" is its alleged complicity in what is often loosely referred to as the postmodern.[5] Critics have pointed out that those texts that are singled out as representative postcolonial narratives tend to be texts that satisfy Western (postmodern) criteria of evaluation.[6] They are experimental, make extensive use of irony, resist closure, question traditional boundaries, employ intertextual strategies, etc. If a text produced by an author from a former British colony does not carry these attributes, if a writer, for instance, chooses to write in a realist rather than in an experimental mode, her/his text tends to be marginalized (see Glage). Postcolonial literatures are appropriated by the West, which, after having lost its trust in historical progress and having self-critically questioned its own master narratives, has now turned to an uncritical celebration of multiplicity and play. As Graham Huggan argues, "books and articles abound, many of them connected, in one way or another, with the booming 'alterity' industry. Indeed, postcolonialism seems in danger of becoming the latest orthodoxy of the fashionable Other" (130).

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Although I think that we need to take very seriously these reservations, a critique of the label "postcolonial literatures" requires

thinking about alternatives. Rather than to discuss the pros and cons of each of the various possible "compartmentalizations" that have been used through the years to refer to the study the various English literatures, I would like to draw attention to an aspect of this debate that I think needs addressing when we think about how to institutionalize this subject at universities. When scholars argue about the appropriate approach to the various English literatures, they engage in negotiating the demarcation of territories. The pertinent question seems to be how to define the terrain in the context of which we are to study postcolonial literatures. Do we need to study these literatures within the boundaries of the nation-state in which they have been produced? Or should we abandon the "outlived" concept of "national literatures" altogether, as Christopher Clausen has suggested, to make possible a "genuine multiculturalism in English literary studies" (61)?[7] Or, is it necessary to shatter and disintegrate this dream of a happy global family by emphasizing the divisions that exist within the world economy and accordingly to differentiate between First, Second, Third, and Fourth World literatures? I do not intend to argue here about the validity of establishing these diverse "borderlands." Nor do I want to contest the various theoretical and political implications that inform the insistence on such divisions. But the point I would like to make is that to opt for either of these categorizations is to engage inevitably in defining space and thus to ascribe identities to these territories. What I am worried about is a tendency in the discussion of the concept of "postcolonialism" not only to ignore that space as a defining category but also as a defined category, a construct.

This tendency, I think, finds expression in the ways in which some critics have dealt with "traitors." It has been emphasized repeatedly that scholars such as Helen Tiffin, Gareth Griffiths, Stephen Slemon, et al. who advertise a postcolonial stance are Second World critics who, on these grounds, are thought to develop theories that allow them to find acceptance in the West rather than to highlight their relationship to the so-called First Nations (Fourth World) or Third World countries. Third World critics, on the other hand, who live in the West and who engage

in the postcolonial debate, such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and others, are said to have been influenced by Western schools of thought, especially those of French poststructuralist origin. Both exile critics and writers, Kenneth Parker asserts, "are stigmatized as the bearers of all kinds of 'Eurocentric' baggage" (75), which disqualifies them from speaking about—let alone for—their countries (see Alcoff). I do not mean to question the need to reflect upon the political role of intellectuals, but the point I would like to make is that the (dis)location of a writer or critic continues to be used as a means to discard his or her writings. Such arguments assume that the location of a writer determines her/his outlook. They presuppose that identities are tied to space, and that a pure and authentic standpoint can be developed only if one remains rooted firmly within the territory of one's origin.

I argue here for the use of the label "postcolonial studies" for two reasons. First, although postcolonial theory by now denotes a development that has become extremely heterogeneous, one of its main achievements undoubtably has been to make us rethink the conceptualization of space and to recognize that space is a construct to which identities have been ascribed.[8] The consequences to be drawn from such insights are not to abandon boundaries and to celebrate a "genuine multiculturalism." Rather, this insight requires, secondly, an acknowledgement of the significant and determining function of borders. To quote Henry A. Giroux, who, by drawing on postcolonial theories, argues for an introduction of what he calls "border pedagogy":

> the category border signals in the metaphorical and literal sense how power is inscribed differently on the body, culture, history, space, land, and psyche. Borders elicit a recognition of those epistemological, political, cultural, and social margins that distinguish between "us and them," delineate zones of terror from locations that are safe, and create new cartographies of identity and difference. The concept of borders when defined as part of a politics of cultural difference can be used heuristically to make problematic specific authorial positions secured in monolithic views of culture, nationalism, and difference. (23)

I accept Giroux's concept of a border pedagogy and want to outline why I consider postcolonial studies appropriate for pro-

viding us with the necessary theoretical potential to pursue such a pedagogy. To explain this I address the reservations that have been formulated against postcolonial studies, as summarized above. I ask, first, whether it is justifiable to assume that postcolonial theory maintains an oppositional relationship between the centre and its (semi)peripheries and, secondly, whether it is valid to classify postcolonial literatures or criticism as innately postmodern. In order to reflect upon these problems I concentrate on the question of subjectivity. Postcolonial theory, I argue, has reformulated the postmodern notion of the subject by shifting our attention to processes of subject formation that are closely connected to the notion of space. I then return to the issue raised above, that is, how postcolonial theory has addressed the problem of defining space, the problem of positioning the subject.

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Postcolonial critics have set out to reassess and extend the theoretical paradigms underlying the concept of "Third World Literature."[9] Central to this reassessment is the notion of resistance, which has been based on various readings of Frantz Fanon's work. While Fanon assumed that the relationship between colonizers and colonized is marked by an inflexible and inevitable dichotomy between black and white, Europe and the "Wretched of the Earth," postcolonial critics have questioned this clear-cut opposition.[10] The idea that a postcolonial writer should formulate a corrective to the imperial versions of history and function as an educator for her or his own people is a demand perhaps most prominently formulated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and by Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike. In contrast to these authors, some postcolonial critics assert that postcolonial literatures are not to be read simply as a response to the West but instead as literary attempts at negotiating rather than defining differences. The analysis of postcolonial texts along these lines, Stephen Slemon argues, does not aim at identifying either a pure or genuine form of literary resistance ("Unsettling" 37). Such an attempt is considered problematic and exclusive, in that it implies that every postcolonial text is overtly

counter-discursive and that the relationship between colonizers and colonized is the only hierarchical relationship that must be resisted. In recent years, studies of colonial history have made us recognize the heterogeneity of colonialism, the different motives, for instance, of missionaries, colonial administrators, or merchants.[11] This development demands in turn an awareness and analysis of the fact that the responses of the colonized are equally heterogeneous. With her analysis of the conceptualization of the untouchable, Bakha, in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* (1935), Arun Mukherjee, for example, has highlighted the "complicity of [this novel] in hegemonic discourses" ("Exclusions" 44). Mukherjee illustrates how *Untouchable* is firmly rooted in the 1930s ideology of the dominant nationalist, Gandhian discourse on untouchability, which "denies the virulent critique of Gandhi and other leaders of the Indian National Congress made by untouchables" (39). What postcolonial critics have scrutinized are any forms of essentialist and globalizing theories. Rather than to situate postcolonial literatures in opposition to the West, they have set out to analyze how postcolonial literatures engage with and negotiate the dominant and conflicting discourses of colonialism, on the one hand, and nationalism, on the other.

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In order to illustrate further the theoretical assumptions on which such analyses are based, I want to argue here that postcolonial theory has reformulated the (post)modern notion of the subject by shifting our attention from the (fractured) Self to processes of subject formation.

Questioning the authority and universal validity of European knowledge is by no means a development peculiar to postcolonial critics or writers. In the wake of poststructuralist theory,[12] scholars in the West have come to consider the production of the so-called "grand narratives" as an essentially unstable and questionable encounter (see White, and Young). Calling down structuralist assumptions that language is a coherent system of meaning that can be decoded by analyzing the structure of oppositions within which it operates, poststructuralism demon-

strates that these oppositions are in fact rather vulnerable. Poststructuralist critics have deconstructed texts by foregrounding the instabilities of these systems of meaning. By arguing that discourses must operate with exclusions to defend their own validity and desired dominant position, postructuralist criticism draws our attention to the various blind spots or gaps within texts. This has led to an increased concern for the rehabilitation of marginalized groups or texts, a change in paradigm that has had a considerable impact on the restructuring of literary studies at our (i.e., Western) universities.

That this development has been observed with much reservation is due at least in part to poststructuralism's concept of the subject. The liberal humanist concept of the subject as autonomous and self-determined master of her or his own history already had been severely challenged by various theories developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[13] Yet in the context of these theories, the subject—however (over) determined—still remained "intact," that is, an identifiable whole that functions within society and could acquire at least a sense of identity. Poststructuralism, however, completely dispels the notion of the unified subject. The subject is now considered meaningless in itself, a mere cocoon, which, once opened, dissolves into a multiplicity of discursive facets. The subject does not speak, but is spoken by, language. The effect of such analyses is often to assign to the subject a position of passivity.

Although poststructuralist criticism effectively has revealed mechanisms of marginalization, the concept of the fractured self (that much-celebrated protagonist of our postmodern society) has at the same time worked towards fixing the marginalized Other in this silenced position (see Parry, "Problems"). The result has been a renewed increase in purely intrinsic analyses that indulged in finding the various gaps within a text. The interest in the silenced Other here amounted to no more than an enthusiastic acknowledgement of the Other's ungraspable existence.[14] It would be rather short-sighted, however, to reduce the developments within the humanities during the last three decades to this deconstructivist variation of poststructuralist thought. Postcolonial theory, along with other theoretical devel-

opments, such as feminist theory and the so-called New Historicism, re-introduced questions of politics into the postmodern debate, which has tended to concentrate on "multiplicity" and "play," replacing these with the concept of "difference" and the acknowledgement of "power-structures." The dilemma of the silenced Other has been confronted by ascribing agency to the subject, that is, by insisting that the subject *can* act. This is not to say that subject can determine its own position. Subject positions continue to be seen as constructs; but as agent the subject constantly acts out, reformulates, challenges, and potentially re-locates these constructs/discourses that assign to her or him a place from which to speak (see Sunder Rajan). With these developments, the question of "who I am" has been "deterritorialized," so to speak, has been re-moved by the question of how to locate oneself. bell hooks has described this process as follows:

> I have been working to change the way I speak and write, to incorporate in the manner of telling a sense of place, of not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from, the multiple voices within me. I have confronted silence, inarticulateness. When I say then, that these words emerge from suffering, I refer to that personal struggle to name that location from which I come to voice—that space of my theorizing.
>
> Often when the radical voice speaks about domination we are speaking to those who dominate. Their presence changes the nature and direction of our words. Language is a place of struggle. (146)

What hooks is suggesting here, it seems to me, is that the place inhabited by individuals is not simply an identifiable/authentic cultural or political locus that is somehow occupied, but rather a site of multiple and conflicting voices within which the individual is embedded. She is emphasizing the problematic process of positioning oneself within that realm of conflicting and hierarchical discourses that, more often than not, threaten to silence her altogether or claim authority to speak on her behalf rather than allow her to speak for her *Self*. But she is by no means dumb. However much she might be caught in this web of dominant discourses, she can and must speak. She is using the dominant language (English) to be heard, but by doing so struggles to develop her own language/voice in order to be recognized in the

First Place. It is *this* notion of resistance that lies at the heart of the postcolonial debate. Central for this reading of resistance is that it is based on the rejection of any notion of cultural purity and authenticity, which is necessarily essentialist and in the past served as a means to discriminate against those who have gone against the dominant grain, both on a national and international terrain.

To summarize my arguments thus far: while postcolonial critics have extended Third World theories and thus problematized the clear-cut opposition between colonizers and colonized, they at the same time have formulated a critique of the postmodern notion of the fractured subject. Postcolonial critics have developed reading strategies that shift our attention away from the analysis of cultural specificity and identity to ask how different culturally and politically induced processes of subject formation are negotiated—to ask how subjects act in relation to these hierarchically structured notions of identity, or, to use hooks's formulation again, to ask not just "who I am" but "where am I coming from." The clear-cut opposition between "us" and "them" has been challenged by arguing that subjectivity is constituted relationally within this field of tension. Accordingly, to argue for a de-territorialization of literature and/or the subject does not imply ignoring the peculiarity of the contexts in which these literatures/subjectivities are formed. Instead, it means to insist that peculiarity can be accounted for only by investigating the multiplicity and complexity of reactions that were developed in relation to what has been considered peculiar. One of the grand pecularities that has been used to distinguish people is the notion of identity.

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The notion of identity has been tied to nation in history, in literature, and in theory (see Bhabha). And, as Edward Said reminds us, "we are still the inheritors of that style by which one is defined by the nation, which in turn derives its authority from a supposedly unbroken tradition" (*Culture and Imperialism* xxviii). Essential for the notion of the national is its definition in opposition to the culturally Other. As Said argues, however, "all cultures

are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic" (xxix). Postcolonial studies have made a substantial contribution in revealing the notion of cultural purity as fictitious and in destabilizing notions of authenticity. This project does not deny the existence of boundaries and differences. On the contrary, it sets out to investigate the formation, function, and effects of territorial demarcations. In order to establish whether literature formulates resistance to, is subversive of, or complicit with the dominant discourses that seek to maintain authorial positions requires an analysis of the ways in which individual texts engage with and negotiate these positions.

In postcolonial studies we no longer find the various English literatures set against each other, organized in neat little compartments on a vertical scale of older/younger, mature/developing, First World/Third World, and so on. Rather, postcolonial critics aim at adopting a horizontal view to highlight the ways in which the experience of colonization has shaped modes of literary production/reception and subject positions formulated in narrative texts. Rather than dissect postcolonial texts into allegedly traditional and modern/Westernized elements, they draw our attention to what is new, that is, to the ways in which "East and West" have been merged to produce not "half-castes" but voices that demand the equality and acknowledgement of differences. Postcolonial critics thereby remind us that the relationship between the imperial centre and the various (semi)peripheries continues to be a hierarchical one. At the same time, however, they demonstrate that the marginalized Other has her or his own voice, which works towards subverting essentialist and unifying classifications. To quote Said once more:

> Gone are the binary oppositions dear to the nationalist and imperialist enterprise. Instead we begin to sense that old authority cannot simply be replaced by new authority, but that new alignments made across borders, types, nations, and essences are rapidly coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of *identity* that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism.
>
> (*Culture and Imperialism* xxviii)

However, as long as the clear-cut division between "us" and

"them" remains part of a powerful discourse that effectively functions as a means of exclusion and denigration (and, as I intended to point out in my introduction, there can be no doubt that it still does), we need to establish a pedagogy that, while demanding the equality and acknowledgement of differences, insists on foregrounding the complex histories and ongoing processes of demarcating these critical terrains. This cannot be achieved by abandoning the concept of national literatures altogether to enter a "genuine multiculturalism" nor by insisting on the maintenance of smaller units, as Arun Mukherjee seems to demand. Rather, postcolonial studies need to resist fixing postcolonial literatures to any particular terrain and, instead, to set out to analyze how these literatures acquire meaning in interaction with a variety of contested territories.

To give an example: When I teach Kamala Markandaya's well-known novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) here at Hannover University, I acquaint students with a variety of possible interactions with this narrative. First, I invite students to reflect upon how they respond to the novel, how this story opens up reader-positions that allow them, for example, to comprehend the depiction of women in this novel on the basis of what they have learned about Indian women through the media in Germany. The novel touches upon a variety of well-known topics that are covered in the media, such as arranged marriages, privileging sons while resenting daughters, the stigmatization of barren women, the dominant position of husband over wife, etc. I ask students to analyze the degree to which the narrative triggers off these preconceived notions of Indian womanhood, on the one hand, and how these aspects are dealt with and evaluated in the text, on the other. We compare our own readings with those of other Western literary scholars to find out whether our reactions to the text are typical. We then turn to the Indian context to study how *Nectar in a Sieve* has been received in India by mainstream Indo-English literary critics or, in comparison, by Indian feminist literary scholars. This allows us to gain an understanding of the significance of this novel within the Indian national context. Next, I draw students' attention to the variety of discourses that run through the novel. *Nectar in a Sieve*, for example, is interspersed with a national

discourse on gender that makes use of notions of femininity to negotiate cultural differences. Our task, once more, would be to study how the figure of Rukmani, for instance, is positioned in the novel in relation to the conflict between East and West, between life in a village and life in a city, etc. In other words, by drawing attention to subject positions we would be studying the ways in which this text acquires meaning between and within a variety of contested territories. Such an encounter with the novel makes students sensitive to a type of criticism that either celebrates this novel because it is thought to be "truly Indian" or dismisses it because it allegedly carries traces of an author who has become "too Westernized." It will become clear, instead, that the reactions to the novel reflect the ways in which it engages with a variety of national as well as inter-national zones of conflict.

With this example I hope to have illustrated—however sketchily—that "the notion of border pedagogy presupposes an acknowledgement of the shifting borders that both undermine and reterritorialize different configurations of culture, power, and knowledge" (Giroux 23). This, to me, is the task as well as the potential of "postcolonial studies."

NOTES

1 The label "Commonwealth literature," which dominated the discussion at the beginning, soon came under attack to give way—although still not everywhere—to alternatives such as "World Literatures Written in English," "New English Literatures," "Third World Literatures," etc.

2 See, for example, Mills; Sharpe; Mohanty; Spivak ("Three Women's Texts"); and Suleri. In recent years, a number of books have been published on the role of white women in a colonial setting. For a critical assessment of this development, see Haggis.

3 See, for example, Guha and Spivak. For a critical discussion of the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, see O'Hanlon.

4 Aijaz Ahmad's critique of postcolonial theory compiled in his *In Theory* (1992) has been discussed, for example, by Parry ("Aijaz Ahmad"), Brennan, Visser, and Durant.

5 Mishra and Hodge, in "What is Post(-)Colonialism?," therefore suggest distinguishing between oppositional and complicit postcolonialism.

6 For a very interesting discussion of the similarities between postmodernism and postcolonialism, see Hutcheon; Appiah; Slemon, "Modernism's Last Post"; and During.

7 I cannot restrain myself from commenting that Clausen's article is certainly one of the latest examples of how seriously we need to take the warnings of an undifferentiated integration of postcolonial literatures into Western curricula.

The author certainly needs to be invited to define his concept of "genuine multiculturalism."

[8] Edward Said's *Orientalism* in particular has been very influential for rethinking the conceptualization of space. See also Cosgrove and Daniels; Lowe; and Suleri.

[9] "The term Third World gained international currency in both academic and political contexts, particularly with reference to anti-nationalist movements of the fifties through the seventies as well as the political-economic analysis of dependency theory and world system theory (André Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin)" (Shohat 100). For a discussion of the term "Third World Literature," see also the debate between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad, which was started in *Social Text* in 1986 and has continued there and in other critical journals since, for example, *Social Text* 17 (1987) and *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 July 1992.

[10] An extensive discussion of Fanon's work would go beyond the scope of this paper. A summary of his theory of Third World literature can be found in Gugelberger. An investigation into the ways in which Fanon's theory has been employed and developed by postcolonial critics has been provided by Gates, Jr.; Parry ("Problems"); and Lazarus.

[11] The role of missionaries in particular has received considerable attention in recent years. See, for example, Ballhatchet for the Indian context, Gray for the African context, and Comaroff for the South African context.

[12] I am here using the term "poststructuralism" in a very general manner. For an introduction to the various poststructuralist approaches, see Norris; and Attridge, Bennington, and Young.

[13] I am thinking particularly of theories developed by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. See the discussions on the history of the notion of the subject in Grosz and in Keupp.

[14] Recent interpretations of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), for instance, clearly reflect this tendency. See, for example, Heath and D'Crux. In contrast, see, for example, Sharpe's reading of Forster's novel (chapter 5).

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