

Postcolonialism and “International” Politics: A Critical Perspective

RAJESH KUMAR

Abstract: Postcolonialism points out the Eurocentrism of the theories of “International Relations” and seeks to “provincialise Europe.” This essay reviews this claim, through a critique of Sanjay Seth, and argues that postcolonial theory problematically uses binaries to raise its concerns, and suffers from anthropocentrism, which harms its cause.

Keywords: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Hybridity, *Orientalism*, Locke

Postcolonialism seeks to systematically “provincialise Europe,” by showing inconsistencies in the “mainstream IR” (Seth 2011, 167-8). Postcolonialism brings to the fore the understanding that “conquest, colonialism and empire” constitute the “central part” of “a larger story” of “capitalism, modernity or the expansion of international society” (Seth 2011, 174). The “post” in postcolonial, according to him, signifies not the “period after colonialism” but rather “the effects of this era” in constituting today’s world (Seth 2011, 174).

In his critique, Seth clearly claims a foundational status for “colonialism,” recovering it as the “central part” for the story that has been made accessible though the narratives of “capitalism, modernity or the expansion of international society.” It is surprising, then, that Seth offers a misconstrued and limited view of colonialism. As I will discuss in this essay, his understanding of colonialism has two defects: first, he uses binary categories that fail to represent the contemporary condition, that is, “the word that is ours” (Seth 2011, 174); and second, the view of colonialism he presents is essentially anthropocentric. If postcolonialism has to acquire a critical edge in International Relations discipline, the concerns raised here must be addressed. I begin by discussing why the use of binary categories are inappropriate for understanding colonialism and its effects.

Seth (2011) assumes, much like the conventional wisdom he attempts to critique, that “the colonial encounter” was a conflict between the binary

* Rajesh Kumar teaches Political Science at Delhi College of Arts and Commerce, New Delhi.

opposites: that is, between “the Europe/ the West and the non-Europe/ the non-West.” In his formulation, the colonizer and the colonized are neat oppositional categories. At one instance, he suggests that understanding “Europe’s relations with the world outside Europe” is key to understanding how Europe became dominant (Seth 2011, 172). At another, he suggests that the current international society should be understood by examining “the interactions between Europe and those it colonised” (Seth 2011, 174). These interactions, he points out, constituted the both through “multifarious exchanges”; therefore, the present order cannot be understood simply as “the West” impacting and “awakening” the “dormant non-West” (Seth 2011, 174). Even as he recognises the constitutive role of “the colonial encounter” for the both, it is clear that Seth’s world is conceived through binary categories. The idea of the Europe/ West or the non-Europe/ the non-West, however, signifies a sense of origin or root which is always problematic to trace. The binaries also ‘essentialise’ and homogenise the reality they appear to be representing.

The binary view also does not correspond with “the world that is ours” at present. We witness the contemporary human condition more as “hybrid” or “syncretic.” Colonialism certainly has played a role, but binary categories that Seth employs do not help us make sense of it. The postcolonial contemporary condition is distinguished by heterogeneous, multiple and diverse subjectivities. The Europe and the non-Europe both exist today in images, symbols, consumption patterns and different lifestyles across the world. Outside the geographical boundaries, both are also located through their respective diasporic communities or the migrants. “Diaspora” and the “migrants” are often used interchangeably. Very crucially, Leela Gandhi suggests, both evoke the specific traumas of human displacement (Gandhi 1998, 131).

Even as the migrants have to learn new languages and adapt afresh in the host countries, they carry their native cultures wherever they go. It is not uncommon to see spaces like “Little India” or “China Town” outside India and China. Europe and Asia meet in Australia. And America is present in Asia, Africa and also elsewhere on the planet. Nevertheless, these spaces exist in forms which have evolved through human practices, and by the exchanges between “the migrants and the hosts.” The political and cultural imaginations of the migrating populations combine the past, present, and future expectations in various ways, therefore, their experiences cannot be understood through neat binaries.

Assessing a postcolonial condition like this, Homi K Bhabha (1990)

argues that migrations generate conditions that represent "ambivalence" and "hybridity" (Bhabha 1990). Hybridity may refer to anything from genetic mixtures, the fusion of ideas and music to the conscious or unconscious inclusions of past into the present. While "hybridity" represents the present condition, "ambivalence" suggest the possibilities between the past and the future. As human migrations have historically been a continuous phenomenon, Seth's understanding of the colonial era and the present world through binary categories becomes more complicated. Franz Fanon, in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1991, 25) also captures the sense of displacement/ replacement during colonial encounter when he argues that 'the fact that the newly returned Negro adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation'. Neither the colonizer's identity is stable, Fanon suggests, nor does the identity of the colonized remain so. We cannot trace their original state. Epistemologically, therefore, the strategy of binary categories proves to be inappropriate.

Seth's understanding of colonialism as a binary oppositional encounter is surprising when he seeks to dissolve binary categories at another level. According to Seth, postcolonial theory "questions the epistemological privilege" of the knowledge system "which is blind to the constitutive...role of knowledge" (Seth 2011, 168). The constitutive role of knowledge, he says, comes by negating the knowledge system which "defines" knowing as "a relation" between "the subject" and "an object" (Seth 2011, 168). Thus, where the conventional knowledge system constructs a neat, binary division between the subject and the object, according to Seth, postcolonial theory aligns with a view which rejects this.

Understanding colonialism as a binary construct makes Seth's position inconsistent with the postcolonial theory of knowledge where the binary categories are problematised. In a way, the binary categories – "Europe/West" and "non-Europe/ non-West" – reproduce the same conditions – like the duality of "the subject" and "an object" – which Seth seeks to question. If Seth's critique has to succeed, this defect must be corrected. Let me now discuss, as I noted earlier, the second defect with Seth's understanding of colonialism.

Seth's postcolonial project takes an anthropocentric view of colonialism. That is, he understands colonialism as a relationship only among the human beings. He fails to see that the relationship between human beings and the natural environment resembles the colonial relationship in every way: it is "unequal," "hierarchical," and "coercive." The colonisation of nature also

followed the same pattern as “the colonial encounter” between “the Europe and the non-Europe.” As Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1991[1978]) informs us, the Europe’s domination was legitimised through creating a knowledge about the non-Europe. This knowledge privileged the Europe as a superior in relation with the non-Europe. Similarly, the knowledge system that privileged the individual over everything else legitimated the colonisation of the natural environment.

We may look into John Locke (1988) to understand this perspective better. John Locke’s attempt to defend capitalism starts from his account of private ownership. This may also be read as justifying the control of human beings over the natural environment. His theory of private property allows appropriation of the fruits of one’s labour. That is, if a person “mixes his labour” with something external to himself, he acquires rights in that thing. That the material world or natural world can be used for one’s preservation is a knowledge that essentially puts the individual in a position of control. According to Uday Mehta (cited in Seth 2011, 180), Locke’s project involved “constructing” an “individuality” that provided a secure foundation for producing the Western political thought. Nevertheless, Locke’s project also laid the basis for a knowledge framework that put the individual in control of his physical and material environment. Industrialisation – preceding or following colonialism, in Europe or elsewhere– facilitated the colonisation of environment further. It is ironic that the “civilising” benefits of industrialisation exposed the human beings as colonisers of environment. A postcolonial theory that claims to recover colonialism as “a central part” in its narrative must not ignore this image of colonisation.

For the reasons I have discussed in this essay, it is clear that Seth’s conceptualisation of colonialism is misconstrued and limited. Seth has proposed to offer “a postcolonial critique of the discipline, not a postcolonial way of practising it” (Seth 2011, 168). But the political agency of postcolonialism, in theory or in practice, would lack the critical edge unless these concerns are addressed.

Bibliography

- Ahmad, Aijaz. 1995. “The politics of literary postcoloniality.” *Race & Class* 36: 1-20.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1990. “Introduction: narrating the nation.” In *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi K Bhabha, 1-7. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Fanon, Franz. 1991. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press.

- Gandhi, Leela. 1998. *Postcolonial Theory: A critical introduction*. Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Goss, Jasper. 1996. "Postcolonialism: Subverting Whose Empire?" *Third World Quarterly* 17: 239-250.
- Lazarus, Neil. 2011. "What postcolonial theory doesn't say." *Race & Class* 53: 3-27.
- Locke, John. 1988. *Two Treatises of Government, Student Edn*, edited by P Laslett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mehta, Uday S. 1992. *Anxiety of freedom: Imagination and Individuality in Locke's Political Thought*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Nixon, Robb. 2005. "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism." In *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, edited by Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzel, Antoinette Burton and Jed Esty, 233-251. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Said, Edward. 1991 [1978]. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient, 3rd edn*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Seth, Sanjay. 2011. "Postcolonial Theory and the Critique of International Relations." *Millennium Journal of International Studies* 40: 167- 183.
- Shohat, Ella. 1992. "Notes on the post-colonial." *Social Text* 31/32: 99-113.