



THEORIES OF COLONIAL DISCOURSES

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ABSTRACT:

The two areas of intellectual study: Commonwealth Literature and the Theories of Colonial Discourse have influenced the context of postcolonialism. Many agreed that the 'novel' ideas and new 'interpretations of life' in Commonwealth Literature and Colonial Discourses owed much to the ways that writers were forging their own sense of national and cultural identity. Just as the idea of a Commonwealth of Nations suggested a diverse community with a common set of concerns, Commonwealth Literature and Colonial Discourses, whether produced in India, Australia or Caribbean was assumed to reach across national borders and deal with universal concerns and their best writing possessed the power of transcending them too. Critics like Jeffers and Walsh assisted in ensuring that these literatures were major fields that merited serious attention on the same criteria as the 'classics' of English literature. The first side of this philanthropic spirit of studying the Commonwealth Literature and Colonial Discourses, the paraphernalia of postcolonialism concentrated more on the nature of exploitation and dependence. In the late 1970's and 1980's, many critics obliterated the liberal bias and started reading literatures in new ways. This attempt produced theories of 'colonial discourses', often thought as an antecedent of postcolonialism.

Key Words: Colonialism, Commonwealth Literature, Colonial Discourses, Postcolonialism

Theories of colonial discourse have been largely responsible for the development of postcolonialism. They attempt to explore the representations and

modes of perception that are widely used by the colonial agent to keep the colonized people subservient to colonial rule. Abdul Jan Mohammad [1985:12] formulates this in terms of binary or 'Manichean' code of recognition which underlines colonialism's domination of the other. This consists of a series of fixed oppositions such as self/other, white/black, good/evil, rationality/sensuality, master/slave, subject/object etc. These ways of perceiving specific modes of understanding the world and one's place in it are at the root of the study of colonial discourses. Under colonialism, the colonized subjects are made subservient to the truest world-views and value-systems of the colonial power through the internalization of the education system, precisely language. The colonial power distorts and disfigures the identity of the colonized, making him feel inferior and dependent from which he must be rescued. The colonial power internalizes its own set-values and cultural heritage. Frantz Fanon is an important figure in the field of postcolonialism. He was born in 1925 in France. He suffered heavily the notions of colonial exploitation, recorded the psychological damage suffered by colonized people who internalized colonial discourses. His work includes two polemical books- *Black Skin, White Masks* (trans. Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto [1952] 1986) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Constance Farrington, Penguin [1961] 1967). The former explains the consequences of identity formation for the colonized subject who is forced to regard himself as 'other'. Negro remains 'other' to all qualities against which colonizing people derive their superiority. "The White World", writes Fanon [1952, 1986:114], "the only honourable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a Black man". He remembers in the chapter, '*The Fact of Blackness*' how he felt when in France, white strangers pointed at him as 'look a negro!'. He writes [1952, 1986:112-13]:

On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spitted my whole body with black blood? But I did not want this revision, this thematisation. All I wanted

was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come to lithe and young into a world that was ours and help to build it together.

Among many a domain instrumental in strengthening the colonial impact on the indigenous properties by force and physical coercion, language played an important role which comprises a set of beliefs to which the colonized people were subjected. As Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson [1994:3] explain, 'colonialism (like its counterpart, racism), then, is an operation of discourse, and an operation of discourses it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation'. The representation of the colonized subjects in colonial discourse is an outcome of an ideology that perpetuates the colonizer's notion to regard the colonized as the 'other', enabling him to derive a new sense of self-worth through their participation in the 'furthering' the progress of civilization.

Reading literatures in the context of colonial discourses refuses the humanistic assumption that literary texts exist above and beyond their historical contexts. It situates texts in history by exposing how historical contexts influence their historical moment. In the wake of postcolonial studies, Edward Said's '*Orientalism*' (1978) is considered influential. He looked at the divisive relationship between the colonizer and the colonized but from a different angle. Drawing upon developments in Marxist theories of power, especially the political philosophy of the Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci and France's Michel Foucault, Said asserted that the production of knowledge by the Western imperial powers in the colonies helped them continually to justify their subjugation. He opined that they spent immense time in producing knowledge about the locations they dominated and hardly ever tried to learn about them. The Western representation of Egypt and Middle East, in a variety of writing materials is a cursory sum of their propagandistic attitude. The 'Orient' is a collective noun Said uses to refer to the sum of West's representation of the places like North African and Middle East. Even after decolonization of the former colonies, he argues, how *Orientalism* still survives even today in Western media reports of Eastern, especially Arab lands. One of the fundamental views Said expresses is its binary division it makes between the Orient and the Occident. Each is assumed to exist against the other. The Orient is conceived as

everything that West is not, its 'alter-ego'. The Orient is frequently described in a series of derogatory terms to buttress a Western notion of superiority and strength. The West is considered to be a vital seat of knowledge and learning while the Orient, a place of exoticism, moral laxity, sexual degeneracy and so forth. David Richard [1994:289] writes, 'the representation of other cultures invariably entails the presentation of self-portraits, in that those people who are observed are overshadowed or eclipsed by the observer'. Said's critique of the machinery of colonialism is anticipated by the Foucaultian view of tracing the connections between the production of knowledge and the exercise of power. It also inaugurates the use of literary material to discuss historical and epistemological processes. Said's use of culture and knowledge to interrogate colonial power initiated colonial discourse analysis, as claimed by Said, traces connections between the centre and the marginalized, the real and the hidden. It allows us to see how power interplays through language, literature, culture and the institutions which channelize our daily lives. Said's basic thesis is that *Orientalism* was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structures promoted a binary oppositions between the familiar (Europe, the West, us) and the strange (the 'Orient, the East and them'). Since the inception of *Orientalism*, colonial discourses have analyzed a wide range of cultural texts and practices such as art, cinema, scientific systems, medical practices, geology, educational institutions etc. according to R. Young [1990:11], "colonial discourse analysis forms the point of questioning of Western Knowledges Categories and Assumptions". Despite of the enormous popularity, *Orientalism* evoked hostility and much criticism among many Western intellectuals. Said's binary divisions of East and West praxis has been a more or less static feature of Western discourses from Classical Greece to the present day. Said's work is seen to flatten historical nuances into a fixed East versus West divide", writes Ajaz Ahmed [1983:183]. He [1992:3-25] also accuses Said of homogenizing the West in that he does not connect Orientalists' knowledge production to colonial history and its connections with the development of colonialism. Critics have also pointed out that Said's analysis concentrates almost exclusively on canonical Western literary texts. Radically more frequent charge, Ajaz Ahmed [1983:200] views, is

that Said ignores the self-representations of the colonized and focuses on the imposition of colonial power rather than on resistance to it. He promotes a static model of colonial relations in which 'colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer and therefore there is no room for negotiation or change.

Like Said, Bhabha has become one of the leading voices in the study of postcolonialism since 1980. Bhabha's work seems to be incomprehensible due to his complex writing style. ArifDirlik[1994:328-56] argues that Bhabha is 'something of a master of political mystification and theoretical obfuscation'. He was inspired by the monumental works of Sigmund Freud on psychoanalysis and the poststructuralist Jacques Lacan, and Frantz Fanon. His essays of *'Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse* and *'The Other Question: Stereotyped, Discrimination and Discourse of Colonialism* construct a working knowledge of his concepts of 'ambivalence' and 'mimicry in the operation of colonial discourses'. "The objective of colonial discourse," Bhabha writes [1994:70], "is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction". Bhabha argues that the emergence of colonial stereotypes that represent colonized peoples has never been fully met with, since it does not function according to its plan because of its dualistic patterns. The colonized subjects in the discourse of colonialism are radically strange creatures whose eccentric and barbaric nature is the cause for both curiosity and concern. At another level, the discourse of colonialism attempts to domesticate colonized subjects and abolition of their radical 'otherness' bringing them inside the western set-up through the Orientalists' project of constructing knowledge about them. He writes, "colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once and "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible". Echoing Said's arguments that Western representations of the East are based primarily on the fantasies, desires and imaginings, Bhabha [1994:72] points out that the discourse of colonialism is frequently populated with terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy. His *'Discourse of Colonialism'* is characterized by both ambivalence and anxious repetition. In his essay, *"Of Mimicry and Man"*, Bhabha explores how the ambivalence of the colonized

subjects becomes a direct threat to the authority of the colonizers through the effect of mimicry. He [1994:82] defines mimicry as, "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge". He pointed out that in colonized nations like India, the British authorities required native people to work on their behalf and thus internalized the English language. Macaulay's [1835, 1995:] infamous 'Minutes' on Indian Education is an indictment towards the need to create a class of Indians capable of taking on English opinions, morals and intellect. These 'Mimic Men' as described by Fanon are to be anglicized not to be English. The ambivalent position of the colonized mimic men in relation to the colonizers- 'almost the same but not quite', is, according to Bhabha, is a source of anti-colonial resistance. It presents an unconquerable challenge to the entire structure of the discourse of colonialism.

Like Said and Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak too questions the Western domination but from a different perspective. Hers is a feminist deconstructive approach that questions West's predominant discourse in the 1970's and 1980's. Herself a 'Marxist-feminist-deconstructionist, she is critical of the imperialistic' neo-capitalistic market strategies used by the west to control' manipulate and exploit the Third World population. Her numerous essays and reflections analyze the double-bondage of women in the colonial and patriarchal system. She relates diverse aspects of the third world population to analyze the causes and features of the condition of exploitation. Like the 'Materialist feminists', as some of the Marxist feminist such as Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt are called, Spivak related the problems of women's oppression in patriarchal system with those of economic and political systems and manipulations. Her close reading and translation of '*Of Grammatology*' (1976) helped her to adopt the deconstructive method to examine the western intellectual discourse and the cultural institutions of the two worlds interrogated within the framework of international capitalism. After having experienced as an immigrant Asian and a woman, she experiences an element of marginality in the context of Euro-centric intellectual and cultural hegemony. She makes her experience of marginality a location, from which she can examine and deconstruct the West's domination. In her essay, Spivak [1979:107] introspects her marginalized stance in the words

as, 'the putative centre welcomes selective inhabitants of the margin in order to better to exclude the margin'. Spivak [1979:104] maintains that both deconstruction and feminism have the common cause of 'paying attention to marginality because of 'a suspicion that what is at the center often hides a repression. Learned from Jacques Derrida's handling of a texture of language to a re-reading of a textual production, she says [1979:105], "that every textual production of every explanation, there is the itinerary of a constantly thwarted desire to make the text explain. She is critical of the First world's construction of explanation /knowledge to explain the 'other', in explaining the 'other' postcolonial world, for she writes [1979:105], "in explaining the 'other/world, we exclude the possibility of the radically heterogeneous'. Dissatisfied with the gradual decline of humanities in the universities because of the capitalist control over most social, cultural institutions including education, she [1979:107] points out that the humanities are required to produce the culture that will describe and make neo-capitalism acceptable to the masses in the First and Third Worlds. The production of knowledge has a clear purpose aiming to justify and popularize 'explain' the culture of consumerism, high-fashion and advancing technology. Spivak and other postcolonial critics maintain that the construction of knowledge in the metropolitan centers and the Western universities produce a specific type of culture. And this culture describes, defines and shapes the scholars. She maintains the need for rethinking of the concepts like selfhood, culture and national identity. The 'official explanations, aligned with power imposing status of the 'other' on those on the margin, follow the requirements of the power emphasizing continuity or discontinuity with past explanations, depending on a seemingly judicious choice permitted by the play of their power'. In producing these official explanations, 'we reproduce' she writes [1979:108], 'structures of possibility of a knowledge whose effect is that very structure'. 'We (The Third World scholars who study the knowledge produced by the First World Academy), 'are a part of the records we keep', and "...we are written into the texts of technology. These effects upon us of the close adherence to the knowledge produced elsewhere emphasize the 'complicity' and the 'surrender' to the controlling power of neo-capitalism. Spivak's writing is a commentary on the

First World's practice of imposing its political power over the Third world through indirect strategies like education, mass-media and market forces. It is this that strengthened its power.

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