

Review Article¹

The Origins and Ends of Postcolonial Studies

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CURRENT CRITICAL CONSENSUS locates the genesis of “postcolonial studies” in 1978, with the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. The consensus — which is no doubt correct on this point — holds that Said subjected the extensive discourse that he called Orientalism to an original and skeptical scrutiny. In his generalized and sweeping account, Said revealed the intimate relationship between colonialism and European systems of knowledge that took Asia as their object.² *Orientalism* proved so influential that all existing species of area studies were discredited and a new academic field of inquiry — colonial discourse analysis and postcolonial studies — was born. The rest, one might say, is disciplinary history — the history of the discipline of “postcolonial studies” (which in loose usage has begun in more recent years to subsume the specialized field of colonial discourse analysis). To a greater or lesser degree, this conventional understanding of postcolonial studies — the notion that, at the very beginning of the discipline was the word as defined by Said, and the word, in a manner of speaking, was “orientalism” — finds reiteration in three recent books.

While *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* by Ania Loomba and *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* by Leela Gandhi largely undertake a review of postcolonial studies by referencing a variety of debates within the discipline, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* by Bart Moore-Gilbert is organized around the work of “the ‘Holy Trinity’ of postcolonial theorists” (1). Three chapters constitute the core of the book: one each devoted to Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha.

The remaining chapters aspire to synthesize Moore-Gilbert's critique of "the Holy Trinity" into a review of the same academic phenomenon examined in the other two books. Most often, Moore-Gilbert calls this phenomenon "postcolonial theory"; in the final chapter, however, the phrase "postcolonial studies" makes its telling appearance (185 and elsewhere). The slide from "theory" to "studies" suggests the true horizons of Moore-Gilbert's arguments.

In the context of his nevertheless more circumscribed approach (when compared to the other two books), Moore-Gilbert's aspirations to disciplinary stocktaking depend on the distinction between "postcolonial theory" and "postcolonial criticism." The distinction is full of possibilities and Moore-Gilbert makes persuasive use of them to reveal both similarities and differences. While "postcolonial theory . . . [is] work shaped primarily, or to a significant degree, by methodological affiliations to French 'high' theory," postcolonial criticism has its origins in an older model, the criticism of Commonwealth literature (1). Moore-Gilbert notes that the relationship between "postcolonial criticism" and "postcolonial theory" has often been contentious, even though both raise similar questions about the postcolonial. To illustrate this point, he compares Wilson Harris (postcolonial writer and critic) and Homi Bhabha (postcolonial theorist). Moore-Gilbert demonstrates that both Harris and Bhabha show an abiding interest in such issues as hybridity, indigenization, and mimicry, despite important differences in some of the conclusions reached by each (181-84).

The absence of a detailed discussion of the general meanings of "criticism" and "theory" is a curious oversight in a book so dependent on the terms. However, Moore-Gilbert's otherwise insightful account reveals criticism and theory to be differing institutional practices. The differences between the two terms allow him both to identify central themes in the cultural analysis of colonial history and to draw fresh attention to the institutional context of postcolonial theory. Thus, the adequacy of a "theoretical" approach is now affirmed and now questioned as the argument progresses to its conclusion through a series of comparisons. It must be said, though, that the many insights

enabled by this mode of presentation come at a certain price: the narrowly literary provenance of the argument is unmistakable. Were it not for the far more substantial ambitions of the three figures at the center of the book, or Moore-Gilbert's own recourse to a more general language of assessment and review in the concluding chapter, such narrowness would not be worthy of comment. As presently configured, the general scope of the book seems to kick against its particular argument.

Nevertheless, Moore-Gilbert's book is useful for its careful review of the work of Said and Bhabha. Here he follows in the wake of such critics as Benita Parry, Robert Young, and Aijaz Ahmad, responding to and expanding on their already elaborated critiques. Moore-Gilbert is less persuasive in the chapter on Spivak, where he emphasizes her feminism and deconstruction over her commitment to certain modes of Marxist analysis. Thus, he has no comments to offer on Spivak's important work on "value," derived from her continuing interest in Marxist political economy.³ While Moore-Gilbert devotes one section of the chapter on Spivak to deconstruction and another section to feminism, he does not allocate equivalent space to Spivak's engagement with Marxism. The effect is a general undervaluation of Marxist influence on "postcolonial studies." The representative Marxist figure in Moore-Gilbert's account is Aijaz Ahmad, and there is indeed an extensive treatment of Ahmad's critiques of postcolonialism. But given Ahmad's hostility to postcolonialism, Moore-Gilbert's account gives the perhaps unintended impression that Marxist analysis is external to and largely in conflict with postcolonial studies. At issue here is how to understand "postcolonialism" — is it a methodology or a set of issues? is it a "theory" or a field of "studies"? If postcolonialism is the latter rather than the former, it is difficult to see how Marxism must *necessarily* be external to postcolonial studies. If it is both, greater rigor is needed in making and maintaining the distinction between the two meanings. One of the bemusing aspects of postcolonial studies is a lack of clarity on this issue, which not only Moore-Gilbert but also Gandhi and Loomba leave undiscussed.

If it is problematic for a book on postcolonial theory to devote so little attention to Spivak's Marxism, it is also a problem that Moore-Gilbert generally ignores Spivak's significant interventions in "postcolonial" debates through her efforts at translating Mahasweta Devi from Bengali into English. Spivak has made these translations occasions for theoretical interventions, declaring for example in "The Politics of Translation" that "there is so much of the old colonial attitude, slightly displaced, at work in the translation racket" (187).⁴ Indeed, Spivak's commitment to the lowly practice of translation is so exceptional within "postcolonial studies" that it serves to draw attention to the general silence of the "vernacular" archive in theoretical pronouncements on "postcolonialism."⁵ Not only has the elaborate edifice of postcolonial studies been built almost exclusively on the support of archival resources in metropolitan languages like English and French, but the issue of the adequacy of these archives for the use to which they have been put has been broached too infrequently. One of the unfortunate consequences of Said's otherwise timely critique of area studies has been the concomitant devaluation of the kind of competency in non-metropolitan languages fostered, albeit for reasons not always approvable, by area studies.

At the end of his book, Moore-Gilbert confesses a suspicion that postcolonial theory has reached a point of exhaustion, "that the postcolonial 'moment' has been and gone" (185). It is a sentiment that finds a more muted expression in Leela Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory*. In the context of a discussion of "the critical mood of disaffection with 'identitarian' politics" she refers to "the pervasive postcolonial exhaustion with the mantric iteration of the embattled past" (128). The point is not made in the narrowly disciplinary context found in Moore-Gilbert, but if the past is lost to it, then what is left to orient the *postcolonial*? The question of the transcendence of the postcolonial cultural "moment" is implicit in the exhaustion that Gandhi explores in this section of her book.

In a lively argument marked by many such interrogative gestures, Leela Gandhi explicitly takes postcolonial studies as her subject and ranges over a much wider terrain than does Moore-

Gilbert. In her "Preface," Gandhi declares "little doubt that in its current mood postcolonial theory principally addresses the needs of the Western academy" (ix). And so the book sets out to review and assess postcolonial theory — her preferred locution is "postcolonial studies" or simply "postcolonialism" — within its Western academic context.

In some ways, Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory* proves idiosyncratic in the pursuit of this objective. Perhaps the most visible sign of this idiosyncrasy is her inflated evaluation of the influence of Gandhian thought in the constitution of "postcolonial theory" within the Western academy. Doubtless Gandhi is correct to draw attention to the difference that institutional location makes, by observing that "while it may be revolutionary to teach [M. K.] Gandhi as political theory in the Anglo-American academy, he is, and has always been, canonical in India" (ix). But when she writes "the careful retrieval of figures like Gandhi and Fanon is instructive to postcolonial theory," she misrepresents the vastly different valence of the two figures. Surely it cannot be a matter of dispute that M. K. Gandhi and Gandhism have received not even a fraction of the attention bestowed on Frantz Fanon and Fanonism within postcolonial theory. Why this is so is itself an issue worth addressing. Not only does Leela Gandhi forego such a discussion, but some of her other conclusions regarding Fanon and Gandhi also merit further reflection. When she refers to "their fierce and uncompromising rejection of all things European," her assessment seems debatable (22). After all, from a Gandhian perspective it may be argued that in fact Fanonism remains inextricably entangled in a web of European systems of knowledge (for example, psychoanalysis and Marxism). The indigenism behind Gandhi's rejection of the West plays little role in Fanon.

Nevertheless, Leela Gandhi's comparative discussion of Fanon and Gandhi, initiated in the first chapter, allows her subsequently to sketch the central themes of postcolonial studies in broad, useful strokes. In the three chapters that succeed the first, Gandhi locates postcolonial studies in its intellectual and institutional context. Beginning with the crisis in humanism and the advent of high theory in the metropolitan academy, she

proceeds to demarcate postcolonial studies as a discipline within what she felicitously calls the “new humanities” (academic disciplines which emerged out of the critique of humanism and Enlightenment reason). The chapter entitled “Edward Said and his critics” provides another good illustration of both the strengths and the weaknesses of Gandhi’s approach to the task of introducing postcolonial theory. It is in some ways as idiosyncratic a presentation as the discussion of Fanon and Gandhi in the first chapter. Her recuperation of Said as a poststructuralist thinker follows logically from her argument that postcolonial studies is part of the new humanities. Indeed, in some ways, it is crucial to her argument, for she too endorses the current critical consensus that the word at the beginning of postcolonial studies was Said’s. In the context of Gandhi’s argument, it follows that poststructuralism must be seen to mark unmistakably the original word. The problem with this characterization is that it ignores the residual humanism, noted by many commentators, that is also a significant aspect of *Orientalism*.⁶

Other chapters in Leela Gandhi’s book take up postcolonial studies in the context of feminism, nationalism, postnationalism, postcolonial literatures, and literary criticism. The final chapter is concerned with “the limits of postcolonial theory.” Here, she summarizes the organizing principle of her survey of postcolonialism:

In conclusion, it could be said that postcolonialism is caught between the politics of structure and totality on the one hand, and the politics of the fragment on the other. This is one way of suggesting that postcolonial theory is situated somewhere in the interstices between Marxism and postmodernism/poststructuralism. (167)

If the forceful pursuit of this thesis leads Gandhi to the kind of idiosyncratic presentation of material noted above, it also leads her to depart often from conventional treatments of postcolonial issues and materials and to attempt original and valuable interventions in contemporary postcolonial debates.

One of the marked features of the recent emergence and elaboration of postcolonial studies is the prominence of Indi-

ans within it. Two of the three central figures in Moore-Gilbert's book are Indian. Two of the three books under review here are by Indians. Further evidence: the covers of two of the books are graced (if that is the right word) by scenes from Indian colonial history! The peculiar indebtedness of postcolonial studies to Indian intellectual production has already been noted by Arif Dirlik, though there has not yet been an adequate accounting of the historical exigencies behind such indebtedness (Dirlik 340). To what extent is metropolitan postcolonial studies itself marked by post-independence academic developments and cultural life amongst the Indian intelligentsia? How has the inordinately large role played by the Indian colonial archive shaped the distinctive themes of postcolonial studies? Such questions are the converse of those regarding the location of postcolonial studies in the metropolitan academy; however, they are no less important than these other more frequently asked questions.

Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* does not attempt an answer to these questions regarding India's contribution to postcolonial studies. But it does begin with an instructive confession:

Of course, one's own disciplinary training or identity is bound to shape one's knowledge of the field [of postcolonial studies] — I felt myself turning to early modern Europe or to modern India for my examples. The point, however, is not that we need to know the entire historical and geographic diversity of colonialism in order to theorize, but rather, that we must build our theories with an awareness that such diversity exists, and not expand the local to the universal. (xvi)

To this might be added the following: it is also relevant to guard against — without subsequently dismissing the very notion of postcolonialism — the ways in which postcolonial studies as a field may uncritically transfer aspects of a local configuration to a much wider context.

Despite the many disclaimers, Loomba aims at a greater breadth in her survey of postcolonial studies than either Moore-Gilbert or Gandhi. This ambition is evident in her determined, though occasional, references to contexts other than

early modern Europe or modern India; several times, for example, she mentions South Africa. It may be that the careful and self-reflexive demarcation of her own disciplinary competence is the corollary to this greater ambition. In any event, Loomba begins by defining the fundamental terms of postcolonial studies, going indeed to the venerable horse's mouth, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to ferret out the layers of meaning behind the word "colonialism" (1-2). She then locates postcolonial studies within its institutional contexts, tracking the semantics of "postcolonialist" terminology through increasing layers of complexity, and stressing its indebtedness to poststructuralism at the same time that she compares it to such alternative methodologies as Marxism and feminism. Succeeding chapters are devoted to more specific debates regarding postcolonial identities and subjectivity and to a review of various challenges to colonialism.

Loomba's approach to the task before her is marked by a peculiar, if laudable, striving for objectivity. Virtually every point in her presentation, and every review of a controversy, seems to have two "hands" to it: if on the one hand Marxism has stressed too much the role of the economic in the study of colonialism, on the other hand it has proven "inspirational for many anti-colonial struggles" (20-22); if on the one hand "it is important to remember and acknowledge the enormous power and appeal of anticolonial nationalism," on the other hand the many exclusions of such a nationalism should also be remembered (197-9); if on the one hand "we can abandon the grand narratives which once dominated the writing of history," on the other hand we cannot abandon "all analysis of the *relationships* between different forces in society" (240-1; emphasis in the original).

This mode of presentation follows naturally from Loomba's apparent desire to produce a comprehensive survey of the field of postcolonial studies. But if on the one hand (we might say), this mode of presentation makes the book an admirable introduction to postcolonial studies, on the other hand it renders the overarching argument of her book unfortunately weak. Thus, in the conclusion to her discussion of grand narratives mentioned above, Loomba writes, "within the literary academy,

we often see a too-easy pluralism, where all theories are regarded as equally and unproblematically available for the scholar"; however, subsequently building on F. E. Mallon's suggestion that we need to maintain "'fertile tensions' between different theoretical approaches," she concludes, "this is a tall order, but if postcolonial studies demands both a revision of the past, and an analysis of our fast-changing present, then we cannot work with closed paradigms" (253-54). Since Loomba does not — indeed cannot, in the context of this book — prescribe a *particular* way of avoiding closed paradigms, it is difficult to see how her exhortation is different from the "too-easy pluralism" she excoriates.

The conclusion to Loomba's book cites Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential article on the writing of postcolonial history, invoking it for its suggestion that postcolonial forms of knowledge explore ways of returning the gaze that Eurocentric forms of knowledge have traditionally trained on the colonial and postcolonial world. Here Loomba's book echoes Leela Gandhi's, which also cites Chakrabarty in the conclusion. As much as literary criticism, the discipline of history has contributed significantly to the elaboration of a postcolonial studies. Especially influential in this regard has been the work of the Subaltern Studies group; both Gandhi and Loomba provide useful reviews of the contributions of the group, demonstrating how the work of such representative figures as Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee reveals the ways in which our history — the history of the globe — is (post)colonial.

In other respects, however, the conclusions of the books by Leela Gandhi and Ania Loomba echo Moore-Gilbert's suspicion of disciplinary exhaustion cited above and raise the question, even if only in my mind, of whether "postcolonial studies" itself may not be becoming history. For some time now, "globalization" has been looming ever larger on the intellectual horizon of the metropolitan academy. Something that might one day come to be called "globalization studies" is now in its most nascent stage. Since it, too, purports to take as one of its objects of inquiry what was once called the Third World, a nascent "globalization studies" represents a potent challenge to post-

colonial studies. It is fitting then that all three books under review have scattered remarks to offer on globalization in their conclusions. At the end of his book, Moore-Gilbert paraphrases Stuart Hall's fear

that the impasse which now besets the field [of postcolonial studies] derives from the failure of its practitioners to be sufficiently interdisciplinary, to move out from a focus on essentially literary concerns to engage with disciplines like economics and sociology, in particular, which are addressing the material practices and cultural consequences of globalization.

(186)

Leela Gandhi refers to "a growing body of academic work on globalisation" and notes that "this McDonald'sisation of the world demands postcolonial attention, for in some sense, colonialism was the historical harbinger of the fluid global circuits which now — so compellingly — characterise the discomfiting propinquities of modernity" (125). And Ania Loomba writes:

Even if postcolonial critics sometimes forget the links between the recasting of third world cultures and the spread of consumer capitalism, the *New York Times* does not . . . often globalisation is celebrated as the producer of a new and 'liberating' hybridity or multiculturalism, terms that now circulate to ratify the mish-mash of cultures generated by the near unipolar domination of the Western, particularly United States, media machine. In this situation, it is even more important for us to think about the relation of culture to economic and political structures. . . . (257)

Thus, in their final pages, Bart Moore-Gilbert, Leela Gandhi and Ania Loomba invoke globalization in different ways. In this context, it is worth inquiring into the ability of postcolonial studies, as it is presently constituted, to turn its attention to "globalization."

In its present form — and all three books surveyed here testify to this — academic postcolonialism is a strategy of reading. The methodologies widely, if problematically, recognized as distinctive of postcolonialism have been perfected over a textual terrain, the literary and historiographical archive of colonialism and its immediate aftermath. In this overwhelmingly textual context, it is not surprising that the most influential traditional disciplines contributing to postcolonial studies thus

far have been literary criticism and history. If the distinctive methodologies of postcolonial studies require an already existing archive, how will they respond to the still-unfolding challenges of globalization? The textual accounts of globalization are only now being produced, and it might very well be the case that the most interesting work with regard to formerly colonized societies might now come to be done in the social sciences, rather than in what Leela Gandhi calls the “new humanities.” Certainly, the most widely cited critical works on the cultural dimensions of globalization have been produced thus far by anthropologists and sociologists, for example, by Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large*. Will the challenges of globalization overwhelm the methodologies of “postcolonial studies”? Will these methodologies be rendered obsolete as globalization takes on a more and more urgent character? Or will globalization force fresh methodological innovations within postcolonial studies? Will it at least compel clarification of where academic postcolonialism is a set of issues, where it is a distinctive set of methodologies, and what relationship “issue” bears to “methodology”?

Despite the glancing nature of their engagement with “globalization,” it would be misleading to leave the impression that the writers under review are unaware of such questions. The inaugural issue of *Postcolonial Studies*, a journal co-edited by Leela Gandhi, carried two essays exploring precisely the relationship between globalization and postcolonialism and, by implicit extension, “globalization studies” and “postcolonial studies.” The lead essay was by Simon During, the response by Bart Moore-Gilbert. Although this is not the place to launch a detailed examination of these two essays, it should be noted that both essays touch on the adequacy of academic postcolonialism with regard to “globalization.”⁷

If the word at the beginning of postcolonial studies was Said’s particular notion of “Orientalism,” will the word at the end be “globalization?” Bart Moore-Gilbert might very well be correct in declaring in the essay cited above that “globalisation signals not so much the end of postcolonialism as new opportunities for it” (62). But the argument is yet to be concluded. It is ironic,

and also a testament to their astuteness, that three books setting out to summarize and assess the field of “postcolonial studies” — thus attesting as well as contributing to the institutional success of the discipline — simultaneously suggest such questions.

NOTES

- 1 Leela Gandhi. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. Pp. x, 200. \$ 42.50, \$17.50 pb.; Ania Loomba. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. New York: Routledge, 1998. Pp. xviii, 289. \$50, \$14.99 pb.; Bart Moore-Gilbert. *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*. New York: Verso, 1997. Pp. x, 243. \$60, \$19 pb.
- 2 The argument has been made that Said defines “Orientalism” in an unconventional way. See, for example, pages 75 to 77 in Leela Gandhi’s book.
- 3 See, for example, “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value” and “Post-structuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value.”
- 4 See also Spivak’s “Imperialism and Sexual Difference,” and the introduction to her translation of Mahasweta Devi’s story “Draupadi.”
- 5 Translation theory in the context of postcolonialism is a growing area of scholarship. See, for example, Tejaswini Niranjana, James Clifford, Harish Trivedi, Eric Cheyfitz, and the essays in the volume edited by Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier.
- 6 For a summary of this criticism see Moore-Gilbert’s *Postcolonial Theory* (40-53).
- 7 In this context, see also some of the essays in *The Cultures of Globalization*, edited by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi.

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