



# Postcolonialism: A Contested Theory

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*(Abstract – The origin of the idea of postcolonialism could be traced back to the decolonization process in the 1970s and 1980s'. It brought about an end of modernism in social science research. It is a discourse that refers to the hegemonic colonial theory of the West and looks beyond the liberation movement in the Afro-Asian and Australian nations. Since its inception including the father of the theory, Edward Said has been widely criticized, contested, and debated unequivocally by most of the prominent contemporary thinkers and philosophers despite its seminal contribution and giving an alternative paradigm to social science research. The most significant issues around which the postcolonial theory has unfolded are culture, ethnicity, feminism, art, hybridity, discrimination, marginalization, etc. The most predominant critics of postcolonialism are the poststructuralists, neo-colonialists, and those who are researching global studies though it is a fashionable pedagogy in social science research in the contemporary academic world.)*

*Keywords-* Postcolonialism, enlightenment, modernism, poststructuralist, neocolonialism, subalterns, globalism, Amar Chitra Katha

No scholarship can successfully dissociate itself from the biases located within the varied social structures and cultural individualities associated with post-colonialism. In its simplest terms, postcolonial scholarship is a concept of understanding in the academic world that challenges the West-centric, modernist, and positivist ideas of description along with indigenous knowledge. What is postcolonialism in history? Postcolonialism is known as a critical theory or an alternative discourse on the cultural, political, and economic bequest of colonialism and imperialism from geographical and historical settings. Dipesh Chakravarty, a well-known and celebrated postcolonial historian, said that 'it is to contest the absolute ignorance of the majority of humankind insinuated by positivist social science'. The goal is therefore not merely to encourage cultural diversity in knowledge production but to steer knowledge production away from the dominant Western-centric mode of reasoning implicitly accepted across continents. [1] The postcolonial critique goes on to inquire about the structure and efficacy of particular forms of nationalism as they emerged at a time when colonial ideology flattered and declined. This thematic proposition of modern thought forces us to rethink our understanding of the deeper relations between people, cultures, or communities, and the ethical encounter interrupted by colonialism. A

majority of postcolonial critiques concentrate on the militant condemnation of a pernicious political ideology, but another aspect uses that condemnation to challenge and extend our understanding of how to contemplate the other. [2] Further, one of the most enduring and oft-repeated criticisms against postcolonial theory is that in objecting to the universalizing categories of Enlightenment theories as Eurocentric and inadequate in understanding the practices, experiences, and realities in the non-European world, postcolonial critique is ontologizing the difference between the Orient and the Occident. The philosophers of postcolonial theory scrutinize how authors from colonized nations endeavor to express and even rejoice in their cultural trajectories and retrieve them from the conquerors. They also observe how the literature of the colonial nation is used to rationalize colonialism through the endurance of images of the colonized as mediocre. [3]

Further to elaborate the critique of postcolonialism theory focuses on the ruthlessness, the methods of exploitation by colonizers, and the inequalities and impoverishment that emanated from them. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, in *'Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, and Politics' (1996)*, explain that 'the term post-colonialism is too rigid and emphasizes 'performance theory', which is instrumental in resisting and continuing the effects of imperialism'. Lamenting the performance theory studies, he has discussed a variety of plays from hegemonized nations, which include India, Japan, China, Australia, etc. According to the author, in contemporary society, national identity politics through religious practices are very important for asserting one's own identity. [4] Vivek Chibber, an Indian-American Marxist scholar, in his well-known book *'Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital'*, which was published in 2013, defends the Marxian view and critiques some foundational tenets of postcolonial theory. The criticism of Chibber became extremely popular in postcolonial theory and is an influential paradigm for understanding the Global South. He strictly critiqued the essentializing and universalizing of the idea of enlightenment. Chibber offered a comprehensive response to the postcolonial writings on behalf of the radical Enlightenment tradition. He questioned the foundational tenets of the postcolonial subaltern study projects that unfolded on a series of analytical and historical misapprehensions. Chibber argued that it is possible to uphold a universalizing theory without yielding to Eurocentrism or reductionism. Hence, Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* is a monumental work in postcolonial critical thinking. [5] Noam Chomsky, Slavoj Žižek, and historian Robert Brenner have praised the critical and provocative narration of Chibber. The American quarterly magazine *Jacobin* called it a "strong case for why we can—and must—conceptualize the non-Western world through the same analytical lens that we use to understand developments in the West. The Los Angeles Review of Books wrote, "Chibber does a good and important job criticizing some of the foundations of subaltern studies. *Postcolonial Theory* is a book that should be read by all those engaging with postcolonial theory. [6]

Aijaz Ahmad, thinker of postcoloniality in his celebrated work *'Postcolonial Theory and The Post-Condition'*, began his criticism by interrogating Alexandre Kojève's infamous proposition "*Fin de l'histoire*" (End of History is the death of man as such), furthered by Fukuyama (postcolonialism). Ahmad suggested that postcolonialism as such an idea was put into practice much earlier before 1970 with a wide-ranging trajectory of political discourse by several postcolonial thinkers, from Hamza Alavi to John Saul. Aijaz Ahmad was

initially a contributor to postcolonial discourse theory in the 1980s, though scantily and was a product of those times, witnessed massive decolonization processes and the formation of nation-states all over the world. He believed in identifying with class, gender, history, resistance, political struggle, and, above all, human liberation and praxis. In his numerous essays, he argued that the Euro-American academy had been over French philosophy—structuralism was responsible for destroying activism with excessive textualism and Marxism with postmodernism—but none of the virtues of that debate but all its ample defects. The colonial/postcolonial binary is now used as a foundational category not just for certain states in particular countries but for the trans-continental, transhistorical making of the world in general. Suffice it to say simply that as one reads through a variety of postcolonial critics—Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, Vera Kutzinski, Sara Suleri Goodyear, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Ann McClintock, Gayatri Spivak, and others—the term gets applied to virtually the whole globe, including, notably, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, the South Pacific Islands, the states arising out of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia, not to speak of the whole of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. [7] Ahmad was so provocative in his condemnation of the lack of commitment shown even by academics like Edward W. Said and his fellow Marxist friend Frederic Jameson. He set in motion the publications of several books as well as a full issue of postcolonialism in the distinguished journal *'Public Culture'*, in response to the arguments delineated in *'In Theory'*. [8]

Similarly, John Roosa, in his well-documented article *The Subaltern Took the Postcolonial Turn,*” condemned the postcolonial Subaltern Series of Collectives of Ranjit Guha and his historian compatriots in the 1980s, the subaltern-elite dichotomy as power narratives and a ‘generic analysis’ which has very little relevance to historians. He further argues that subaltern theorization is an old dichotomy already existing in European social theory, and it went under the new name of Foucaultian postcolonial understandings in ways so far ignored by the series’ programmatic statements. He says that some members of the collective, on the pretext of uncovering a particularly “Indian modernity” and moving beyond Western categories, have redefined the concept of modernity and repeated worn-out old debates within Western social theory. [9] Benita Parry’s socio-economic materialistic approach is also quite significant to mention. In her *'Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique in 2004'*, she blatantly critiqued postcolonialism as colonial discourse from the perspective of Marxist socio-economic materialism. She then turns to literature with a series of detailed readings that not only demonstrate her theoretical position at work but also give new dimensions to widely studied texts by Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells, and E. M. Forster. Parry argues throughout that the material impulses of colonialism, its appropriation of physical resources, exploitation of human labor, and institutional repression have too long been allowed to recede from view. [10] For Parry, Said's repudiation of Marxism is ‘of a different order’ from that of other postcolonial critics who drag revolutionary figures such as Fanon and Gramsci into their agenda by attempting to stabilize and attune their thought to the ‘center-left’. Parry goes on to criticize the editors of *The Postcolonial Gramsci* for positing Marxist thinking as a restricting framework from which the editors aim to liberate Gramsci's writing. For Parry, these reappraisals of revolutionary thinkers constitute a new form of recuperative criticism that she terms ‘the rights of misprision’. If this is a strategy for ‘draining Marxist and indeed all left thought of its revolutionary impulses and energies’, Parry insists, ‘it is one to be resisted and

countered, not in the interests of a sterile rigor, but—in Benjamin's words—to rescue the past and the dead, and a tradition and its receivers, from being overpowered by conformism'. [11]

Neil Lazarus categorically argues in his introduction to *"The Postcolonial Unconscious: "Postcolonial Criticism" ...is constitutively anti-Marxist"*. The anti-Marxist positioning of postcolonial scholarships is barely a coincidence. In other words, the postcolonial thesis was a product of its own time, prey to intellectual ramifications (poststructuralism) that were themselves little more than the cultural lucidity of the West. As he puts it, "The emergent field breathed the air of the reassertion of imperial dominance in the 1970s". [12]

Eqbal Ahmad's *'Post-colonial System of Power'* provides an alternative theory that argues on the context of the post-colonial period, the unequal distribution of power, undemocratic behaviors, and other varieties of differences that persist in third-world countries today. Critiquing the postcolonial theory Ahmad had proposed an idea known as 'dependency theory', which marked an important beginning to the study of neocolonial relations. Finally, the larger question is not one of "Marxism or Enlightenment versus postcolonialism," but rather one of how to use the categories developed by Marx, or, for that matter, Kant or Hegel, to analyze the situations these thinkers neither experienced nor foresaw. This would entail being a Marxist or Enlightenment scholar in divergent ways under conditions of geopolitical and historical difference. [13]

The French philosopher Jaques Derrida and Spivak's professor Paul de Man precisely demonstrated the deconstructionism approach in the 1960s and 1970s in North America, emphasizing how the meaning of the literary text is not stable, transparent, and open for further questioning. De Man's idea had a seminal influence on Spivak's early readings of British colonial archives and Indian historiography. Her reading of William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and the works of W. B. Yeats and her scholarly preface to Derrida's *'Of Grammatology'* surprise many with the idea of deconstructionism and overtly shifting to politics and championing the cause of minorities through the political commitment. Spivak has thus persistently and persuasively demonstrated that deconstruction is an authoritative political and hypothetical tool in the post-liberation period. Unlike Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, and Edward Said, Spivak foregrounded the textual elements that shape the understanding of the social world and thereby questioned the binary opposition between philosophical or literary texts and the so-called real world, referring to the threat of globalization. [14] In 1999, Spivak's magnanimous book *"A Critique of Postcolonialism Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present"* was published by Harvard and its revised version, *Can Subaltern Speak?*, in which she vehemently critiqued postcolonialism after reading Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, and Karl Marx, all German philosophers. [15] Sangeeta Ray however, unempathetically critiqued the shifting position of Spivak and stated that 'Spivak has been commodified and marketed as the postcolonial critic in the intellectual marketplace'. [16] On the other hand, Robert Young declares Spivak a member of a 'Holy Trinity' of postcolonial-2012 critical theory that also includes Homi Bhabha and Edward Said. Aid's 'Orientalism', Bhabha's 'Mimicry and Hybridity', and Spivak's 'Subalternity' form the backbone of postcolonial literature. [17] In terms of affinities, the third critic raised questions and debates within binary oppositions. Yet, their works cannot be clubbed together. Each critic has contributed to the school differently. Said, Bhabha, and Spivak. [18] Bart-More Gilbert does agree with J.C.

Young's consideration of the 'Holy Trinity' well-designated term for Said, Bhabha, and Spivak because Said's work had a tremendous influence on them. Spivak, for example, has described Orientalism (1978) as "the sourcebook in our discipline." Gilbert suggested that in various ways the trio has many similarities and attempts to extend the idea of their mentor, Edward Said. [19] J. C. Young wrote in the second edition of *White Mythologies* (in 2003) that in 1990 he was among the first to trace the contours of some as-yet-undefined project with Said, Bhabha, and Spivak at the helm. Young demands two projects: decolonizing history and deconstructing the West. Besides Fanon, Young finds hope in three thinkers—Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—who have begun this work. Said's "disorientation," Bhabha's "ambivalence," and Spivak's "deconstruction" are the models for how to move leftist literary critique forward. [20]

Anna Ball and Karim Mattar's study on the Middle East: *The Edinburgh Companion to the Postcolonial Middle East* has a large host of established scholars, artists, and writers who share their reflections on how the kaleidoscopic local and global scopes of the Middle East could be conceptualized in the field of postcolonial studies. This edited volume by Karim Mattar revisits readings of Edward Said that downplayed his experience of exile from Palestine to demonstrate how future interrogations of postcolonial studies "as an institution" need to take greater account of Said's relation to Palestine and the Middle East. Karim Mattar and Balla have mapped out the postcolonial Middle East as a nascent sub-field; secondly, the Colonial Encounter: Discourses of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism; thirdly, states of postcoloniality: politics, religion, gender, and sexuality; and fourthly, the Postcolonial Present: Crisis and Engagement in the Global Context of the Middle East. Karim Matta and Balla questioned the applicability of Said's theory in understanding the past and present of the Middle East.[21]

In the Indian postcolonial context, Schwarz's *Writing Cultural History in Colonial and Postcolonial India* is noteworthy to mention. He has critiqued the development of historical writings in postcolonial Indian subaltern collectives. He questioned the narrative mode and traced the movement toward the metaphoric and ironic styles of the post-independence era. [22] As in the 1980s, India was stuck in a paradox. On the one hand, it was the direct heir of a brilliant civilization anchored in 3,000 years of intellectual and material accomplishments, and it was also on the verge of becoming, after China, the second country on Earth whose population exceeded 1 billion, which occurred in 2000. Today, India is a post-colonial country whose decision-makers believe that the Nehruvian paradigm has to be adjusted to new realities. [23] In the postcolonial dominant historiographical discourse, the Subaltern Studies Collective has given a new trend by crossing the traditional boundaries of history. Within the trend of 'Subaltern Studies', Sumit Sarkar has contributed a lot by proposing the theory of 'history from the below', originally designated by Edward P Thompson which directly or indirectly referring to subaltern study collectives. He is known as a brilliant postcolonial historian who employs the term subalterns for tribal and low-caste agricultural laborers and sharecroppers, landholding peasants, generally of intermediate-caste status in Bengal, and laborers in plantations, mines, and industries. He studied Marxism, and his important writings consist of the past of common people in national movements, the past of neglected groups, the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in national movements, and the dominant nature of foreign colonial government.

[24] Later, Sumit Sarkar and Gayatri Spivak too, known left-wing thinkers in the late 1980s, criticizing the subaltern study projects, opined that it was a simplistic celebration of popular resistance' by the historians accompanying the discourse. In their justified search for popular subaltern consciousness, Spivak argued, these historians had considered that all forms of struggle and common acts had emancipatory potential. While arguing so, she has borrowed the idea of the Foucauldian emancipatory notion of traditional Marxism resulting seizure of power by the oppressors from the oppressed. Spivak pointed out that this was mistaken and incomplete, and she saw it as an unjustified optimism about the struggles of the past. Secondly, he criticized the 'discursive power' notion of subaltern classes and the subaltern historian's assumption of the right to speak 'for' the oppressed. Third, most significantly and productively, the male bias of subaltern research and said the leading protagonists of subaltern collectives were male-dominated, who often unnoticed the life experiences of subaltern women while celebrating the often-macho exploits of male peasant rebels. Finally, at the Subaltern Studies conference at Calcutta in 1986, Spivak advised that historians needed to pay much more attention to how subaltern groups had been folded and structured" in the discourses of social and political domains, which is an argument of post-structuralist scholarship, attentive to the textual edifice of power and the discourses of power domination of colonizers. [25] However, Spivak's international reputation as a postcolonial critic was challenged by the publication of *The Post-colonial Critic* in 1990 by Sarah Haraysm. This was a collection of interviews and dialogue with Spivak. A range of thinkers and philosophers critiqued Spivak's idea of postcolonial deconstructionism, and to mention more, Gilbert leveled it as negative science. Spivak, however, has rightly rejected the criticism because the term postcolonialism has lost its explanatory power, narrating subaltern discourse is attempting to foster neocolonial ideas by putting colonialism and imperialism securely in the past. She goes on to portray that the intellectual West has mistaken the real political and economic oppression suffered by disenfranchised, subaltern populations in the 'Third World' and is significant in the neoliberal capitalist world. Spivak has become vocal in questioning the division between the act of reading literary, cultural, and economic texts of imperialism and global capitalism. By appealing to the historical manipulation and subjugation of the disempowered, Spivak reminds the intellectual world that any act of reading has important social and political significance. [26]

Postcolonial theory is far too standardized, despite its internal differences. Even in 1995 itself, the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* does not even make a mention of it. Edward Brathwaite is pragmatic in that postcolonialism's complex cultural and national histories are flattened into one, on the other the literary beginnings are mislocated. Arif Dirlik had established a link between postcolonialism and global capitalism and beached the work of Arun Prabha Mukherjee, as well as Aijaz Ahmad's scathing criticism in *In Theory*. There has been a marked emergence of diaspora writings in literature and history. [27] Therefore, Salman Rushdie is prominent to mention. The recent writings of Salman Rushdie, a prolific Indian-American novelist, are significant to mention. Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker call it "post-theory". Salman Rushdie's productive, multifarious composition epitomizes contemporary literature's continual tendency to dodge classifications. Being in between cultures, traditions, genres, conventions, and influences, Rushdie's work, often described as hybrid and cosmopolitan, can and should be read from a variety of perspectives, questioning postcolonialism

by highlighting such as “transnational,” “transcultural,” or “international,” in the current literary world. Thus Rushdie’s fiction between categories is gradually deviating away from postcolonial postmodernism toward cosmopolitanism.

Assessing the idea of Salman’s work—Midnight *Children* Arijana Luburic Cvijanovic and Nina Muzdeka opine that Rushdie’s work, often described as hybrid and cosmopolitan, can and should be read from a variety of perspectives. Salman has attempted to create an intersection of modernism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. Rushdie’s fiction also rewrites history, reality, and culture through intertextuality and pastiche, breaking down historical and narrative certainties, while the linguistic, stylistic, and generic experimentation examines the status of the text and does away with familiar narrative organizations of time and space. [28] Jabbar Naheem’s *Historiography and Writing Postcolonial India*, published in 2011, is a critical analysis of the uses made of India’s often millennial past by nationalist ideologues who sought a specific solution to India’s predicament on its way to becoming a post-colonial state. From independence to the present, it considers the competing visions of India’s liberation from her apocalyptic present to be found in the thinking of Gandhi, V. D. Savarkar, Nehru, and B. R. Ambedkar, as well as V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie. This book is a valuable resource for researchers interested in South Asian history, historiography or theory of history, cultural studies, English literature, postcolonial writing, and literary criticism. [29] In the context of Dalit studies in postcolonial India, Gopal Guru, in a recently published article in EPW, *The Idea of India: Derivative, Desi, and Beyond*, explained that the Dalit discourse in India presents a sharp contrast to the “derivative” and “desi” discourses governing nationalist thought and the “idea of India.” The Dalit assertion goes “beyond” the two in the submission of an imagination that is based on a “negative” language, which, however, transcends into a prescriptive form of thinking. The Dalit goes beyond both the imitative and desi since it centers itself on the local arrangement of power, which is fundamental to the Gramscian hegemonic orders of capitalism in the Indian context. [30] Recine Jean-Luc narrates that the postcolonial status of India is still ambiguous. It is, by all accounts, the dominant power in South Asia, but it has been unable to achieve fully normalized relations with its largest neighbors, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Indian media and noted analysts celebrate *Indian Unbound: The Social and Economic Revolution from Independence to the Global Information Age* by Guruchan Das, published in 2000, describing India today as a vibrant free-market democracy apprehending that the country would overcome soon various socio-economic problems. Along with another volume entitled *India Empowered* by Sekhar Gupta in 2006, it describes India’s journey towards change as a testament to the resilience, determination, and collective efforts of its people. From education and women's empowerment to sustainable development, rural upliftment, and healthcare, various sectors are witnessing transformational progress. While challenges remain, India’s commitment to inclusive growth, innovation, and social justice is steering the nation toward a brighter future. Through continued collaboration, dedication, and visionary leadership, India is poised to become a global exemplar of change and development. *India: The Next Global Superpower?* by Namita Bhandare, 2007 is equally important. Yet there is a clear difference between “global reach” and “global power.” By definition, “emerging India” is still in the process of transition. A regional power expanding its circle of influence beyond the confines of South Asia, emerging India is becoming a global player as well, though still

without being a full-fledged global power. The syndrome of the 1947 partition, which left two nations after the British Raj departed, has been so strong that even today, the regional power India enjoys due to the mere fact of its size and weight is somehow blurred. The long-chequered history of wars, tensions, and mistrust between Pakistan and India, particularly regarding Kashmir, has prevented the entire region from developing truly positive relations. [31] The most recent publications, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Romila Thapar: *The Idea of India: A Dialogue* (2024) and *Remaking the Citizen for New Times: History, Pedagogy, and the Amar Chitra Katha* (2024), are phenomenal writings on India's history and culture. In *The Idea of India*, Romila Thapar, in her conversation with Spivak, propelled the idea of India in the context of territoriality, reifying culture, language, religion, etc. Spivak, on the other hand, more or less agrees with the idea of Edward Said, stating, "It was a kind of Oriental discovery of India, a discovery that 'allowed what Vladimir Ilyich would call progressive bourgeoisie.'" [32] Deepa Shreenivas's *Remaking the Citizen for the New Times* is noteworthy, and it promises to counter the West. To me, it is a postcolonial, neocolonial, and global capitalist world seeking to revive the 'authentic' traditions of India through the re-telling of history and mythology, colorfully illustrated in a chitra-katha (picture-story) format. In *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK), Deepa has attempted to propel the ideas concerning nations and citizens who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s and to shape their aspirational articulations of merit, hard work, and self-respect. [33]

### **Concluding Remarks**

Postcolonialism is a study that does not constitute a single program of resistance; it denotes the wider, multilayered effects and consequences of colonial subjugations in different parts of the world. In the 1980s and 1990s, postcolonialism constituted an imperative area of scholarship in academic discourse, which is manifested in the writings of many distinguished scholars of the social sciences and humanities. However, the contestation of postcolonial thinking is intense, and the intellectual differences among the eminent advocates of postcolonial thinkers are imminent as an alternative discourse. The differences and splits as well are a natural fallout of the whole approach among the philosophers of postcolonial thought that remain penetrating. Postcolonialism, therefore, is a philosophy full of paradox and critical theory and has been challenged or debated severely by poststructuralists. The postcolonial study is a paradigm shift from modernism, and it started searching for what happened during colonial times and the paraphernalia of colonial oppression of the native indigenous population. [34] Consequently, the postcolonial thesis is much more than a contested theory, and it can only be remembered in academic discourse as a defeated and dead proposal. The postcolonial study of a contested and defeated theory of liberationist philosophies that emerged in the postcolonial liberation period and subsequently solidified its position in the 1980s and 1990s may be considered a function of its articulation of an intricate intellectual retort to this defeat [35] despite its attempts to locate the lost history, culture, language, literature, hybridity, marginalization, multiculturalism, and identity of the third world—above all, neocolonialism and the ramifications of contemporary global capitalism.



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