CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION—TOWARDS A RECONSIDERATION OF COLONIALISM

I

Human history has not been a pleasant narrative of peaceful co-existence and development. Throughout the various epochs, many politico-cultural trends have emerged and disappeared only to appear again in subtler and more complex forms and then proceed towards other transformation. Colonialism has been regarded as one of the most important politico-cultural phenomenon which will remain central in the history of mankind. Latent or manifest, colonialism has affected and continues to affect in one way or the other the whole human population at one point of time or the other. Responsible for the making, unmaking and remaking of the world order, political, territorial alignments, misalignments and realignments, mapping and remapping of the globe, colonialism, with implications for both the coloniser and the colonised, reveals itself as a stark and blatant form of exploitation in every sense of the term. It is one of the most important phenomenon that brought immense changes in the modern world and thereby provokes questions fascinating in terms of politico-historical developments.

The story of colonialism began with the historic developments of nationalism. With the increase in production of goods, Europe witnessed the rise of nationalism. National movements in Europe led to the formation of several nation-states with a keen sense of rivalry and competition amongst them. The geographical discoveries in the wake of the Renaissance compelled these nation states to embark on a process of carving out colonial empires overseas. Perpetrated by European state-based nationalisms led by Britain and France, followed to a lesser extent by Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Holland and Belgium in order to exploit
markets, colonialism consequently developed anti-colonial nationalist movements and struggles largely led by the indigenous elite in the colonised regions of Asia, Latin America and Africa. These movements supplemented by contemporary historical events and circumstances led to a process of decolonization which is still continuing as the contradictions and implications are yet to be conclusively resolved. It was only after the Second World War that the process of decolonization was initiated whereby the colonized people began to realise their political, cultural and economic rights.

Debates and discourses on colonialism delineate two broad categories of colonialism with distinct characteristics. The first category known as settler-colonies, represents those colonies where the imperialist designs of the coloniser are largely fulfilled through a meticulous policy of implanting settlers in huge numbers. One of the early instance of this type of colonialism can be seen in Ireland, where, under a policy practised in Queen Mary’s reign (1516-58), the native Irish population was displaced from their lands to give way to English and Scottish settlers. Along similar lines there was a continuous process of planting European settlers in the ‘newly discovered’ regions of the world — America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Over a period of time, these settler colonies flourished to such an extent that they began to develop as separate political, social and economic units. They also had their own share in the process of decolonisation, some even fighting for independence and liberation with their mother countries. The case of America and its War of Independence in 1776 is a classic example. In this way America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand became independent and sovereign nation-states.

An astonishing feature of the polemics of colonialism is the over-looking of the indigenous population who inhabited these regions before the so called ‘discovery’ by Europeans. Questions regarding the status of these natives have been largely and conveniently ignored. Two contrasting and paradoxical views of history underline a serious debate on the status of the natives. The first holds the view of cultural difference pointing out that there exists cultures wholly different from that of European perception. The second one holds the view that historical status grows out only through relations in terms of trade or colonialism. It is pertinent to note that European or Western culture tends to look down upon and invalidate other ways of life alien to them. Difference is regarded as inferiority. For the Western peoples pastoral-nomads and tropical forest cultivators or broadly indigenous peoples are described
in terms of the “Other”.

Colonialism, analysed today by many scholars in terms of Third World discourse, tends to overlook the fact that patterns of majority-minority relations, ethnic differentiation exist in the highly industrialized societies having aboriginal population. On the one hand, the term post-colonial has been applied to the settler colonies since they have gained independence from their mother countries and exist as separate political units. On the other hand, the question of the natives, who had been largely subdued, marginalised, oppressed and exploited, whose history, culture and society had been obliterated still persists. Their past and present tell the story of a different form of colonialism. Keeping their present condition in view, it is still problematic to ascertain their real status.

The second category pertains to those peoples and nations which have gained political and economic independence from the colonial powers in the wake of the decolonization process. Asia, Africa and Latin America have had their share of colonial experience. Britain and France, followed by Portugal, Spain, Russia, Germany, Italy and Holland subjected a major portion of the world to colonialism. Brutal in all its aspects, this form of colonialism invited anti-colonial struggles including fierce and bloody armed struggles. The post-War decolonization process eventually gave rise to the emergence of new nation-states and national territorial boundaries with the formation of new political units. The global phenomenon of decolonization gave birth to nearly one hundred and forty ‘independent’ countries in the last fifty years as against a former figure of fifty odd countries. The United Nations statistics reveal the existence of fifty members in June, 1945 against one hundred and eighty four in early 1994; the additional one hundred and thirty four emerged as a result of the decolonization process and national liberation struggles, either constitutional or militant, in various colonial and semi-colonial structures. In the light of this development, it is clear that decolonization is not a static or teleological phenomenon. It is an ongoing process in the politics of everchanging power equations that will continue as long as colonial tendencies persist. A glaring truth is that as long as exploitation and domination exist revealing asymmetrical and unequal relations between cultures, nations, races and linguistic groups, decolonization will remain an agenda in the human world inspite of the postulate of multinationalism or globalisation in the wake of Western-sponsored global capitalism. It would definitely amount to a fallacy if we declare that decolonization in the world has been completed.
Other questions which crop up in this debate pertain to forms of exploitation, domination and subjugation. Parallel to the case of the indigenous native population of North America, we have seen a slightly different form in South Africa. Apartheid was a policy based on the bare and stark logic of racial discrimination. Long after the decolonisation process in the African continent resulted in the liberation of Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt and many other countries, the White racist regime in South Africa still continued its official policy of apartheid. It was only after a long and bitter struggle including the militant phase of the African National Congress that apartheid came to a formal end in the nineteen nineties. When the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic was formed with the enshrined principles of redistributive justice, egalitarianism and complete nationality equalities, the whole world was made to believe momentarily that nationality contradictions would not arise in this arrangement. However, with constant American bickering and cold-war pressures, contradictions surfaced resulting in an inevitable break up in 1991 which was peacefully resolved with the exception of the continuing violence in Bosnia, Herzegovinia and Chechenya. The question of Hong Kong which eventually became a part of its original country China in July, 1997 reveals the process of decolonization in motion. East-Timor, officially accorded independent status by the United Nations Security Council, in 1976, reeled under Indonesian occupation for a long time until its recent independence. The indifference of the United Nations regarding East-Timor needs to be juxtaposed with its firm resolution and instant action — in the U.S. propelled move — against the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990. The recent occupation of Iraq by U.S. led coalition forces in June 2003 and the subsequent imposition of an American controlled civil administration (headed by an American called Paul Bremer) is nothing short of colonialism. It is pertinent to note that the United States took a unilateral decision to occupy Iraq much against the wishes of the entire international community. In an act of total defiance and disregard for the most respected international organization, the United Nations, America embarked on its mission to occupy Iraq raising several disturbing questions on the issue of sovereignty and independence of a country.

With massive underdevelopment and economic backwardness persisting in the ‘post-colonial’ ex-colonies, the relationship between the erstwhile colonial structures/Western powers and the ex-colonies becomes a focal point of critical debates on the ‘pastness’ of colonialism. The more recent global triumph of capitalist imperialism evident in the establishment
of a monolithic and hegemonic global economy — an economy controlled by the West and shared by its comprador allies elsewhere — and the recession of revolutionary socialism have resulted in deepening the crises endemic in the ‘post-colonial’ Third World states. An aggressive assertion of Western capitalism in its global drive to integrate the Third World states within its sphere of operation virtually forces these states to sink further into debt. The decline of anti-colonial nationalism, the crumbling of revolutionary movements that sought to replace colonial societies with socialist societies, and the assimilation of the nationalism of the national bourgeoisies into the machinery of global imperialist capital make it necessary to reconsider the nature of colonialism.

II

Current debates on colonial discourse reflect the diverse trajectories associated with the study of the post-colonial. The concept ‘post-colonial’ is analysed by a number of scholars from a Third World perspective. The three worlds theory, with the First constituting the economically advanced countries, the Second constituting the communists and Third constituting the economically backward, developing/underdeveloped countries, remains a discourse produced by global capitalism in its own interests. The problem of ascertaining a theoretical position vis-a-vis this conceptualization remains pertinent in the study of post-colonialism. Some commentators have dealt with the matter by rigorously arguing that the three worlds theory is blatantly untheoretical. Positing a category called ‘Third World’ is to deny these structures a legitimate place in the international framework. If First World means the advanced capitalist countries and the Second, Communist countries, does it necessarily imply that the so-called Third World cannot adopt communism at all? This theoretical argument can be extended in the framework of the post-coldwar world order. An intriguing question remains as there is no evident Second world at present with the disintegration of the erstwhile U.S.S.R. and China treading the capitalist path by adopting market economy. Cuba, subjected to the most inhuman form of deprivation known as the ‘economic blockade’ (a name invented and put into fashion by the global corporate of industrial capitalism led by the U.S.A.), remains at the margin today literally impoverished.
The polemics of post-colonialism do not end here. Decolonization signifies roughly a national liberation in the form of transfer of power from the colonial power structures to an indigenous elite. In reality, it has remained a mere reproduction of the colonial patterns of power and authority. Colonial legacies still remain a characteristic hallmark in the former colonies. The poverty-stricken masses continue to reel under exploitation and domination. At another level, the heterogeneous identities with distinct cultural and historical experiences are threatened by the homogenization process of nationalism led by the dominant majority appropriating state power in the post-colonial space. Any attempt to unify and impose a teleological historicity on the diverse identities would naturally mean a process that moves towards the erasure of heterogeneity. Sartre's observation is quite illuminating:

...enslaved peoples are still to be found there, together with some who have achieved a simulacrum of phoney independence, others who are still fighting to attain sovereignty and others again who have obtained complete freedom but who live under the constant menace of imperialist aggression.\(^{10}\)

The need to locate certain theoretical positions within the discourse of colonialism compels many scholars to take a deep plunge into post-structuralism and theories of 'deconstruction' and 'historicity'. Post-structuralist strategies of 'decentring' become a much too hyped and familiar debate in the post-colonial academic scene where an elite intelligentsia\(^{11}\) invariably shares in the characteristically post-structuralist desire to "decentre" the dominant, White metropolitan, European-culture. The central post-colonial theoretical concern, as advanced in many recent works in this field of study, reflects a culture that entails a revolt of the margin against the metropolis, the periphery against the centre, by which all experience becomes "uncentred, pluralistic and nefarious".\(^{12}\) In this apparently ambiguous and ambivalent theoretical construct based on an equally confusing word play what constitutes the margins/peripheries and the metropolis/centre need serious scrutiny.\(^{13}\) If the margins/peripheries signify the formerly colonised under developed/ backward (Third World) countries and the metropolis/centre signify the developed/advanced (First World) countries, there is a problem of ascertaining the real nature of a Third World theoretical framework and the ambivalent characteristics of the 'three worlds' theory where the Second world is conspicuously absent make it problematic to accept the decentring concept behind post-colonial theory. Moreover the question of America, Canada and Australia, the First World Capitalist countries vis-a-vis their post-colonial status in relation to metropolitan Europe still remains
unanswered. Post-colonialism with all its significance in contemporary academic debates on colonialism and imperialism remains a highly charged field marked with increasing dissensions within and repeated attacks from outside. Beset with a number of problems resulting from diverse theoretical configurations, trajectories and critical practices the scene is chaotic

Initiated largely by Edward Said's *Orientalism* which actually was not so much of the Orient itself but of the ways in which the Orient was constructed as the ‘Other’ by British and French scholarship, Said’s discourse, replete with Foucauldian terms and ideas like ‘archive’, ‘discursive practice’, ‘episteme’, reveals its complicity with European post-structuralism. His discourse denunciates the whole of Western civilization in an extremely uncompromising manner as Foucault’s denunciation of the Western episteme. Gayatri Spivak, an erudite scholar and student of Derrida, resorts to a deconstructionist approach inclusive of feminist and subaltern politics. Homi Babha, called post-colonialism’s subtlest thinker by Marxist critics, looks towards a post-national, multi-cultural, multi-racial society in the post-colonial space. His concepts of mimicry and hybridity seek to locate a post-colonial culture in the midst of a diasporic experience where the elite ‘Third World’ intellectual finds himself placed in a Western environment. Inspite of the difference and dissension, these three important theorists do seem to agree on the persisting continuity of colonialism in the sphere of politics, culture and economy. The debates generated in the wake of their theoretical intervention firmly hints at the need to reassess post-colonial theory in relation to the actual realities prevailing in the former colonies of Asia, Africa and Latin America. And this necessitates a meaningful reconsideration of the issues of colonialism as a whole particularly the brand of colonialism that prevailed in Africa.
Notes


3. An insightful reading on this aspect of anti-colonial nationalism is provided in Partha Chatterjee. Nationalist Thought and the colonial World: A Derivative Discourse (Delhi: OUP,1986).


9. Aijaz Ahmad’s arguments against Frederic Jameson’s position in the chapter titled “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the National Allegory” in In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures. provide an interesting account.


11. Aijaz Ahmad’s critique of the intellectual bourgeoisie in the post-colonial domain, reproducing the post-structuralist rumblings, serves as a grim reminder of the need to ascertain a separate and distinctive theoretical framework. The chapter titled “Literary Theory and Third World Literature: Some contexts” in In Theory: classes, Nations, Literatures. 43-72 provides interesting insights.


