



OPPRESSION OF THE SUBALTERNS IN POSTCOLONIALISM

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INTRODUCTION:

Post-colonialism is critical theoretical movement which emerged in arts and humanities and has a defining impact on the anthropological mode of understanding of indigenous people. The theory emphasized to interpret and critic the culture of colonialism and imperialism and is product of resistance to colonialism and imperialism. Postcolonial theory seeks to investigate what happens when two cultures clash and one of them considers itself as superior and assumes dominance and control over the other. The foundation of postcolonial movement have lasting impact on several disciplines like literature, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, comparative religion and regional studies etc.

Postcolonialism is critical theoretical movement which emerged in arts and humanities and has a defining impact on the anthropological mode of understanding of indigenous people. The theory emphasized to interpret and critic the culture of colonialism and imperialism and is product of resistance to colonialism and imperialism. The Postcolonialism can trace its beginning in the movements against colonial empires; the leaders who were the fountainhead against these movements shaped the discourse of anti-empire sentiment and language of resistance. Franz Fanon, Mahatma Gandhi, Aime Cesaire and Albert Memmi were thinkers who anticipated the present understanding of postcolonial thinking. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is considered founding text and source book for the postcolonial studies. This book directs its attention to the discursive and textual production of colonial meanings and consolidation of colonial power. Homi K. Bhabha is a cultural critic and one of the leading postcolonial theorists who reflect upon the question of rendering natives marginalized without any agency and identity of their own and the misrepresentation of native culture and distortion of native subjects has been crucial issue. Gayatri C. Spivak is a radical postcolonial literary critic who in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" theorizes 'epistemic violence' of colonization.

Subaltern: In literature, the term "subaltern" is used to describe marginalized or oppressed groups of people, often from lower social classes. The term is often used in postcolonial theory and studies.

In postcolonial studies and in critical theory, subalterns are the colonial populations who are socially, politically, and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power of an imperial colony and from the metropolitan homeland of an empire. Antonio Gramsci coined the term *subaltern* to identify the cultural hegemony that excludes and displaces specific people and social groups from the socio-economic institutions of society, in order to deny their agency and voices in colonial politics. The terms *subaltern* and *subaltern studies* entered the vocabulary of post-colonial studies through the works of the Subaltern Studies Group of historians who explored the political-actor role of the common people

who constitute the mass population, rather than re-explore the political-actor roles of the social and economic elites in the history of India.

Postcolonialism: Definition

The postcolonial can simply mean after colonialism. However, what should be called postcolonial has become a contested idea. The colonialism refers to physical occupation of one land by people associated with another place. This involves settlement of colonies and agriculture and industry building etc. The term imperialism is used to refer to removal of resources and wealth of any area without actual settlement.

Postcolonialism: Beginning

The post-colonialism can trace its beginning in the movements against colonial empires; the leaders who were the fountainhead against these movements shaped the discourse of anti-empire sentiment and language of resistance. The Algerian national Franz Fanon was most important among them and he is widely regarded as the founding stone of postcolonial thinking in west.

Franz Fanon was born in a French colony in Caribbean called Martinique. He wrote *Black Skin White Mask* to explore the experiences of black people in French colonies; in Caribbean, in France and in conflict ridden Algeria. He examines the role of racial features in shaping of life of people in colonies. He has experienced the exploitation and suffering of black race that live with a sense of inferiority in colonies. He discusses the attempt of black native elites to internalize the colonial norms and values and failure to change the skin colour which is black. The native surrenders to the will of white masters and only way to emancipate them were to hide behind white mask as their skin cannot be white. The black elites have to wear white mask to get recognition from outside or sometimes even from themselves as peer social groups in colonies. His work brings in the dialectical and psychological dimension of making of black people as 'negro' and as 'others' and its traumatizing effects on the human psyche. He proposes for the unmasking of black men and women from white ideology and constructing their own identity-free from white norms and values as the primary way of emancipation.

His other important works like *Dying Colonialism* and *Wretched of the Earth* are call for decolonization and are situated within his moral commitment to bring equal rights and recognition to every human being. In *Dying Colonialism* he describes the Algerian revolutionary movements and tactics deployed by Algerians against the colonizers. In *Wretched of the Earth* he recommends the revolutionary path decolonizing nation must take to rid themselves of colonizers. He believes in the participation of local masses in black revolution against colonizers and use of violence in decolonization process. His agenda of violence is about throwing it back to the colonizers who have used violence for colonization.

Mahatma Gandhi who was negotiating freedom from colonial regime in Indian subcontinent wrote *Hind Swaraj (1909)* which can be taken as one of the earliest critic of colonial power. It is very important declaration of self-rule and rejection of western centric notion of civilization. It emphasizes the virtue of Indian tradition and rejects the superiority of western life style. His ideas have guided the making of Indian nation and nationalism in various ways. Though there is lack on part of social thinkers in India to build upon the legacy of Gandhi for conceptualizing Indian social thoughts instead of borrowing Marx, Durkheim and Weber of Industrial West. Recently the historians in Subaltern Studies Group have highlighted the importance of Gandhian Thinking for understanding postcolonial India.

The important thinking in post-colonialism is grounded in the work of three scholars namely Edward Said, GayatriSpivak and Homi K Bhabaha. They represent the so-called "Holy Trinity of Post-colonialism" and it is important to discuss their work to understand postcolonial theory.

Edward W. Said

Edward W Said emerged as the most prominent name in postcolonial theories and considered as pioneer in the field.His book *Orientalism (1978)* is considered founding text and source book for the postcolonial studies. This book directs its attention to the discursive and textual production of colonial

meanings and consolidation of colonial power. *Orientalism* elaborates a unique understanding of imperialism /colonialism as an epistemological and cultural attitude which accompanies the curious habit of dominating and whenever possible ruling the distant territories. Orientalism is defined as the project of teaching, writing and researching the orient. The orient was represented as mystical, irrational and sensuous with ironically ambivalent fascination and disgust by Europeans. He questions the self-imposed authoritative position taken by westerners citing Marx's remark for Asians that 'they cannot represent themselves so they need to be represented'. Said problematize the binaries created by west to essentialize and reify the way of life of people in the east. As Said puts it: "*Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the 'East, "them").*"

Thus Said's critic was not directly engaging with system of colonial power and practices but the system of colonial knowledge and the creation of orient as unified cultural area and category of representation. He bluntly rejects the western representation and its epistemological claims. Said critic was basically founded upon his studies of own native area West Asia and North Africa and his active interest in Palestinian Cause. In his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said examines the complex and ongoing relationships between east and west, colonizer and colonized, white and black, and metropolitan and colonial societies even after decolonization. Here, he is less confrontational in his approach and rather accepts though ambivalently the western discourse.

Homi K. Bhabha

Homi K. Bhabha is a cultural critic and one of the leading postcolonial theorists of the present time. He developed the theoretical insights of post-colonialism and coined several neologisms like mimicry, hybridity, ambivalence and influence etc. He was inspired by Lacanin psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and postmodernism in his critic of various constructions of cultural identity.

In postcolonial studies the question of rendering natives marginalized without any agency and identity of their own and the misrepresentation of native culture and distortion of native subjects has been crucial issue. Bhabha in his essay "*Of Mimicry and Man*" (1985) deal with this issue with the concept of Mimicry. Mimicry is the process of imitation by indigenous colonized to the life style of colonizers. The colonizers taught and disciplined the native people to learn and ape the white man culture and become civilized "like them but not quite". He asserts the colonizers also wish to maintain certain difference so that they can rule them forever. This shows the 'ambivalence' of colonizers in their desire to reform the subjects but not a total transformation like Englishmen. This dilemma result into, what Bhabha calls mimicry. He believes that mimicry has subversive power because "disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority." Though the native who mimic the colonizers culture never realize the power of becoming reformed, recognizable other and its potential to undermine the powerful system of colonizers. Bhabha believes that mimicry can lead to mockery and subversion of colonizers by colonized.

In his most important work *The Location of Culture* (1994) Bhabha deals with negotiations of cultural identity across race, gender and cultural traditions in colonial situations. He is against all claims of purity of racial and national identity and instead believes in in-between categories and hybridity. He maintains that identity is produced in a third space which is in-between real and idealized space. This third space is the precondition for the articulation of cultural differences. The colonizers and colonized can also not be viewed as separate entities defining themselves independently without recognizing each other historically. Instead he suggests the on-going negotiation of cultural identity involves the exchange of cultural performance and production of hybridity. He believes in understanding of cultural differences which is situated not only in the analysis of colonial past but also in postcolonial present. Hybridity emphasizes the interdependence of colonizers and colonized and its continuous interactions after decolonization.

Gaytri Chakravarti Spivak

Gaytri C. Spivak is a radical postcolonial literary critic. She herself is a third world woman of colour, Bengali exile from India and at the same time diasporic elite, intellectual currently teaching at prestigious Columbia University. Her critics of postcolonial realities are uneasy marriage of feminism, Marxism and deconstructionism. She received Padma Bhushan from Government of India for her contributions to literary criticism and feminist literature.

The exemplar of her theory, the essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak*" is a masterful work first published in *Marxism and The Interpretation of Culture* (1988). In her essay, Spivak casts doubt on the categories like third world and postcolonial and label them as unstable, essentialist categories. These categories are product of violent encounter between colonial powers and natives. She terms this process of creation and continuation of knowledge of others as 'epistemic violence' of colonization.

She raises her concern with the postcolonial approaches that study the subaltern and claim to provide the academic voices for them. She believes that these postcolonial critics instead reinforce and co-opt the neo-colonial imperatives of subjugation, exploitation, discrimination and cultural erasure. She questions the location of postcolonial writers in privileged western academic institutions and its influence in recycling of colonial system of knowledge and power. She finds serious faults with such kind of postcolonial efforts to ameliorate the subaltern from oppression and marginalization. She, for example, is apprehensive of subaltern historiography approach developed in leadership of Ranjit Guha to write alternative postcolonial history of marginalized in India.

Her major theoretical work is *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of Vanishing Present* (1999). She also translated the writings of Mahasweta Devi a Bengali Writer of Adivasi Literature to present them as parameter for postcolonial thinking.

The impact of the postcolonial critics like Edward Said was so deep that it motivated James Carrier to edit the counter narrative to the Orientalism called *Occidentalism* (1995) in which he proposed that oriental peoples also have a biased and stereotypical view of west. The contributors to this volume outlined the need of highly reflexive writings to erase these mutual stereotypical representations. Many of the continuing impacts of colonial power structure is inherent in western system of knowledge creation which need to be dismantled for future abuse of colonized nations. The postcolonial thinking provides a window to these endeavours.

Cultural Oppression:

Culture is the shared ideas, meanings, and values acquired by individuals as members of society. It is socially learned, not genetically transmitted, and often influences us unconsciously. Human beings learn through social means—through interactions with others as well as through the products of culture such as books and television. Language is central to social life and mediates the acquisition of much cultural knowledge. Language "provides the most complex system of the classification of experience" and is "the most flexible and most powerful tool developed by humans" (Duranti, 1997: 49 and 47). Differences in languages and underlying concepts may lead to problems with health-related communication.

There are some notions that literature, culture and society are all intertwined. In fact, literature helps us to understand the connection between these two. It is all in attempt to reconnect the studies from all three fields and realize the importance that comes from it. It can provide a real and critical overview of theoretical approaches that are dealing with exploring both culture and society. It is a fascinating study.

The ethnicity and culture make one people belong to a certain region. When you have ethnicity and culture, you get society. Now let us dwell deeper into the subject and try to define what culture actually is. Culture is a set of customs and beliefs that belong to a particular society. The society is a group of people that share the same place of residing at the same time. These people have a certain innate behaviour, or if you prefer, they tend to behave or conduct themselves according to the customs, beliefs, and region they live in. You cannot find two people that are completely the same in this world, not a chance.

CONCLUSION:

It is crucial to note that culture is not static for individuals or for societies. This dynamic principle of culture is referred to as “cultural processes” when groups are discussed, and “lived experiences” in the case of individuals. Individuals are shaped by their life experiences and are exposed to multiple cultures. Today's families and communities consist of people with multiple cultural backgrounds and experiences, who cannot be put into rigid “boxes” by using racial and ethnic labels that are often resented and are misleading. Individuals, families, and communities have belief systems, religious and cultural values, and group identity that serve as powerful filters through which information is received and processed. Culture significantly impacts various aspects of a person's life, shaping their values, beliefs, behaviours, perceptions, and even their understanding of the world around them, influencing everything from how they interact with others to their decision-making processes, and even their health practices; essentially, culture acts as a guiding framework for individuals within a society, dictating what is considered acceptable or desirable behavior in different situations. Culture is the set of values, beliefs, norms and customs that shape our identity and influence our actions.

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