Chapter II

Post Colonialism: An Overview

Postcolonial theory has been framed by thinkers such as Edward Said, Bill Ashcroft, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Aizaz Ahmad and a few others. The critical views that this theory speaks of reflects on the impact of Western imperialism and colonialism. In the 1970s, some critics tried to use this concept to understand the causes and effects of colonialism. Postcolonial theory does away with the old interpretations of colonialism. The postcolonial theory has many a time been defined as a political project aiming to promote the conflicts and issues caused due to colonial domination and to study critically the daunting legacies of colonialism. Postcolonial literature records the history, realities and mythology of the colonised. This literature, as it speaks of a post colonial hybrid culture, is naturally subversive.

Postcolonial theory tries to study the impact of the language of the imperialistic coloniser on the colonised people. The European sense of superiority dictates superior master discourses on topics of history and philosophy. The education, scientific development, knowledge, maritime and other strengths of the rulers empowers the conquered people. This theory concerns itself with the responses of the colonised: their self representation of their unique sense of history, place and race.

The concept studies the after effects of colonisation on the colonised people. Edward Said’s Orientalism(1978), leads to the growth of ‘Colonialist Discourse Theory’. In the words of Bressler (1999), Post-colonialism is “an approach to literary analysis that concerns itself particularly with literature written in English in formerly colonised countries”, like the colonised cultures in Asia, Australia, New Zealand,
Africa, and South America. These people had been once ruled and dominated by European thought in the fields of politics, education, culture, myths and philosophy.

Post colonialism is historically placed in the post-second World War state of decolonisation. The colonies had fought for and won independence and the much sought after political freedom, but the years of colonial rule and the forcefully absorbed values could not be forgotten easily. Mukherjee (1996) observes:

Post-colonialism is not merely a chronological label referring to the period after the demise of empires. It is ideologically an emancipatory concept particularly for the students of literature outside the Western world, because it makes us interrogate many concepts of the study of literature that we were made to take for granted, enabling us not only to read our own texts in our own terms, but also to re-interpret some of the old canonical texts from Europe from the perspective of our specific historical and geographical location (3-4).

Postcolonial writings attempt to express their sense of beingness. Fired with nationalist fervour, writers began to write openly against the Empire, rejecting imperialism. Freedom to think, and critically question the near past was the most involving enterprise. The coloniser forces its thought and impressions on the culture of the colonised, stifling their original voice and sentiments. The European colonising powers devalued the colonised nation's past, deriding it as uncivilized, and questioning its rich historical past. They tried to flaunt their own culture and tried to impress the colonised nation that they had learnt about civilization, history, culture and progress after the coming of the Europeans.

In *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (1989), Bill Ashcroft et al claim that the term ‘postcolonial’ is used to
cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process of aggressive domination. The postcolonial theory tries to convincingly explain that the imperial centre persists in manipulating the literature and language of the colonised, claiming that theirs is a superior language and culture.

Postcolonial literatures challenge and deny these views. Post colonial theorists talk of the values inherent in the emergent cultures, and deride the efforts of the coloniser to push the colonised to the margins, stealing from them the right to celebrate their own deep cultures. The central place is the coloniser, and the natives are removed from the mainstream and pushed to the margins. Western thought lays a lot of stress on the universal, though it ultimately narrowly means only the west, or Europe or the Eurocentric view.

Edward Said has written two very thought provoking influential works, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Said vociferously challenges and convincingly argues and confidently declares his anti-colonial views. He says that the West, trying to show its superiority, tries to push the Eastern concept of itself to an inferiority complex. The West presents a demeaning stereotypical image of the old history and culture of the East. The Eurocentric view shows the East as uncultured. Said defies the West to rethink and frame its concepts of knowledge, history and civilization.

Homi Bhabha (1994) thinks that colonial ideology rests upon a divisive building up of binaries of the civilized and the barbaric, the “us” and the “them”. In his estimation:
The objective of colonialist discourse is to construe the colonised 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.

Postcolonial theory and criticism is a counter-canon, and resists the postulates of imperialistic Western thought. It encourages the East to think for itself and speak out freely and fearlessly as an independent people.

Edward Said is a key figure in the postcolonial discourse. His native country Palestine gained acknowledgement, recognition in the world through the work of Said. He wrote *Orientalism* in 1978 and *The World, the Text and the Critic* in 1983. Orientalism is defined as “Western style for dominating, restructuring having authority over Orient”. The term ‘Orientalism’ refers to the historical and ideological process and false images of the myths of the Eastern, the “orient” constructed in Western discourse. Said’s belief is that European writings contributed to the creation of a dichotomy between Europe and its ‘Others’. Most of the time the West is ignorant of Eastern culture and its representation in literature is often a result of the West’s fantasizing about the East’s magic. Along with these views, the West considers that the East is exotic and can be defined as a place inhabited with illiterate natives, full of barbaric sexual energy, uninhibited expression and no sense of morality or decency. Binaries abound in postcolonial criticism, with the superiority and positivity of the West at all levels, and the inferiority and negativity of the East. Leela Gandhi states that “Orientalism is the first book in which Said relentlessly unmasksthe ideological disguises of imperialism” (67). *Culture and Imperialism*, published in 1993, continues and extends Said’s views on the postcolonial realities.
Homi K. Bhabha is another important thinker in the postcolonial criticism. Bhabha’s work deals with the issues of nationality, ethnicity, and politics and identity. In The Location of Culture (1994) Bhabha uses concepts such as mimicry, interstice, hybridity and liminality, ideas that are the products of Lacanian psychoanalysis and the language of signs. Ambivalence as postcolonial reality is explored by him. Ambivalence is seen in the paradoxical situations of the present. Instead of seeing colonialism as something locked in the past, Bhabha shows how its histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present, demanding a transformation caused through an understanding of cross-cultural relations. The authority of dominant nations and their ideas triggers unrest and causes anxious efforts to challenge and fight against this oppressive situation.

Bhabha thinks that in the present one can see that colonialism caused not only dominating suppression but also gave the opportunity for complex cross cultural contact. One can today celebrate multiculturalism. Bhabha also speaks of mimicry, hybridity and stereotype.

Homi Bhabha says that the coloniser and colonised share a unique love-hate and attraction-repulsion relation, and this complex co-existence of contrasts leads to ambivalence. Ambivalence is important in the postcolonial context, a context which is characterised, as Fanon (1986) emphasised, by the Manichean condition of two mutually-exclusive and opposing sides that know no possibility of integration.

Mimicry describes the ambivalent relationship between coloniser and colonised. The colonised mimics and adopts the coloniser’s ideas, culture and value systems as well as it can. The British managed to create a class of Indians with English culture, opinions and morals. These people would be like Fanon’s French
Bhabha also uses the term Hybridity to analyse the coloniser/colonised relationship. Hybridisation is political and cultural negotiation between the coloniser and the colonised. Edward Said also lays emphasis on cultural hybridity which is natural and persistent within historical situations where diverse groups co-exist in proximity over many years. Hybridity and multiculturalism move towards internationalism. Bhabha argues these concepts in *The Location of Culture published in* 1994. For Bhabha:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the pure and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but re-implicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory-or, in my mixed metaphor, a negative transparency (159-160)
Bhabha discourses on inferior stereotypes created and circulated by the coloniser to maintain power and at the same time try to demoralize and mock the colonised. Mockery is propagated through stereotypical cultural images, bringing out negative traits of the colonised population. These ideas are discussed in Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, in a chapter entitled ‘The Other Question: ‘Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism’. Bhabha defines how racial stereotypes operate:

Racist stereotypical discourse, in its colonial moment, inscribes a form of govern mentality that is informed by a productive splitting in its constitution of knowledge and exercise of power. Some of its practices recognise the difference of race, culture and history as elaborated by stereotypical knowledge, racial theories, administrative colonial experience, and on that basis institutionalise a range of political and cultural ideologies that are prejudicial, discriminatory, vestigial, archaic, ‘mythical’, and, crucially, are recognised as being so. [...] However, there coexist within the same apparatus of colonial power, modern systems and sciences of government, progressive 'Western' forms of social and economic organisation which provide the manifest justification for the project of colonialism. (83)

Gayatri Spivak is best known for her article, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in which she famously articulated that the subaltern cannot speak. She claims that the protests and ideas of the colonised are never heard. Spivak says that the subaltern are the perpetual, voiceless and unrecoverable ‘Other’ in the hegemonic discourse that rules the centre so powerfully that the subaltern is forced to live in the periphery. Spivak said to interviewer, “I am not erudite enough to be interdisciplinary but I can break rules”. (Spivak27). Breaking rules of the academy and trespassing disciplinary
boundaries have been central to the intellectual projects of Gayatri Spivak. She calls herself a “Para-disciplinary, ethical philosopher”:

My position is generally a reactive one. I am versed by Marxists as too codec, by feminists as too male-identified, by indigenous theorists as too committed to Western Theory. I am uneasily pleased about this (Spivak 67).

Spivak uses deconstruction to understand the postcolonial critic’s unknown participation in the exploitation of the Third World. Spivak persists that deconstruction is a powerful political and theoretical tool. Deconstruction has a specific intellectual and political purpose and tries to focus on the reality of the dominant culture and shows ways to escape its stereotypical connotations. Multiplicity of meaning has to be checked at the moment in which an analysis becomes possible. Spivak’s work forces one to go beyond binary oppositions of First World and the Third World in physical exploitation.

She attempts to create a space for marginalised voices. Deconstruction looks incisively into the production of truths. She interrogates the operations that engender these truths and hold them in place.

She also points out that the political independence has not led to the economic independence of many Third-World countries. She claims that economics is very important in critical and cultural theory. Exploitation of men and women in the Third-World provides the wealth and resources for a hegemonic intellectual culture in the First-World.

The term ‘subaltern’ has been coined by the British during its Colonial contact with India. Subordinate or inferior, subaltern implies an inferior mode of knowledge.
The subaltern is created by the discourses of power and politics. Spivak uses ‘subaltern’ to encompass a range of different subject positions, not predetermined by dominant political discourse. She states that ‘subaltern’ is a flexible term and covers diverse social identities and struggles of the colonised, the neglected and also of women. Spivak was at the forefront of the subaltern movement because she is committed to the development of non-exploitive ways in society. She develops a powerful stand to increase the inclusion of women, peasants and tribals in the historical and political discourses in India. The term ‘Subaltern’ was popularised by Spivak’s essay entitled “Can the Subaltern Speak?” written in 1985. This question ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ is ambiguous as one cannot place the speaker: is it the subaltern or the superior imperialist?

In their article, ‘Can the Subaltern Vote?’, Medevoi, Shankar Raman and Benjamin Comment that Spivak does not offer any political solution to emancipate the subaltern especially the women. In an article entitled ‘Can the Subaltern Hear?’ Colin Wright provoked angry response to Spivak’s question, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (Eagleton (ed)34). In all, Spivak’s view of the subaltern is a part of a historical left-wing anti-colonial thought.

Colonialism is a powerful, destructive historical force that has shaped not only the political futures of the countries involved but also the identities of the colonised and colonising people. It depends on a process of “Othering”, the colonised seen as very different from and inferior to the colonisers. Literature written in the colonised countries reflects the articulation of empowered identities who try to reclaim their cultures. Postcolonial literary theory attempts to examine the ways in which a colonising society imposes its worldview on the subjugated people, making them objectives of observation and denying them the power to define themselves.
Colonisers are the active subjects, whose actions are passively received by the colonised.

Postcolonial literary theory now focuses on the lived experiences of colonised people, and it highlights the complex disconnect that the colonised feel, an absurd break from their own identities. Postcolonialism also focuses on the colonised societies’ attempts to redefine and reassert the identities they wish to claim for themselves. This attempt encompasses national, historical, political and cultural identities.

The aim of postcolonial study then is to restore the history, dignity, validity, cultural and global impact of those whose experiences have been represented within a negative worldview that named them the “other”. Contrasting binaries of us/other, western/non-western, civilised/uncivilised, is reductive and exclusive. It diminishes the complexity and legitimacy of the colonised world.

Postcolonial critics and theorists look at issues of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture and how they work in relation to colonial hegemony. Postcolonial theory takes the form of literature composed by authors who are critical of Eurocentric hegemony.

Postcolonial theory also questions the role of the western literary canon as self-ordained high priests of making and framing knowledge. Many of these authors reinforce colonial hegemonic ideology, such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The terms "first-world," "second world," "third world" and "fourth world" nations are critiqued by postcolonial critics because they reinforce the dominant positions of western cultures.
Postcolonialism attempts to analyse the effect of empire, racism and exploitation. It challenges the long tradition of European imperial narratives. A postcolonial critic examines the relation between the coloniser and the colonised in literature, raising and attempting to answer various questions related to colonialist ideology.