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“From Decolonial to the Postcolonial: Trauma of an Unfinished Agenda”

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Abstract

Decolonisation entailed the end of and a reversal of European imperialist expansionist policies in the developing world. On the other hand, postcolonial studies close affinity to post-structuralism has resulted in a complete amnesia about the incompleteness of the project of decolonisation of the erstwhile colonial world. This paper outlines the key critique of postcolonialism being too engrossed in the theoretical and cultural concerns at the expense of the political and ethical responsibilities during the transfer of power. Postcolonialism itself may have become a new colonising, hegemonic discourse. Indeed, the trauma of decolonisation cannot be brushed under the carpet or be wished away in the frenetic action towards mindless theorisation. The passing of the empire or decolonisation in fact did not result in the end of neo-colonial ambitions. The rise and fall of hegemonic states in the developing world provides opportunities to reflect and review our own positioning in relation to theories. Theorising the ‘decolonial’ is as important as their postcolonial interpretations. Today, postcolonialism continues to exhibit its complicity with neoliberal market economy.

Key words: Bandung Conference; political self-determination; postcolonialism; decolonisation; neo-colonial; neoliberal discourses.

“From Decolonial to Postcolonial: Trauma of an Unfinished Agenda”

Taking the cue from Amitava Ghosh (2007), growing up during the decolonial period of India my dominant memory was one of how India was struggling to create its own identity and reality rather than competing with its neighbours and the world at large. As an Indian, discarding the fixation of trying to prove to be a successor state to the erstwhile imperial entity was no longer relevant. Indeed this was largely the case of our neighbours in South Asian and in the African continent. The role of progressive politics in the development of a postcolonial method seems critical when dealing with the unfinished agenda of decolonisation. If postcolonial method invites a critical examination of the material and discursive legacies of colonialism the emphasis would largely dominate around questions of identity, race, and culture.

Decolonisation as a political method would demand a commitment towards dealing with the critical questions of regional and global inequalities and injustices. The conflation between a ‘postcolonial’ and that of decolonial method by ardent advocates has resulted in the generic obfuscation of issues of inequality, ethics and justice across regions at large.

The Bandung Conference of 1955 marked the positioning of a decolonial thinking. There is a fundamental difference between Fanon’s (1963) decolonisation and our perceptions of decoloniality. The former relates to the sphere of the state and involves both the domestic or internal relations and interstate relations. Decoloniality on the other hand is far more intersubjective and relates naturally to the critical interstices of race, gender, and class lines. In other words as Dabashi notes, “there are colonial epistemic and ontological differences between the two...” (2015: xli). Decolonisation therefore implies a systematic transition from one of colonial ‘dependency’ to republican ‘sovereignty’. Decolonisation therefore manifests itself as an externally initiated process distinct from dismantling of internal forms of dependency, e.g. the reorganisation of Indian states and principalities. Decolonisation also can be seen as a form of reshuffling of colonial possessions among imperial powers, e.g. Dutch or French or Germanic hegemonic engagements. Here the rise of a hegemonic state becomes the larger evil with the debatable planks of decolonisation and postcolonial interpretations.

Postcolonialism on the other hand continues to have a major impact in the academia. As a field, postcolonial theory highlights how knowledge is a situated entity, producing a universalising idea, which emanated largely from the ‘western’ confines of the imperialising

Europe (Said, 1993; 1999). At the same time one also needs to acknowledge that these ideas are constantly being revised and conditioned by its places of origin (Clayton, 2000; Lester, 2003). With the advent of a 'cultural turn' and the rise of postmodern interpretations from the triumvirate collective of Said (1978, 1993, 1999), Spivak (1999) and Bhabha (1992), decolonial studies unfortunately became unfashionable and went into a deep coma. So while "postcolonialism provided challenging opportunities to explore the spatiality of the colonial and neo-colonial discourses and the spatial politics of representation" (McEwan, 2003:340), decolonial studies was shunted into the discarded railway-yard of oblivion.

Postcolonialism has been defined as "a radical reconstruction of history and knowledge production, demanding attention to a diversity of perspectives and priorities..." (Raghuram and Madge, 2006:277). On the other hand, decolonisation was considered as a political method enabling a far more fruitful engagement with issues of global marginalisation of peripheral voices, e.g. Aleppo in Syria, or the Rohingya of Myanmar or indeed the Kadiyans of Pakistan. Such a postcolonial method does not enable the provincializing of the privileged First World. Rather than seeking to follow Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000:16) to renew European thought from and for the margins, it would be far more helpful to reinforce the point that Non-Europeans too can Think! Today there is a renewed attempt to racialise and deify political conflict across the regions of the world. Postcolonial method in particular has failed in penetrating this maze of deliberate obfuscation of religion, identity and race being witnessed today. The way to rectify this anomaly is to revisit the decolonial strands of the unfinished project of national building, freedom and nationalism which remains peppered across the diverse regions of the world.

The question is whether postcolonialism as an 'ideology' and as a 'method' has become 'hegemonic' to discard the critical global dilemmas of race, religion and identity within the increasingly embedded framework of dominant neoliberal ideology. In a way postcolonial approach emerged, once the 'decolonial present' started to fade away from the national collective memory of erstwhile imperial regimes and their former colonies. Postcoloniality therefore becomes a "condition of pessimism" (Appiah, 1991: 353), [343] or what Ghosh (2007: 105) states "postcolonial essentially describes you as negative". Postcolonialism in essence, today continues to exhibit its complicity with a neoliberal market economy (Sethi, 2011).

Different stages of history do present us with an opportunity to take a stance of being either postcolonial or decolonial. Thus engaging with the questions of Kashmir, Pakistan,

Bangladesh, China or indeed Tibet becomes largely decolonial than a postcolonial project (Bhambra, 2014). Whereas reflecting on the unfinished projects of socio-economic and political development in the North East of India or Kashmir, remains largely a postcolonial question.

In essence postcoloniality is generally anchored on postmodernity and decolonisation and decoloniality is hitched to the legacies of the Bandung event of 1955. The challenge was one of engaging with the critical nuances of political decolonisation much in the sameness, as Brexit agenda looms large in the horizons of United Kingdom today. The fundamental difference being that while the Brexit is still mired in 'Euro-centred' epistemology, the political decolonisation as witnessed in the erstwhile colonies reiterated a 'decolonial epistemology', which was distinct from the Eurocentric legacies. Decolonial, as a political construct need not be articulated with the assistance of an imperial/ European baggage. Perhaps the postcolonial has become a 'fixated' normal in the present context?

The trap of an embedded postcolonial way of thinking to my mind suggest that nation states and their scholars are more keen to seek an avoidance of the unfinished agenda of political decolonisation. As Terry Eagleton (1998:26) notes 'Postcolonialism', like postmodernism in general, is among other things a brand of culturalism, which inflates the significance of cultural factors in human affairs... 'Postcolonialism' has been on the whole stronger on identity than on the IMF, more fascinated by marginality than by markets. Thus postcolonialism therefore loses out in the political gamesmanship when dealing with the intractable boundary question or that of political self-determination in the shatter zones of the world.

In conclusion, Miyoshi (1995) berates us about our continued reluctance and a literal 'head-in-the sand approach', as we debate about the relevance of postcolonialism and decolonialism in metropolitan academia. He states, "We ignore [the trauma of] those billions outside our ongoing discourse for whom life has nothing 'post' about it" Miyoshi (1995:54). Incomplete decolonisation projects, post-independence struggles are all inscribed as a post-colonial event. The Palestinians continue its *Intifada* against West Bank Occupation, just as the Kashmiris or the Tibetans call for greater *Azadi* and self-determination, and the complete erasure of the ancient Tamil heritage in Jaffna raises minimal eyebrows among the protagonists of colonial and postcolonial theories. Postcolonial theorists continue to epistemologically and ontologically degrade the decolonised 'Others' by erasures and silences of that very identity and cultures it has avowed to protect and highlight. Decolonial in this sense remains an unfinished agenda.

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