

## Book Review

**Shuchi Agrawal.** *Navigating Boundaries: A Comprehensive Study of Postcolonial Theory and Literature*  
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Shuchi Agrawal's book, *Navigating Boundaries: A Comprehensive Study of Postcolonial Theory and Literature* is an invaluable compendium of useful information about postcolonial theory, postcolonial reading and postcolonial literature for students, researchers and teachers alike who wish to explore this subject in a comprehensive manner. Postcolonial theory, like most other literary theories, is marked by a great deal of diversity of stances among postcolonial thinkers. This requires readers, especially students, to run from one source to another to unravel the baffling complexity of different viewpoints expressed in a language that can be often jargonized, and even opaque at times. From my own experience as a teacher having taught literary criticism and literary theory for nearly thirty years, I can say that it is the literary theory paper that scares a majority of learners the most. Since the domain of postcolonial studies borrows many ideas from literary criticism, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis, Marxism, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstructionism, postmodernism, theories of race, caste and identity, feminism, gender and ecocritical studies, it is a veritable minefield of manifold of colliding and colluding ideas. The resulting eclectic mix makes it difficult for the uninitiated to comprehend all its nuances fully. As it is, among the well-known Holy Trinity of postcolonial studies comprising Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the most accessible thinker is Edward Said whose text *Orientalism* (1978) is considered to be the inaugural text of postcolonial studies. The writings of the other two are notorious for their inaccessibility; Spivak's, because of her reliance on the French thinkers in the main, and Bhabha's, because of his penchant for word-play. Life did become a bit easy for the learners when *Routledge Critical Thinkers Series* – well-written monographs, each about a hundred pages long, on various thinkers made its appearance around the turn of the century. The *Oxford's Very Short Introduction Series* too proved quite valuable in this regard. However, a lucid, concise and detailed information about different aspects of postcolonial theory, its genealogical roots in resistance movements against colonialism and in works of thinkers from diverse disciplines, and that too in a single text was not available. The book under review seeks to fill this gap.

The book is structured into eight chapters followed by a concluding Chapter, a works cited section and an index. The author delineates her methodology in the Preface itself that her "goal ... is not just to illuminate the current canon, but also to draw attention to the lesser-explored and neglected voices of the subcontinent and diaspora." This methodology is apparent in the organization of the book. The long, Introductory Chapter provides an overview of colonialism and casts a brief glance at the French, Dutch, Portuguese, Italian and British colonialism. It

also touches briefly upon the work of postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Gloria Anzaldúa, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Edward Said, Bhabha, Spivak and of many other, lesser known Third World thinkers.

Chapter One provides a glossary of thirty-five key concepts in postcolonial theory. There are a number of glossaries of key terms related to postcolonial theory including Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin's pioneering work *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Terms* (2000). However, these texts are confined to providing glossaries only. Shuchi Agrawal's book is more ambitious than just being a glossary. In the next chapters, it lays bare in detail the contribution to postcolonial studies by thinkers from several colonized societies. While doing so, the author situates the thinkers she discusses in their sociocultural problematic.

The second Chapter, "Postcolonial Theory: An Introduction," discusses the continued relevance of postcolonial theory. The author rightly asserts that the flag of freedom granted by the erstwhile colonizers to their colonies never translated into full freedom for the colonized subjects. Neither were the colonial structures of governance dismantled, nor did the colonial mindset vanish away. Most of the native regimes that took over the reins after political freedom proved to be comprador and violently oppressive. The triumphal march of neoliberal economic policies after the collapse of the erstwhile USSR opened up new ways of cultural hegemony of the West over the rest of the world. The processes of globalization, which is understood as primarily a post-Cold War American enterprise by thinkers such as John Gray, are deeply complicit with neocolonial ambitions of the West. In fact, the recent destruction of Gaza by the Israeli regime aided by the US and its western allies is an example of how the unbridled colonial Anglo-US ambitions pan out in a world marked by power asymmetry. Thus, the author's assertion that postcolonial theory is still relevant finds ample proof in what is actually going on world over in the present times. With its emphasis on political resistance and oppositional reading of a literary text, postcolonial theory can show us the way to a better understanding of how cultural hegemony operates in subtle ways to shackle our minds. The rest of this Chapter is devoted to discussing Said's ideas of representation and resistance, and Leela Gandhi's assertion that postcolonial theory must unmask the 'mystifying amnesia' of the colonial period to decolonize the minds. Apart from this, this Chapter deals with Stuart Hall's take on diaspora and processual nature of cultural identities, as well as Chinua Achebe's critique of colonialism in his works.

The third Chapter titled "History, Culture and Place: Writing Back" dwells on issues of Eurocentric histories and subaltern historiography (Dipesh Chakrabarty), issues of cultural diversity, hybridity and difference (Bhabha), and the notions of the postcolonial author's positionality and colonial spatiality (Dennis Lee). The issues of pedagogy in postcolonial societies as discussed by Phillip G. Altbach are also dealt with in this Chapter.

The fourth Chapter "Body, Ethnicity, Subaltern and Language" while focusing on the objectification and radicalization of body, construction of ethnicity and the subaltern, and language in the colonial discourse, unravels their intersectionality. The author engages the views of thinkers such as Spivak, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe, Sabelo J. Ndlovu Gatsheni in the main. Since there is an overlap between the ideas of these thinkers, the author emphasizes their singularity through comparisons of their respective positions. Chapter 5 focuses on postcolonial feminism, literacy in the third world, nationalism and education. She delineates and puts under her critical scanner Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminism, Thomas Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education", Gauri Viswanathan's views on English literary study

in India, and Partha Chatterjee's treatise on nationalism.

Chapter 6 focuses upon postcolonial Caribbean literature and important works of Derek Walcott and Jamaica Kincaid. This Chapter discusses in detail Walcott's "A Far Cry from Africa" as a postcolonial work of resistance centered on the violence and the ravages of colonial intervention in Kenya, in particular in the aftermath of the Mau Mau Uprising against the English. Hybridity and split identity are other major themes in the poem whose structure is marked by interruptions that are symbolic of the violent ruptures in the life of the tribal people caused by the colonial rule. This is followed by a detailed discussion of Jamaica Kincaid's creative non-fictional work "A Small Place". Jamaica's text bristles with the themes of impact of colonialism on Antigua, issues of identity formation, and ongoing dynamics of neocolonialism symbolized by the exoticization of the Caribbean islands as a kind of paradise for promoting foreign tourism.

Chapter 7 is structured around postcolonial African literature and seminal works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, David Diop and Namwali Serpell. In the eighth Chapter, the author turns her critical gaze towards India and discusses the works of M. K. Gandhi, Jhumpa Lahiri, Mahashweta Devi and Kancha Ilaiah. Whereas Gandhi was the chief architect of India's freedom struggle that led to India's freedom from the British rule, Kancha Ilaiah is a well-known political theorist and a Dalit rights activist who has written and lectured extensively against the oppression and exclusion of the marginalized sections of the Indian society, particularly that of the Dalitbahujan Samaj, by the Brahmins. Thus, his is a potent voice against the persistence of the colonial mindset epitomized by Brahminism. Jhumpa Lahiri represents the diasporic experience of alienation, homelessness, rootlessness, exile, nostalgia and the problematic nature of the saturated and schizophrenic diasporic identity. Mahashweta Devi's works highlight issues of caste discrimination, gender injustice and plight of the underprivileged sections of society. The concluding chapter provides a summary of all the previous chapters in a capsule form. The author hints at some weaknesses of the postcolonial theory as well, one of these being the greater priority attached to historical analyses in postcolonial literature in comparison to the analyses of contemporary expressions of colonial relations. Internal lack of coherence that marks the postcolonial theory is another weakness that the author points out. However, to this reviewer, the lack of coherence also saves the postcolonial theory from becoming an overarching theory with the potential to steamroll different experiences of colonial subjugation and resistance. Thus, the presence of multiplicity of voices actually makes postcolonialism a vibrant site of flourishing difference.

In her Preface, Shuchi Agrawal avers that her text "emerges as a careful investigation of the theoretical frameworks that have arisen in the aftermath of colonialism. From Edward Said's seminal writings to Homi K Bhabha's critical inquiries, the theoretical terrain is crossed in order to provide readers with a deep knowledge of the intellectual foundations that support postcolonial discourse. True to her claim, the rest of the book is a working out of this proposition in a systematic manner. Its strength lies in bringing into its ambit relatively lesser-known postcolonial thinkers and authors. Each chapter has many sections and then subsections that make reading easy and precise. Jargon has been kept at the bare minimum. As such, this book will be of immense help for the students and researchers of postcolonial studies.

Yet, by way of minor caveats, it can be pointed out that despite covering a wide range of theoretical frameworks that undergird postcolonialism and postcolonial literature, certain omissions could have been avoided. For instance, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's excellent works on caste could have

been dealt with in greater detail. Strangely enough, Salman Rushdie or his works and Octave Mannoni, whose book *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* (1950) places him among the forerunners of postcolonial theory, are missing. Likewise, some repetitions could have been avoided. The adulatory introductions to postcolonial authors/thinkers take the sheen from the critical insights. The issue of how the insights provided by postcolonial concepts have the potential for misappropriation by certain regressive type of politics, as envisioned by Meera Nanda in *Postcolonial Theory and the Making of Hindu Nationalism: The Wages of Unreason* (2025), should have been addressed because postcolonial nostalgic longing for an idealized, precolonial past can lead to imagining the future in terms of recreating that past. This regressive trajectory of postcolonial theory is not merely anti-science and anti-reason; it is capable of giving rise to impossible irridentist nationalist dreams that are completely out of sync with the present. For the book under review, such a nuanced critique of postcolonial praxis, as it is panning out in contemporary politics could have been the proverbial cherry on the pie. This reviewer hopes that the next edition of this well-written compendium will have a short cautionary section on the “unconscious trajectory of postcolonial theory.”