

Postcolonialism and Postcoloniality: A *Premortem* Prognosis

Narasingha P. Sil *

Postcolonialism as theory, contrasted with postcoloniality as reality, was born sometime during the earlier period of the Cold War that had developed Sphinx-like following the World War II announcing the death of Europe and the rise of two extra-European superpowers. Naturally, the end of the War also began a decade-long process of decolonization, marking the end of European political domination over most of Asia and Africa. The collapse of the continent that owned almost one half of the globe generated a profoundly unsettling soul-searching and re-examination of the values and norms of metropolitan civilization informed by the Enlightenment masculist and quasi-racist rationality, although a critique of Western bourgeois views and values dates back to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and later Rudolf Pannwitz (1881-1969), author of *The Crisis of European Culture* (1917), and Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), author of *The Decline of the West* (1918).

The arch-annihilator of Enlightenment rationality, a French phenomenon *par excellence*, is ironically a French intellectual, the Poitiers born Michel Foucault (1926-84), whose famous question “*What is this Reason that we use?*” in his essay titled deliberately “*What is Enlightenment?*” debunked the definition of the Enlightenment in the German *philosophe* Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) *Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784). The Enlightenment notion of the inevitability of civilizational progress predicated upon human rationality had dethroned Christian metaphysics, the very fulcrum of medieval European intellectual life, and propounded a new metaphysics—regime of reason. But the Cold War anti-rational postmodernism unhinged the hold of the metaphysics of reason and like Nietzsche’s God killed the sovereign autonomous individual. It also announced the death of centers, that is, all the organizing frameworks privileging various centers such as “anglocentrism,”

“Eurocentrism,” “ethnocentrism,” “androcentrism,” and “logocentrism.” These Enlightenment-based “isms” had formed as well as in-formed the metanarratives of Western civilization, the idea of progress, humanism, Liberalism, or Marxism.

However, the modern age, even the very concept of modernity, has been decried by the postmodernists, whom some scholars label occidentalists or West-bashers (Buruma and Margalit 2004: 1-12). These critics of Western civilization rightly maintain that modernity, which had once been a progressive force, has degenerated into a source of repression through its own creation: technology, consumerism, materialism, ideology, bureaucracy, the nation state, and other institutions and norms (See Washbrook 1997: 410-43). Postmodernists’ epistemological challenge debunks the certitudes of rationality in respect of apprehending or comprehending universal truths and underscores the utter impossibility to know them. One of the most famous postmodernist philosophers, Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), asserts that we are so influenced by different forms of media that the real has been lost forever. Ours is a culture of “hyperreality,” the real and the imagined have been confused (1998: 166-84). Out of this postmodern relativism or, as some skeptics quip “nihilism,” emerged postcolonialism as a branch of historical, anthropological, sociological, or cultural studies. Now let me provide a bit of the history of the emergence of postcolonial studies in the Western world.

II

During the interwar years (1919-39), European intellectuals became aware of challenges to European control and dominance from the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico, China, Morocco, and South Africa. They were also influenced by the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) which ideologically and openly opposed traditional European imperialism and colonialism and established global networks such as Communist International or the Third International or Comintern, founded in Moscow in March 1919, for the purpose of undermining the imperial system. Postcolonial studies developed from these earlier moments but it expanded in course of time. The Subaltern Studies Group (SSG), begun by the historian Ranajit Guha in India in the 1980s, was further enriched by amalgamating the perspectives and insights of Critical Studies pioneered by the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies and led by Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and above all, Stuart Hall. Cultural Studies scholars allied with postcolonial and subaltern theorists in Australia such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, and Ranajit Guha. This interesting academic

ensemble was further stimulated by feminist scholars, chiefly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The SSG collectives borrowed the ideas of Antonio Gramsci (1881-1937) and adopted his terminology, especially “hegemony” and the “subaltern”. They found in the Italian’s writings (mainly *The Prison Notebooks*) “theoretical modes of understanding applicable to the developing world, to feudal incrustations and religious backwardness, to weak and wavering bourgeoisies seeking ways to construct hegemony” (Brennan 2001: 147).

Since the late eighties and early nineties of the past century, postcolonial studies, a major branch of colonial discourse theory, has emerged as the site of both convergence and controversy in respect of a number of theories, descending from the late-nineteenth-century nationalisms and mid-twentieth-century third-worldisms (“tricontinentalism,” to borrow Robert Young’s term [2003: 16-20])¹, Marxism, neo-Marxism, poststructuralism, and a host of academic disciplines such as history, political science, sociology, anthropology, critical theory, and cultural studies (Washbrook 1999: 596-611). Couze Venn suggests that postcolonialism arose out of a host of theories or isms such as structuralism, poststructuralism, historicism, post-Marxism, and postmodernism that have contributed to its problematization of colonial discourse with its concept of “difference, modernity, globalization, dissidence, revolution, historical specificity, identity formations, and so on” (2000: 45-46). Consequently, it becomes difficult to ascertain the precise and proper content, scope, and relevance of postcolonial studies.²

While some scholars put emphasis on the “post” of postcolonialism and consider it as a temporal marker of the decolonizing process, others question the chronological separation between colonialism and its aftermath, claiming that postcoloniality (or postcolonial condition) had begun with colonization rather than after decolonization. Thus postcolonialism has a history of *longue durée* (“long perspective,” a phrase made famous by the historian of the *Annales* School Fernand Braudel, 1902-85). “The origins of postcolonialism,” Young writes, “lie in the historical resistance to colonial occupation and imperial control, the success of which then enabled a radical challenge to the political and conceptual structures of the systems on which such domination had been based” (2001: 60).

III

Postcolonial studies problematizes postcoloniality, which is characterized frequently by a desire on the part of the newly independent nation-states to forget the colonial past. This willful postcolonial amnesia springs from an urge for historical self-invention by way of eliding painful and shameful memories of colonial subordination. Franz Fanon, one of the major theorists to influence postcolonial studies, articulates a tragic profile and odyssey of the hybrid “other” in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967). In Homi Bhabha’s paraphrasing of Fanon’s use of the hybridization process is

a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once which makes it impossible for the devalued, insatiable évolué...to accept the coloniser’s identity: ‘You’re a doctor, a writer, a student, you’re *different*, you’re one of us’. It is precisely in that ambivalent use of ‘different’—to be different from those that are different makes you the same—that the Unconscious speaks of the form of Otherness, the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement (1994: 117).

Postcolonialism, according to Leela Gandhi, is “a disciplinary project devoted to the task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past” (1998: 4). It does so with a view to dealing with this past in order to surpass it to achieve a psychological recovery by suggesting an alternative culture, an alternative epistemology or system of knowledge. Thus amnesia (caused either by neurotic repression or *Vedrängung* or by psychotic repudiation or *Verwerfung*) is not a healthy cure from a painful memory which must be seen as a necessary bridge between colonialism and cultural identity. Remembering, Homi Bhabha argues, is “re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (1994: 63). This re-remembering makes it mandatory for postcoloniality to become complicit with the trials, terrors, and tribulations of its colonial past.

Thus postcolonial studies transforms the conflictual relationship between the past and present into a symbiotic relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. As the Tunisian born French intellectual Albert Memmi has written in the *Dominated Man: Notes Toward a Portrait*, the colonial condition “chained the colonizer and the colonized into an implacable dependence, moulded their respective characters and dictated their conduct” (1968: 45). This problematic coexistence of colonial past and the colonial aftermath of *in-dependence* (rather than simple “independence”) in the present poses a real challenge to the agonistic postcolonial theory predicated on the premise of an “implacable enmity between the native and the invader” (Parry 1987: 32). Bhabha reminds us that

resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or the exclusion of the “content” of another culture, as difference once perceived...[but] the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference. (1985: 153).

IV

In an intelligent and incisive study Vilashini Cooppan writes that the triumphant march of postcolonial studies in the American academy beginning with Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978 met with a mighty hurdle in 2000 the year of publication of *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2005: 80-100).³ Said’s *Orientalism* articulated the principal concerns of postcolonial studies such as colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism, whereas Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* announced the advent of a new phenomenon, “Empire,” created by globalization, that cuts across the territorializing impulses of colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism because “the fundamental principle of Empire is that its power has no actual and localizable terrain or center.” Empire, like Newtonian cosmos, has no center, and further, no bordered or bounded space; it is networked (www), always fluid and flowing—“a fundamentally new form of rule” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 384, 146).⁴ However, we ought to note an apparent paradox here; this new globalized Empire is of course the only Superpower of post-Cold War world, the United States of America, and yet not centered on its space but on the fluid flow of transnational capital. Nevertheless, the US as the postnational imperial power bears a tantalizingly intriguing imprint of an old one, the Roman Empire possessing, in the context of their times, overwhelming military, technological, and economic power, client states (the Barbarian lands for the Roman, and the Third World for the American), and multiethnic and-cultural societies. An article in the *New York Times* announced boldly and blandly a year after 911: “Today, America is no mere superpower or hegemon but a full-blown empire in the Roman and British sense” (cited in Cooppan 2005: 82).⁵

Let’s try to get a clearer view of this networked globalized world, the sphere of the so-called postnational Empire. In an interview with Kerry Chance of Bard College on 3 March 2001, Homi Bhabha explained the complex character of the currently burgeoning globalization by distinguishing it from internationalization. According to him, the forces of global inter-nationalisms such as international conventions, regional economic bodies, the European Union, international treaties, global economy, global media economy, accelerating

commodification and consumption, the cult or culture of goods *et cetera* are making for increasing globalization. The difference between internationalism and globalization has to do with speed, the extent of permeation, and the effect of the compromised sovereignty of national economies of the nation state itself.

Interestingly and ironically, globalization is also spawning its antithesis (so to speak), a kind of hyper nationalism such as genocidal nationalism caused by the structural deficiency of the newly emerging nation states following the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Then there is regionalism like Eurocentrism—not strictly nationalism, but rather xenophobia of a regional variety. Another kind of nationalism triggered by globalization comprises the nationalist movements of a peculiar kind. The obvious example of this type of nationalism is the Hindu nationalism in India—a truly hybrid form of nationalism in that it is based on a global, technological revolution, having as its subjects the whole groups of diasporic Indians and as its site of communication the ubiquitous Internet. This nationalism sees itself as a modern, global movement by demanding for a Hindu India—not exclusively religiously fundamentalist (except for a wing of Hindu zealots) but in general believing itself as the upholder of authentic Hindutva (the Hindu Essence) that is tolerant, quasi-secular displaying the authentic cultural temperament of India. So, though the Muslims are to be the second rate citizens of this Hindu India, they have nothing to fear as, according to the Hindu nationalists, Hinduism, really, is ecumenical—a broad church. The other extreme kind of fundamentalisms that are thriving at the same time as religious fundamentalists—Christian, Hindu, as well as Islamic—see themselves as international movements (Chance 2001).⁶ The postcolonialist and subalternist theoreticians and thinkers are buffeted by the crosscurrents of their nationalist and populist rhetoric and their undeclared elitist and agonistic professional imperatives in the agonistic academic sanctuaries (Needham and Sunder Rajan 2007).⁷

However, surpassing all these contradictions, globalization has generated two contrasting visions: an ongoing decolonization accompanied by its heterogenization of the globe with its claims of the local and the particular as well as a mega colonialism constructed by transnational capitalism's homogenizing *imperium*. Masao Miyoshi distinguishes between old colonialism operating “in the name of nation, ethnicities, and races” and a new colonialism operating through the transnational corporation and “tending toward nationlessness” (1993: 740, 747). Kanishka Chowdhury observes that contemporary critical theorists in the Anglo-American academe tend to valorize “global” or “transnational” metaphors to highlight the minorities' struggle for identity via postcolonial and postmodern

paradigms such as “disjuncture,” “hybridity,” “migrancy,” “vagrancy,” and “diaspora.” These minorities comprise “those who are completely outside the scope of the global economy, the marginal, the superexploited...rural poor, the landless laborers” of most of Africa, Asia, and South America (2002: 3 [webpage]).⁸

V

What would be the fate of postcolonial studies in this decentered, destabilized, deterritorialized, ever flowing, ever floating globalized world? Postcolonial studies is predicated on the nation-state and endeavors to understand national and global forms of domination and resistance. Following postmodernism, postcolonialism argues for “a politics of difference, fluidity, and hybridity in order to challenge the binaries and essentialism of modern sovereignty” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 138). The Empire of the globalized world, on the other hand, represents a version of postmodern sovereignty. In fact this Empire represents postmodern imperialism that operates not within a binary or dialectical structure but through the deterritorialized and diversified networks. Thus the “discipline” of postcolonial studies either has to reorient its methodology or develop a new theoretical framework to fathom the realities and complexities of contemporary global power.⁹

There is a further problem with postcolonial studies in the metropole. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has observed, and I cite him with approval, “postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery” (1991: 348). Indeed some of the leading postcolonial theorists in Anglo-American academe are of South Asian origin. Four of them—with the exception of Homi Bhabha, the “superstar of postcolonial studies,” and currently at Harvard, who studied at the Universities of Bombay and Oxford—Dipesh Chakrabarty of Chicago, who studied in India and Australia, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, University Professor at Columbia, who studied in India and the United States, and her colleague in the Anthropology department, the Political Scientist Partha Chatterjee, a completely home-grown historian, have had their undergraduate training at the Presidency College, Calcutta (incidentally my undergraduate *alma mater*, too). Chatterjee, truly a global academician, holds simultaneous positions at Columbia and the Center for Studies in the Social Sciences, the prestigious institution of Calcutta, where he is the director. The doyen of subaltern studies that has fueled the

postcolonial, the historian Ranajit Guha, also had his undergraduate training at the Presidency College, Calcutta, obtained his doctorate in the United Kingdom, worked in Australia, and retired in Austria where he currently resides in Vienna, Europe's most cosmopolitan city.

These peripatetic scholars—and to cite a few more distinguished names such as Arif Dirlik, Arjun Appadurai, Anthony Appiah, Aijaz Ahmad, Stuart Hall, Ali Mazrui, Edward Said, V.Y. Mudimbe, Lata Mani, Leela Desai, Ania Loomba, and Mrinalini Sinha—together with their colleagues from Africa and South America, have been trained in some of the most celebrated temples of learning in colonial and metropolitan countries, are well versed in Western languages and humanities, and social sciences, and have constructed their theories on those of Western intellectuals from France, Germany, U.K. and the U.S. Simon During has astutely observed that postcolonialism's critique “continues to be spoken through a Western lexicon and vocabulary” (Gandhi 1998: 175. See also During 1990: 135-53). I would even venture to suggest that none of these postcolonial theorists and writers have used any indigenous ur-texts of subalternity, postmodernism, or postcolonialism. Thus postcolonial studies *eo ipso* is a product of the West, informed as it is by the wisdom of the West and has been used by the post-colonial intellectuals and the literati of the diaspora against the West—a sort of bizarre Oedipus complex—seeking to debunk or destroy the spirit of the illegitimate Father who had raped the motherland of these militant and renegade sons (and daughters, to further complicate the “bizarre” reality of this Oedipus complex).¹⁰

VI

For a time this postcolonial scholarship thrived but now it must rearm or disarm itself to combat, comprehend, or cop out of the contemporary globalized, deterritorialized, and denationalized world that is under the thrall of a mega nation state, the single arbiter of its Empire. There is still another problem that postcolonialists must attend to. As Serap Türkman points out, postcolonialist scholars, including, surprisingly, those of the subaltern affiliation, tend to be elitist in that they—citing the example of a prominent member of that radical collective, Gayatri Spivak—consider themselves to be qualified enough to voice the concerns and aspirations of the subalterns who are not ready yet to stand for themselves. Such condescending and frankly elitist attitudes on the part of the intellectuals who profess to uphold the cause of the underdogs of society echo Marxist elitism in respect of the proletariat

and of the colonized subjects. To quote Türkman once again, “when we talk about the rights of those who cannot speak, we indirectly inscribe another stereotype too” (2003: 199).

Robert Young cautions that

colonial discourse analysis as a general method has reached a stage where it is itself in danger of becoming oddly stagnated....We have reached something of an impasse with regard to the theoretical questions raised in the study of colonial discourse and this has meant certain complacency about or neglect of the problems of the methodologies that have been developed. In other words we have stopped asking questions about the limits and boundaries of our own assumptions” (2001: 78 cited in Türkmen 2003: 199).

This degeneration into academic *hubris* appears to be the expected evolution of a bunch of brilliant, relatively young but uncertain maverick scholars of the 1980s into established dons of the colleges and universities of the First World wielding enormous influence over the curricula and of graduate programs in the humanities and the social science departments in their respective institutions. Quite naturally the acuity and power of the intellect of the erstwhile renegades have been blunted by their acquisition of vested interests in the academe.

VII

In conclusion let me provide, even at the risk of being gratuitous, some vignettes of our contemporary networked, wired, and somewhat weird heterotopia that is subsuming, even subverting, traditional national or ethnic cultures and identities. Contrary to the chauvinistic Western attitudes to the cultural practices of the colonials in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the globalized *fin-de-siècle* and the twenty-first century multicultural world is witnessing a strange process of appropriation and representation. I present a single but singular instance of this phenomenon. It has to do with the metamorphosis of the popular Hindu goddess Kali.

Despite the fact she has inspired intellectual as well as devotional inspiration among some scholars in the West, the goddess has gone global and postmodern, and eschewing her traditional abode in the cremation ground of Bengal, reincarnated in computerized graphics in Indian films.¹¹ Surprisingly, she now floats freely in the cyberspace or poses as a pin-up girl on the cover of some new age pop videocassettes. Kali has become the patron deity of some

postmodernist devotees whose idealized representation of the dark goddess reveals the extent to which the homogenizing trend of the globalized world could result in an easy cross-fertilization between piety and pornography. Kali's traditional iconic representation in India is that of a dark-skinned naked woman with four hands— two offering blessings and security, one holding the severed head of a male demon, and another her curved scimitar—wearing a garland of severed heads of demons and standing atop her divine consort, the drug-addict Shiva, lying on the cremation ground. The cover of a videocassette titled “The Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop or How to be a Sex Goddess in 101 Easy Steps” depicts Kali as a lusty buxom belle with Mediterranean features possessing six hands (in place of Four) holding sex toys including an oversize dildo (*Tantra* 1992: 85 cited in MsDermott 1996: 1). This lusty beast of the East is being worshipped as a porn divinity in some websites (*Tantra* 1994: 56 cited in McDermott 1996: 11).

This, then, is our postcolonial, postmodern, post-Cold War globalized world, where all binaries, boundaries, and barriers are melting down, all ideologies and identities have become flotsam and jetsam of interfaces and imbrications, a world, where, to quote John Donne (1572-1631), “It's all in pieces, all coherence gone” (1611), or where, to quote William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), “The best lack all convictions, while the worst are full of passionate intensity” (1920). Postcolonialists, the beleaguered nomads on this globalized planet must either drive themselves underground or strive to either reform or re-form themselves to cope with the conundrum of neo-imperialism. I conclude with two optimistic suggestions that might reverse the odyssey of postcolonial studies. Ali Behdad believes that “postcolonialism can offer a historical corrective to the celebratory theories of globalization” by exploring “the unequal geography of globalization and its historical links with European colonialism and the process of decolonization” with a view to providing “a critical genealogy to explicate the political shift from European colonialism to US imperialism” (2005: 77). Couze Venn postulates a hopeful future for postcolonial critique in a new emancipatory project to usher in a transcolonial and transmodern just world characterized by “a critical cosmopolitanism that imagines a future founded on respect for the singularity of the other.” This brave new world will be a far cry from the current globalized empire of neo-liberal capitalism. It promises to be a habitat for humanity resting “on an ontology that prioritizes both commonality and singularity” (2006: 170-71).

NOTES

* Dr. Narasingha P. Sil, *Professor of History*, Western Oregon University

¹ The phrase “Third World” was coined by the French demographer and anthropologist Alfred Sauvy (1898-1990) in an article in *L’Observateur* (14 August 1952) in which he commented on the “*ignore, exploité, méprisé*,” [“ignored, exploited, scorned”] *Tiers Monde* [Third World] that “*veut lui aussi, être quelque*” [“wishes to become something”] like the *Tiers Etat* [Third Estate], *a la Abbé Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès* (1748-1836), *Qu’est-ce que le tiers état?* [What is the Third Estate?] (1789).

² Stephen Slemon views postcolonialism “as a subset of both postmodernism and post-structuralism” and “a name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings” and “as an oppositional form of reading practice” (1999: 45)

³ The rest of Section IV of my paper draws partly on Dr. Cooppan’s analysis. See also Said (1978); Hardt and Negri (2000).

⁴ Admittedly, the European colonial empires operated in a globalizing world in many ways. See the Introduction in Hall and Rose (2006: 1-31).

⁵ See, especially, Clark (2004:181-315); Mann (2003). Michael Ignatieff, however, regards the American empire as “imperialism lite” (2003) or, in Jackie Assayag’s paraphrasing, “a hegemony without colonies, a global sphere of influence relieved of the weight of direct administration and of the risks entailed in the day to day management of politics” (2007: 262-63).

⁶ See www.bard.edu/hrp/resource_pdfs/chance.hbhabha.pdf

⁷ See some of the contributions, especially the bellicose piece of the well-paid and well-placed gadfly of India, the anti-postcolonialist intellectual Ashis Nandy, on pp. 107-17.

⁸ <http://eserver.or/clogic/2002/chowdhury.html>

⁹ See, especially, Chowdhury’s critique of Bhabha’s concept of hybridity in “Globalization and Ideologies of Postnationalism and Hybridity” (2002: 5-6 [webpages]). For “postmodern imperialism” see Venn (2006: 179).

¹⁰ Admittedly, there are exceptions—such as some native Western “third-worlders” of the academe who join ranks with their cohorts from the postcolonies and the diaspora. I borrow the term “postcolony” from Mbembe 2001. See also Buruma and Margalit 2004:143: “Most revolts against Western imperialism, and its local offshoots, borrowed heavily from Western ideas.”

¹¹ See the South Indian film director Kodi Ramakrishna’s *Ammoru* (1995) or *Devi* (1999) (not to be confused with Satyajit Ray’s film of 1960 bearing the same title). See also Smith (2003: 133). For a balanced and judicious estimate of Kali see David Nelson, *alias* Devadatta Kali (2003) and “The Many Faces of Kali” in (<http://hindusaktha.freeservers.com/facesofmaa.html>).

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