

Post-colonialism

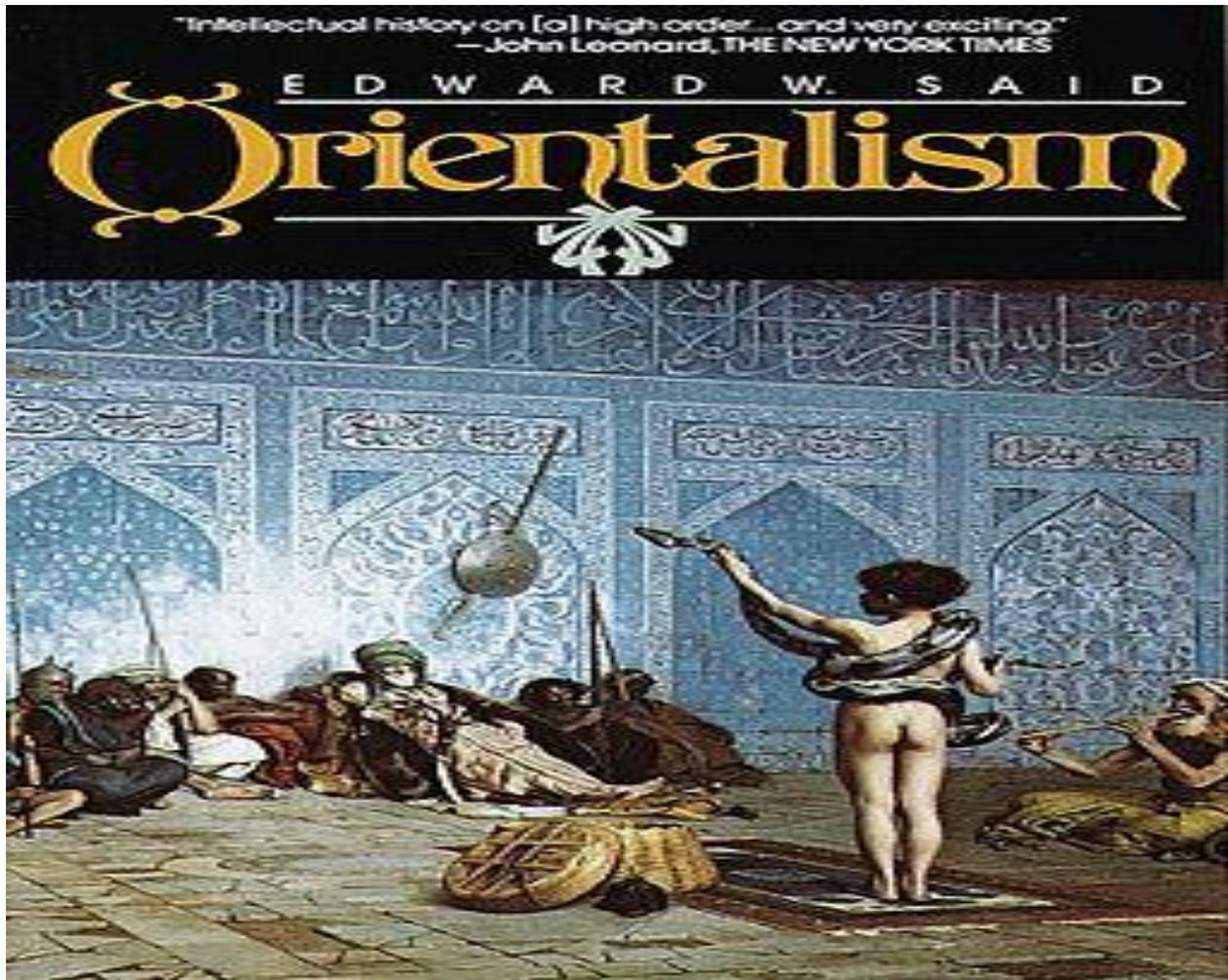


Paper : Colonialism in India
Lesson : Post-Colonialism
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Table of Contents

- Chapter 1: **Post-Colonial perspective on Colonialism**
 - 1.1: Introduction.
 - 1.1.1: Discussion on Post-Colonial perspective.
 - 1.1.2: 1.1.2 Understanding Post-Colonial theory in the context of India
 - 1.1.3: Critics of the Post- Colonial School of Thought.
 - 1.1.4: Concluding Remarks.
 - Objective
 - Summary
 - Exercises
 - Glossary
 - References





[Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism_\(book\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism_(book))]

When we speak of post colonial lit

When we speak of postcolonialism, it implies colonialism existed as a precedent to the postcolonial era. Likewise, there is a presumption of colonial literature as a fall-out of Imperialism, which would have been written in the colonial period. By its very nature, post colonial literature inscribes culture in a picture frame, for example like the one above, for this literature affirms the identity of the nation set free. With a predominantly local colour, this literature is realistic. In contrast is literature by the alien ruling people. "We are progress", they said. They convinced themselves that they had the right and duty to teach others. They meant to civilize the world, or so they said !

1.1 Introduction

After the Second World War, post-colonial school of thought developed in response to the Liberal and Marxist understanding of colonialism. Post-colonialist theorist primarily criticised the argument of the Liberal school, which believes that the countries of 'Orient' are uncivilized, barbaric and savage. According to the post-colonial perspective, as it is commonly known, the justification of colonial occupation as 'civilising mission' was a farce and an ethnocentric idea (Said.E. 1978). Basically, Edward Said criticised the whole project of "civilizing mission" of colonial countries and argued that by furthering the notion of the civilizing mission, Imperial historians tried to depict a picture of eastern countries as 'backward' and 'pre-modern', so that they can legitimize their rule over the countries of the Orient (East). Edward Said tried to view "civilizing mission" in the context of 'knowledge-power relationship'. This school of thought studied western writings and practices and tried to establish that the so-called claims of superiority of the West, which led it to occupy the East, were nothing new. This was a fall-out of the Industrial revolution. In post-industrial Europe, the myth of backwardness of the Orient was purposefully created by colonialist historiography to justify the need of the 'capitalists' to establish various colonies around the world on the basis of absolute force or advancements of their war-machine.

Broadly, post-colonial state refers to those kinds of state who fought their freedom struggle and achieved their independence after Second World War. However, the very term 'post-colonial' is debatable. In general, the term 'post-colonial' refers to post-independence period after Second World War.

Since 1970s, the term has been used by literary critics. The term 'post-colonial' per se was first used to refer to cultural interactions within literary circles of colonial societies. However, the term, 'post-colonial' commonly refer to the "political, linguistic and cultural experience of societies" of former European colonies.

The founding work in this tradition was brought by the Edward Said's book, '*Orientalism*'. This led to the development of new discourses on colonialism. This school of thought believed that 'power discourses' shaped the understanding of colonialism at large. Basically, post-colonial approach deals with the impact of colonialism over the culture and society of post-colonial states. Scholars, associated with this school of thought, adopted the discourse analysis method of post-modernist/post-structuralist scholars. For example, Edward Said has used the style of Michael Foucault, Homi Bhabha style was influenced by Althusser's and Lacan's and Gayatri Spivak adopted the method of Derrida.

Post-colonialism

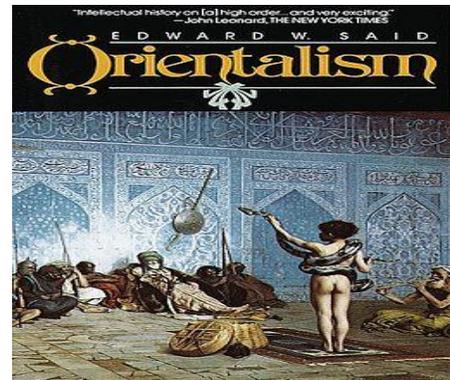
Orient and Occident

'Orient' means 'East' and 'Occident' means 'West'. In liberal writings, the picture of 'Orient' countries had been portrayed as 'uncivilized', 'barbaric' and 'savage'. Whereas, post-colonialist thinkers, like Edward Said, criticized this aspect and tried to link portrayal of such depiction of 'Orient' as nothing but showing the cultural superiority of the Occidental countries over the 'Oriental' countries. This dichotomy of civilized-uncivilized created the so called need for a notion of the "civilizing mission".

1.1.1 Discussion on Post-Colonial perspective.

A new critical approach to colonialism developed particularly, as argued earlier, in the wake of Said's *Orientalism*. In his famous work, Edward Said tries to show how European power tried to portray the picture of the 'Orient' as backward, uncivilized and barbaric. Edward Said characterised 'Orientalism' as a Western style for "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient" (Said,E:1978). The portrayal of the Orient has always been their part of 'knowing the Orient project'.

Post-colonial school argues that the portrayal about the 'Orient' is not a true discourse about the 'Orient'. In fact, it is all about the relationship of power, domination and hegemony between the Occident and Orient. Orientalism models a wide range of institutional construction of the 'colonial other' where the colonised subject is characterised as 'other' through discourses such as "primitivism" and "cannibalism", as a means of establishing the binary separation of the coloniser and colonised. In a way, asserting the "naturalness" and "primacy" of the colonising culture and world view. Such kinds of constructions stem from their enlightenment values. That is why, they claim that their rule in India is nothing but for a noble cause: -'civilizing mission'.



[[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism_\(book\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism_(book))]
Image 1

This is the foundational work of Edward Said which shaped the post-colonial literatures. Said tries to argue how western countries created 'false' knowledge or myth about the orient countries that they are backward and barbaric. Basically, in his book, he emphasized the "Eurocentric" bias against Arab-Islamic world in particular.

Post-colonialism



Image 2. *The country is depicted as Mother and her dependents as the colonial offspring.*

([William-Adolphe Bouguereau, 1883](#))

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism>

In order to get legitimacy for their rule, they have created several kinds of binaries like *rational-irrational, mind-body, self-other, civilized-native, order-chaos* and so on.

This whole issue of creating binaries were rooted in the power and knowledge discourses. Edward Said argues that the whole business of 'knowing the orient project' was nothing but a way to control the masses of the Orient by showing that their culture is subordinate to European culture. To quote Edward Said, "the most formidable ally of economic and political control had long been the business of 'knowing' other peoples because this 'knowing' underpinned imperial dominance and became the mode by which they were increasingly persuaded to know themselves: that is, as subordinate to Europe (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000/2007, 29). " It means the subject of the colonisers' countries were persuaded or taught to believe that the culture of 'occidental' countries is far superior to their culture. So, for Edward Said, the sustainability and endurance of colonialism or imperialism was based on their knowledge of the 'other'.

Post-colonialism

In a way, unlike other studies which focused only on either economic or political logic of colonialism, Said tried to draw the attention to the relationship between 'knowledge' and 'power'. By doing this, Edward Said was able to "undermine the ideological assumption of value-free knowledge" of the colonial powers and argued that this was part of their dominating project. Edward Said has used Michael Foucault's understanding of discourses as a "form of knowledge that is not used instrumentally in service of power but rather is itself a form of power". Therefore, according to Said, by representation of the 'oriental' culture as 'other' was nothing but the product of "western epistemology and colonial projects of power" (Stanford encyclopaedia of Philosophy).

Another major contribution to the post-colonialist theory is related with the Gayatri Spivak's writings. In her famous work '*Can subaltern Speak*', Spivak tries to question the 'autonomous voice' of subaltern people, independent from the mainstream voice. She falls in to the 'problem of representation' and argues that "representation has not withered away". She pointed out that it is hard to find the idea of transparent subaltern speech and those who are expecting that by removing the intermediary like the expert, the judge, the



Image 3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism>

imperial administrator and so on, will enable them to recognize that the authentic truth based on experience is nothing but imaginary. It is because everywhere power exists "even in language itself, so transparency and authenticity are impossible". Basically, Spivak questions the Antonio Gramsci's views about subalterns, where Gramsci's subaltern can have their autonomous voice, independent from others.

So, here also, Spivak tried to point out that how the culture and language of dominant power shaped mainstream voice, where there is no say of subaltern or the marginalised. In line with this tradition of post-colonial interpretation of colonial text, Homi Bhabha has taken up further the importance of the written text as an instrument of control. He argued that the "emblem of the English book is one of the most important of signs taken for wonders by which the coloniser controled the imagination and the aspirations of the colonised, because

Post-colonialism

the book assumes a greater authority than the experience of the colonised peoples themselves (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1995, 02).” At the same time, such authority also

‘Knowing the Orient project’ had helped in the consolidation of empire in India. Establishment of the ‘Asiatic society’, in 1784, by Sir William Jones for the learning of Oriental culture was nothing but their part of ‘knowing the Orient Project’. At the Asiatic Society, many of the Indian religious texts were translated first in Persian and later into English, just for the sake of Indian culture and society.

Colonial scholars criticised the concept of ‘absolute monarchical’ culture of ancient India, where people had no right against monarchy. By doing this, the coloniser tried to defy the ancient Indian culture. However, later notion of absolute monarchy was criticised by the nationalist historiographer just to counter the colonial narrative of the Indian past. Against the colonial narrative, the nationalist historiographer tried to show that in ancient India, Monarchy was not ‘absolute’- in fact, there was ‘limited monarchy’, where ‘king’ was bound by performing his dharma. Not only this, by conducting census, Britishers came to know about the Indian society and one can see how their knowledge of Indian society (caste structure) helped in their recruiting policies.

“renders the colonial presence ambivalent” since it only replaces those imaginary which was acquired by the colonised society during colonial rule. The people of the colonised society experienced that their relationship with imperial presence becomes one of “constant, if implicit, contestation and opposition”. Bhabha repetitively points to the fact that colonial discourse was obliged to put into rehabilitating stereotypes that were constantly subject to historical change. Bhabha’s term ‘Hybridity’, which means “colonial discourse with the threat of recognition; the other is like, but only partially” like, self-“almost the same but not quite/white (Wolfe, Patrick 1997: 399)”. He argues that on the one hand, it strove to “domesticate-to assimilate- the native; on the other, it was undone-de-authorized, disavowed-by the partial resemblance”, the “difference between being English and being Anglicized” that was thus produced (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1995). It was nothing but a kind of racial essence that underpinned the domination of colonial power.

1.1.2 Understanding Post-Colonial theory in the context of India

If one views the British policy towards its Indian colony then one can see that their belief in savageness of the Easterners led to the bitter oppression of the latter’s cultural and social practices during colonial occupation. The so-called ‘social-reforms’, like bringing legislation against Sati system (1829) or for the cause of widow remarriage (1856) were reforms guided by a superiority complex of the colonial administrators. For them, the local beliefs and faith was not worthy of consideration while initiating these reforms. In fact, the physical occupation of resources and political institution came later. For them, education was one of the strategies of control like war and conquest. The purpose of introducing English education can be seen in the statement of Lord Macaulay: to make “*poor and rude Indian into a class of persons. Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect*”. It means, that for colonizers, education was

Post-colonialism

primarily meant for creating a class of English speaking *Babus* (clerks), who can serve the need of the British rule. In a way, through their education policy, they colonised the mind of Indian people and gradually the knowledge of English became synonymous of "modernity". Apart from that, their 'knowing the orient project' had also helped in the consolidation of empire in India. Establishment of the 'Asiatic society' in 1784, by Sir William Jones, for the learning of Oriental culture was nothing but their part of 'knowing the Orient Project'. At the Asiatic Society, many of the varied Indian religious texts were translated first in Persian and later into English, just for the sake of Indian culture and society. Colonial scholars criticised the concept of 'absolute monarchical' culture of ancient India, where people had no right against monarchy. By doing this, the coloniser tried to defy the ancient Indian culture. However, later notions of absolute monarchy were criticised by the nationalist historiographer just to counter the colonial narrative of the Indian past. Against the colonial narrative, the nationalist historiographer tried to show that in ancient India, Monarchy was not 'absolute'-- in fact, there was 'limited monarchy', where the 'king' was bound by performing his *dharma*. Not only this, by conducting census, Britishers came to know more about Indian society and one can see how their knowledge of Indian society (caste structure) due to census, helped in their recruiting policies. So, one can see how their knowledge of the Orient, consolidated their empire in India.

1.1.3 Critics of the Post-colonial School of Thought.

Therefore, the post-colonial school adopted the post-modernist and post-structuralist style to analyse the whole colonial project and criticised the hegemonic project of imperial powers. Looking from knowledge and power relationship, this school of thought brought a new perspective to view colonialism. However, complexities of the post-colonial societies put some limitation before this school of thought. The portrayal of the 'Orient' as weak and backward has been continued even after the end of formal colonies. In many of the Western films and literatures, the 'Orient' have been portrayed as backward and underdeveloped (one can see movies of the James Bond series or the film starring Peter Sellers called 'The Party'). That is why, post-Colonial theorists, are in favour of the insurrection of local culture and beliefs. Most of them argue strongly in favour of celebration of local practices and history and deny the existence and need of "modernity" totally. Thus, the Post-Colonial project questions each and everything coming from the West. The problem with this school of thought is that in order to establish the equality of the East and its independence, it refuses the need for any change and becomes an apology for retaining the status quo. Thus, a critique of the Post-Colonial perspective is it justified anything and everything in the name of the local or the native and refused the need for change. In a way, it can be a justification for the status of the oppressed sections in society and reinforces that values such as equality and democracy have originated in the West.

By contesting both the old understanding of colonialism, of both the Marxist and the Liberal tradition, the post-colonial thinkers moved closer to post- modernism. For them, the entire tradition of progress through rationale was to be rejected as being part of Euro-centrism. This attitude would obviously thwart the cultural journey of mankind.

Post-colonialism

On its theory of knowledge, critics argue that though the cultural dimensions of the post-colonial approach is laudable, but the human dimension or the struggles of the victims of colonialism is missing from current discourses of post-colonialists. The political dimensions of an economy based on capitalism is totally segregated and left untouched by this school of thought. This school displays a limited understanding of capitalism. Scholar and critics have argued that by concentrating excessively on the cultural dimension of colonialism, post – colonial school of thought underplays the role of the revolutionary movements of that period. Hence some critics call this a past-revolutionary project rather than a post-colonial school of thought. Some put this differently by saying that by an over-emphasis on the cultural aspect of the suppression faced by the natives, post-colonialists real battle that was waged by oppressed societies against world capitalism. Leading historian, Sumit Sarkar, disagrees with the complete rejection by the post-colonialist historiography of European Enlightenment and modernity in the mere guise of indigenous tradition and native culture.

1.1.4 Concluding Remarks.

However, what cannot be denied is that post-colonialism has looked afresh at traditional thinking on colonialism and imperialism. This thinking, now known as post-colonial approach, has nonetheless focused on the problems of the dispossessed and of internal colonialism signifying marginalization. Moving closer to post-modernism, this approach has become refined and subtle, but as a theory of practical knowledge the attitude is verve and ineffective. Slowly its uni-dimensional character is coming to the fore, but it has enriched greatly the intellectual discourse on colonialism and imperialism.

Objectives

- The e-lesson gives a better understanding of post-colonialism
- It will enhance the practical aspect of post-colonial theory.

Summary

- Post-Colonial perspective primarily criticized the colonial and the Marxist interpretations of colonialism.
- This perspective defined the whole project of colonialism in the context of knowledge and power relationship.
- This school tried to show how the depiction of 'orient' countries as 'backward' and 'savage' helped in their expansion in the name of 'civilizing mission'.
- For their rule, the colonizer created many binaries like ration-irrational, order-chaos, for its legitimate rule.

Post-colonialism

- This school criticized the “modernist” argument of liberal scholars and argued in favour of local culture and history.

Exercises

- 1.1 Discuss the post-colonial perspective on colonialism.
- 1.2 Critically examine Edward Said’s idea of “Orientalism”.

Glossary

Orient means ‘East’.

Occident means ‘West’.

Orientalism is about the study of Eastern countries. Edward Said’s work ‘Orientalism’ became the founding work for Post-colonial approach towards colonialism .

Post-Colonialism discusses study of the society and politics of post-colonialist state, which got their independence after Second World War.

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Suggested Readings

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3. Web Links

1.1 Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism>

Image 1 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism> [book]

Image 2: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism>

Image 3: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism>

