

# Shifting Boundaries: The Postcolonial and Postcolonialism

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In his most recent book, *Postcolonialism*, Robert Young makes a useful distinction between the terms "postcolonial" and "postcolonialism." He defines the postcolonial as "coming after colonialism and imperialism, in their original meaning of direct-rule domination, but still positioned within imperialism in its later sense of the global system of hegemonic economic power. The postcolonial is a dialectical concept that marks the broad historical facts of decolonization and the determined achievement of sovereignty--but also the realities of nations and peoples emerging into a new imperialistic context of economic and sometimes political domination." Postcolonialism names "a theoretical and political position which embodies an active concept of intervention within such oppressive circumstances" (57).

Young's careful distinction between a set of political conditions and a theoretical stance is important in terms of the study of "postcolonial" cultural production because some prominent work in the field suggests that all such production has the same agenda or the same perspective. Commenting on the study of "postcolonial literature," Stephan Sleman writes of the "confusion in which the project of identifying the scope and nature of anti-colonialist resistance in writing has been mistaken for the project which concerns itself with articulating the literary nature of Third and Fourth-World cultural groups" (31). A classic example of this confusion is the claim in *The Empire Writes Back* that: "post-colonial literatures everywhere . . . emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial" (Ashcroft 2). This claim is highly problematic, since there are plenty of examples of literature from postcolonial societies which are by no means focused on writing back to the colonizer and to the colonizer's culture. As Arun Mukherjee asserts, "This kind of theorizing leaves us only one modality, one discursive position. We are forever forced to interrogate European discourses, of only one particular kind, the ones that degrade and deny our humanity. I would like to respond that our cultural productions are created in response to our own needs, and we have many more needs than constantly to 'parody the imperialists'" (6). Mukherjee alludes here to the enormous diversity of concerns to which "postcolonial" cultural productions responds—a diversity created, in part, by different forms of imperialism and the multitude of pre-colonial cultures which they impacted. Such diversity is repressed by the kind of definitions of "postcolonial" offered by *The Empire Writes Back*.

Young's definitions also addresses the complaint of critics like Anne McClintock and Aijaz Ahmed that the term postcolonialism elides continued economic imperial relationships between the former colonizers and colonized and projects a problematic notion of progress which can be "prematurely celebratory" (294). Young carefully distinguishes between colonialism as direct rule which the post in postcolonial designates as over and imperialism which can designate economic and indirect political control beyond the moment of formal

independence; in other words, he enables us to mark the important moment of formal independence from European colonialism without ignoring continued forms of imperial control.

Yet, despite the apparent soundness of Young's definitions, they do not entirely escape the kinds of problems that those like McClintock and Ahmed detect in the suggestion of a movement beyond colonialism suggested by the post in postcolonial. The problems with Young's definitions turn on the issue of the nation and its relationship with colonialism. Young claims that the post in postcolonial refers to national liberation from direct colonial rule but not freedom from other forms of imperialism. However, national independence did not necessarily result even in freedom from direct colonial control for many within the new nations; Young's definition only works if we focus on the relationship between newly independent nations and their former colonizers and repress forms of internal colonialism. As Anne McClintock defines it, "Internal colonization occurs where the dominant part of a country treats a group or region as it might a foreign colony" (295). An easy example of internal colonialism would be apartheid South Africa. Because they were free from British rule, Afrikaners in Apartheid South Africa thought of themselves as postcolonial (in Young's terms). Yet, suggesting that blacks under apartheid would see the era of colonialism over in any way is highly debatable. In other words, we need to avoid too strict an equation between freedom from direct foreign control and liberation from colonialism; this equation can all too easily encourage an exclusive focus on the struggle against external forms of control and can, as a result, suppress the varied and abundant forms of internal colonialism in the "postcolonial" world--which themselves often work in contradictory ways with external economic control.

Yet, despite the many problems with the term "postcolonial," it has certain advantages. As Rajeswari Mohan points out, using it when referring to cultural production from what is still often called the "Third World" encourages a focus on political relationships and discourages an eliding of the way that past and present imperial connections between "the west and the rest" have helped produce contemporary global conditions: "As a historical and epistemological category, postcoloniality immediately draws attention to the historical and cultural contexts of producing and reading texts in a world riven by political hierarchies, economic manipulations, and hegemonic interests" (34). Mohan's explanation of the benefits of using the term "postcolonial" or "postcoloniality" points to an important connection between the use of this term and "postcolonialism" because those who ascribe to postcolonialism insist on understanding the "Third World" and its relationship with the "First World" in the light of the colonial past. As Young asserts, Postcolonialism "involves a reconsideration of the history of modern European colonization, particularly from the perspective of those suffering its effects, together with the defining of this history's contemporary social and cultural impact." (Postcolonialism 4). This intellectual work enables an exploration of the common elements that linked different forms of European colonialism; as a result, it continues the work of anti-colonial liberation movements which found common cause, despite the wide variety of colonial situations from which they developed. This is not to deny that we must remain attuned to the plethora of colonial and postcolonial situations. As Young claims in *Colonial Desire*, "at this point in the postcolonial era, as we seek to understand the operation and effects of colonial history, the homogenization of colonialism does also need to be set against its historical and geographical particularities. The question for any theory of colonial discourse is whether it can maintain, and do

justice to, both levels" (165).

This need for careful attention to the interplay between the universal and particular should certainly be applied to the term "postcolonial." As Ania Loomba notes, the postcolonial "is a word that is useful only if we use it with caution and qualifications." It "is useful in indicating a general process with some shared features across the globe. But if it is uprooted from specific locations, [it] cannot be meaningfully investigated, and, instead, the term begins to obscure the very relations of domination that it seeks to uncover" (19).

### **Works Cited**

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