

Colonialism vs Postcolonialism: A Review of Basic Preliminaries

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Abstract:

The current paper is an attempt to review and present few main undercurrents and arguments of 'colonialism' and 'postcolonialism,' and try to articulate how these concepts help us to understand wider aspects of both these movements, and the resultant influence on colonizer and colonized peoples, cultures as well as literatures. The paper, however, will mainly rely on understanding the basic concepts of both these movements and locate them in historical perspectives to situate the emergence as well as decadence of colonialism and the gradual growth of postcolonial culture and literature across the countries that were once part of the vicious colonization project of the Europe.

Keywords: colonialism, imperialism, ideology, postcolonialism

Introduction:

Colonialism and imperialism are often used interchangeably. The word colonialism, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), comes from the Roman 'colonia' which meant 'farm' or 'settlement,' and referred to Roman's who settled in other lands but still retained their citizenship. Accordingly, the (OED) describes it as: "a settlement in a new country... a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state; the community so formed, consisting of the original settlers and their decedents and successors, as long as the connection with the parent state is kept up."

The meaning of the root word 'colony' or 'colonia,' suggest that these 'landed estates' were located in newly conquered territories of the Roman Empire and were generally given gifts to Roman citizen's who were mostly soldiers, for establishing Roman colonies in an otherwise hostile territories. But the modern European colonialism was by far the most extensive of the different kinds of colonial contact that have been a recurrent feature of the human history. The earliest forms of colonialism associated with the Roman Empire was different from the modern European colonialism, because the former was a pre-capitalist, while as modern colonialism was established alongside capitalism. By the 1970s, colonies and ex-colonies of Europe covered 84.6 percent of the land surface of the globe. Only parts of Arabia, Persia, Afghanistan, Mongolia, Tibet, China, Siam, and Japan had never been under formal European government. (Loomba, 20-21).

Discussion:

According to Ania Loomba, one useful way of distinguishing between imperialism and colonialism might be to separate them not in temporal but in spatial terms and to think of imperialism or neo-imperialism as the phenomenon that originates in the metropolis, the process which leads to domination and control. Its results or what happens in the colonies as a consequence of imperial domination is colonialism or neo-colonialism. Thus the imperial country is the 'metropole' from which power flows, and the colony or neo-colony is the place which it penetrates and controls. Imperialism can function without formal colonies (as in United States imperialism today) but colonialism cannot. (Loomba, 28)

Therefore, neo-colonialism is a form of military or economic intervention without apparently taking over the land of colonized subjects. The term neo-colonialism was coined by Ghanaian ant-colonialist leader Kwame

Nkrumah to describe the condition of Africa in 1960s or through puppet regimes, such as US control of South Vietnam or more recently the US occupation of Iraq. In contemporary time, US is one of the major unipolar power exerting its influence on many sovereign nation states in the world.

To understand how colonialists were able to franchise and captivate their interests in otherwise hostile territories, we have to look at different policies which they employed during the colonization process. The fact is that colonialism itself brought violence of various kinds to execute the vicious plans of the colonizers—epistemic, cultural, economic and military violence. In order to have conception of how they captured lands and then took advantage of the native recourses of knowledge to establish their own epistemic tradition, P K Nayar, in his book, *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* (2008) explains the mechanism behind the different forms of colonial exploitations as:

(1). Epistemic Violence: the European colonizers exploited native sources of knowledge and presented their point of view regarding it and finally displaced it by their own epistemic tradition. According to Nayar a good example of cultural dimension of colonialism would be to analyse role of English in India. Colonial administrators such as Warren Hastings and T. B Macaulay, academic scholars like William Jones and commentators James Mill first studied Indian languages (especially Sanskrit and Persian) by translating texts from these languages into English or undertaking studies of Indian law, religion or arts. In second stage they announced that these Indian texts and cultures were primitive, irrelevant, and completely outdated. With such knowledge system, India can never progress. In the third stage, they substituted English as the medium instruction, as the language of knowledge itself. (Nayar, 3).

Macaulay *Minute on Indian Education* provides us a clue how British colonialists established their literature and knowledge as the only valid as well as relied source of understanding nature and behaviors in the world: “I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic.—But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.” —Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Minute on Indian Education” (1835)

(2). Political and Economic Operation: the European culture was equated with the triumph of science and reason over the forces of superstition, and indeed many colonized peoples took the same view. A British Education Dispatch of 1854 explicitly connected ‘the advance of European knowledge’ in India to the economic development of the subcontinent. English education would teach ‘the natives of India the marvelous results employment of labour and capital’ and ‘rouse them to emulate us in the development of the vast resources of the country.’ (Loomba, 41)

(3). Military power: The most effective way of exercising power over other is through physical violence. The British colonizers through their military might perpetuated many kinds and forms of violence on the native’s of Asia Africa or South America. It was through this military expansion that they were able to retain these colonies for centuries.

Again, to examine how the European colonizers were able to capture the alien and hostile lands and also effectively influence the thinking of native people to cooperate in their own subjugation without feeling any external and apparent force, we have to analyse some major concepts like ideology, discourse, power, knowledge, hegemony and how they operate in a society. So let us examine these briefly.

(1). Ideology: the ideology is the most effective way of imparting values, beliefs and customs to the subjugated or colonized population. In the book, *the German Ideology* (1846) Marx and Engels suggest that ‘ideology is basically a distorted or false consciousness of the world which disguises people’s real relationship to their world. This is because the ideologies that most circulate or gain currency in any society reflect and reproduce the interests of the dominant social classes. Marx and Engels used the metaphor of the *camera obscura* to

explain the process of such obfuscation or misrepresentation. They argue that ideology is *camera obscura* which reflects an inverted image of social reality, which is distorted and false. According to them the truth of reality and reality as it is conceived through ideology are opposed. (Loomba, 44)

Another Marxist critic and intellectual Antonio Gramsci argue that hegemony stresses the incorporation and transformation of ideas and practices belonging to those who are dominant. He analyses how the state and ruling capitalist class- the bourgeois use cultural institutions to maintain power in capitalist class. The bourgeoisie, in Gramsci's view, develops a hegemonic culture using ideology rather than violence, economic force, or coercion. Hegemonic culture propagates its own values and norms so that they become the 'common sense' values of all and thus maintain the status quo.

Louis Althusser, in essay, *Ideological State Apparatus, (1970)* examines how ideologies are internalized and how human beings make dominant ideas their own. Gramsci had suggested that hegemony is achieved via certain social institutions of 'force' and 'consent'- Althusser argued that in modern capitalist societies the former is achieved by 'repressive state apparatuses' such as the army and the police, but the latter is enforced via 'ideological state apparatus' such as schools, the church, the family, the media and political system. These ideological apparatuses assist in the reproduction of the dominant system by creating subjects who are ideologically conditioned to accept the values of the system (Loomba, 51)

Similarly, Michal Foucault stressed that Knowledge is not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of power. This Foucaultian insight forms Edward Said's '*Orientalism*' which points out the extent to which knowledge about 'the orient' as it was produced and circulated in Europe was an ideological accompaniment of 'colonial' power.

All these factors put together formed colonialism, a vast project which subjugated natives in Asia, Africa or South America and deprived them of their own resources. Thus according to P. K. Nayar, colonialism has three central features:

- (1). the governance of non-European places by European administrators and rulers (through economic, political and military modes),
- (2). the study of non-European cultures by European academics, scholars, and scientists (in anthropology, literature, area studies)
- (3). the slow transformation of native societies (through missionary work, English/European education systems, European modes of bureaucracy) (Nayar, 4)

Postcolonialism: The term, 'Postcolonialism' is a wider term that means different things in various contexts. The difficulty arises even in its spelling that presents numerous alternative meanings- post-colonial, postcolonial and post/colonial. There are critics who interpret each term differently. However, most scholars believe that hyphenated word 'post-colonial' refers to the period which came after colonialism. In the Indian context, it signifies the period, after 15 July 1947, when India ceased to be politically ruled by the British government. Similarly, Boehmer in his book, *Colonial and Postcolonial literature* refers non hyphenated term postcolonialism as: "To the writing, that sets out in one or another way to resist colonial subjugation, both before and after the period of colonialism." So it covers complexity from its very beginning and includes literature written by both colonizer and colonized people as long as that takes colonial yoke as a subject. The impact of colonialism is still with us in the form of neo-colonialism today even if the map of the world is changed through decolonization. The most recent events post September 11/ 2001 saw a coming of a new US centred colonial power, replacing multi-polar colonial power of European states. According to Loomba, " after the events of 9/11 in New York, conservative academics and policy makers across Britain and the U. S started advocating the need for 'new kind of imperialism' spearheaded by the U. S that would fill the 'power vacuum and chaos' left by earlier wave of decolonization" (Loomba, 6)

Therefore, Postcolonialism is the theoretical wing of postcoloniality, which refers to the historical, material and actual condition of newly independent Asian, African and south American states with the global system. It refers to the mode of reading, political analysis, and cultural resistance or intervention that deals with the history of colonialism and the present neo-colonial structures. (Nayar, 17)

Aime Cesaire's book, *Discourse on Colonialism*, opens with this poetic and passionate indictment of European colonialism, and with an announcement that its days are numbered:

The colonists may kill in Indochina, torture in Madagascar, imprison in Black Africa, crack down in the West Indies. Henceforth the colonized know that they have an advantage over them. They know that their temporary 'masters' are lying. And, therefore, that their masters are weak. (Loomba, 181)

These lines are the denunciation of an old world order and as well as the confirmation of new dawn in postcolonial literature and theory. With it begin the theoretical counter attack to the project of colonialism by the Postcolonial thinkers and writers. M. A. R. Habib lists some of the influential books of postcolonialism as:

The year 1950 to 1990, saw the publication of seminal texts of Postcolonialism: Aime Cesaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths *The Empire Writes Back* and Gayatri Spivak's *The Post-colonial Critic*. The key concepts associated with postcolonialism are -orient, occident, negritude, hybridity, mimicry subaltern and so on. (Habib, 738)

Conclusion:

Thus, colonialism was a period characterized by the dominance of the European powers which brought political, economic, cultural and epistemic changes in the countries subjugated by these powers. Postcoloniality on the other hand, refers to the continuing effect of these invasions in the colonized countries and upon the people. While as neo-colonialism is the current US hegemony on other countries or sovereign nation states in the world. Postcolonialism is therefore, a reaction and resistance to these political invasions and cultural ideologies. It seeks to explore different contours of this invasion and possible counter narratives and growth of native literature and culture across the colonized parts of the world.

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