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Language and Geography: The Postcolonial Critic

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FEATURES

Ketu H. Katrak

LANGUAGE AND GEOGRAPHY: THE POSTCOLONIAL CRITIC

THE MAP OF THE world has been crucially re-drawn by colonial history. In postcolonial literary studies today, the question of language relates in significant ways to a critic's geographical location. Issues of identity and belonging, crucially tied to choice and use of language, assume new configurations in the light of one's geographical locale. Where the postcolonial writer and critic live and work influences their uses of language on emotive, intellectual, and psychological levels. Words are not forged only within "the smithy of (one's) soul"; they carry echoes reverberating from our geographical locations. There are indeed many reasons for these confluences, at times happy, at other times painful, of language and geography, of speech and space for both postcolonial writer and critic today. Recent "flag independences" in several African countries, India, the Caribbean, continuing neo-colonial trends in most of these societies; more recently, migrations of postcolonial peoples living as expatriates and exiles in various parts of the western world, are all a part of significant and often conflictual predicaments of identity, language and belonging.

For the postcolonial critic, the choice of language carries an additional burden, namely particular theoretical positions that require the learning and deployment of certain critical vocabulary. A socially responsible postcolonial critic is aware of "the political implications of analytic strategies"¹, namely the recognition that analytic methodologies, deconstructive, post-structuralist, psychoanalytic among others always carry political implications. None of these critical methods can be politically neutral. Today, in the highly theory-ridden world of literary and cultural studies, the postcolonial critic must necessarily and strategically select certain theoretical positions.

Let us explore the impacts of geographical locations on the geo-political, academic, non-academic positions (all of which are problematized today) of a socially engaged postcolonial critic. Further, let us recognize the costs and fallouts resulting from the intersection of a postcolonial critic's location within institutions such as academia, or publishing houses. Rosaura Sanchez's question is apt: can one "in fact, ever represent a counter project while being funded, housed and incorporated within the system?"² How do our own self-positionings as postcolonial critics and our theorizings implicate ourselves and postcolonial literature in sustaining, or resisting, or negotiating institutional power structures? Are postcolonial voices even as they sound oppositional (to dominant discourses, texts), simultaneously complicit with institutional power? Is it possible to be otherwise and yet be heard, or must one then be silenced?³ Even as we negotiate institutional power mechanisms, we come up against what Barbara Harlow

Language and Geography

terms the “tactics of containment” that seek to obfuscate “an insurgent politics” (p.163).

As a “native” of India, a product of the British educational system, and currently a part of academia within the U.S., I aim to make a postcolonial critical enterprise enhance the growth itself of a postcolonial literary tradition. Which critical practices will be constructive for the growth itself of this literature? The goal is to implement our scholarship to reinforce, even to inspire new forms of cultural production. We need to find critical practices that break down power positions sustaining normative hierarchies in theory. In using the phrase “normative hierarchies,” I borrow from what Hazel Carby has recently called “normative whiteness”—in race, in literary theory, a norm derives power precisely by remaining unstated. I implement critical practices that recognize political, and academic/theoretical systems of domination, and that analyze the interplay of cultural and sexual politics of cultural and critical productions within the forces of the marketplace.

I attempt to redefine the critic’s role by returning the critical and theoretical task “to the source,” to use Amílcar Cabral’s phrase. This “source” lies as much in cultural productions as it does in the broader history and culture (colonial and postcolonial) that create the very conditions of cultural production. It is useful within a postcolonial context to think of theory itself, as Barbara Harlow suggests, as strategy, as one among several means aiming at social change; to consider certain integral links between theory and practice. I aim to make creative alliances between writers and critics and to bring critics of postcolonial literature from the periphery to an active participation in the struggle for social change.

Even as one works towards such goals, one needs to undertake complex negotiations—to note only one, namely, one’s audience. Geographically, and as work-space, my audience is primarily here, in U.S. academia, but my constituency is largely elsewhere. Issues of audience, constituency, and accountability are conflictual for postcolonial critics, and the challenge lies in making one’s constituency more directly one’s audience—to enter into dialogue with third world scholars/activists here and elsewhere. For example, an important writer and critic from India, Eunice de Souza, teaching at the University of Bombay works under very different, less privileged conditions than Chandra Mohanty, Huma Ibrahim, myself, all positioned in U.S. academia. De Souza’s audience and our’s at times intersect, at times are very different; we get very different kinds of support for our research. This is not to create simple dichotomies, or to “nativize” positions of authenticity determined by race, or choice of work-space. Nor do I wish to suggest that postcolonial criticism is best produced by “insiders” and not by “Westerners.” One must problematize these categories of insider and outsider, native and other. One’s location and one’s “origin” are often not the same because it is no longer a simple matter of living or working in one’s “native” land since that may be Britain, U.S., Trinidad, or Bombay. Rather, the challenge for a postcolonial critic is to be in contact with movements for social change within postcolonial environments, and to attempt a dialectic between social struggle and critical practice. Political factors “inside” postcolonial areas can radically transform what the struggle is “outside” the actual arenas of struggle, even in literary criticism.⁴

The postcolonial critic's *geographic* location must be historicized in the light of a colonial history and migrations (after 1950) of ex-colonial peoples to "the M/Other Country," often "invited" after fighting on the allied side in World War II. Migrant populations, which include postcolonial writers and critics, exiles and expatriates have to struggle to define their spaces, and fight against new racisms embodied, for instance, in immigration laws. The case of Salman Rushdie, a Pakistani Black Britisher, currently under the protection of the British government dramatizes some of the paradoxes and ironies facing the postcolonial writer. Rushdie, living in London, inhabiting a western space, mixed cultural, literary, and religious norms in his fictional "Satanic Verses."

As with the writer, the postcolonial critic, according to Meenakshi Mukherjee, often adopts "models of critiquing imperialism" such as Edward Said's work, from the center, "validated by Columbia, or Cambridge, or Sussex."⁵ Further, Mukherjee doubts whether "such radical and rigorously worked-out discourses are at all possible within the limited parameters of the academic institutions in third world countries." There is ample evidence to contest this claim. Significant work is produced from these areas—for instance by Kali for Women, a publishing house in Delhi: *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid; *Structures of Patriarchy*, edited by Bina Agarwal.

In U.S. academia, the postcolonial critic currently occupies a position fraught with ironies and paradoxes in terms of personal identity, and professional space. Biddy Martin's questions raised in another context are appropriate here: "What assumptions about institutions and the workings of power within them are embedded in our efforts to take up and/or resist identities? What assumptions about institutions and the workings of power within them underlie any definition of a particular field or position as marginal?"⁶ Postcolonial literature may be the latest in the line of "minority" fields in U.S. universities. However, the postcolonial critic's position is contradictory—often marginal in terms of ethnicity, the teaching of non-canonical texts, and simultaneously occupying significant intellectual spaces created by institutional desire to promote postcoloniality in various forms. Can we avoid falling through the cracks of an almost macabre dance between margin and center, as dictated by the center, i.e. by matters of institutional power, desire, domination—an erotics of postcoloniality—which decide when, and for how long a certain literary field will be promoted through hirings, research support, etc? We have to struggle against producing what David Hwang recently called "Orientalia for the intelligentsia."

When the production and dissemination of knowledge about postcolonial societies happens in the first world, by a heterogeneity of voices, one recognizes the links between the production of postcoloniality itself, the visibility of postcolonial discourse, and new complicities on the part of critics in global systems of domination. One finds new forms of colonization, new ways of acquiring territories, i.e. brains, which are partly responsible for intellectually impoverished conditions in the third world. Migrations by "choice" are necessitated often by extreme economic hardships in postcolonial nations. A socially responsible postcolonial critic is aware of this complicitous position, and particularly in the early stages of the institutionalization of a field, undertakes a

progressive, political critique of this scenario. Postcolonial critics need to make a more concerted effort to genuinely “share” information across geographic boundaries. The geopolitics of sharing and withholding information in the context of what Walter Ong calls “the technologizing of the word” is tacitly acknowledged, but seldom confronted.

In the current legitimizing of “opening up the canon,” in certain literary circles, and the attendant angst to include cultural “diversity,” a subtle and insidious mystification needs to be revealed, namely, in their haste to welcome “foreign bodies” (texts and critics) into departments of English, Culture Studies, there is a tacit, often unspoken “closing of the theoretical canon.” So, while postcolonial texts may be embraced as fulfilling diversity and adding other exotic flavors to English-language traditions, they are subsumed into dominant theoretical discourses that are part of extremely rigid academic hierarchies and boundaries. The levels of representation, or ghettoization, or appropriation of postcolonial literature and the postcolonial critic are mediated by, and located in theoretical language. It is here, as Chandra Mohanty has remarked, that we need “to examine the political implications of analytic strategies,” and to challenge this “discursive colonization.”

A subtle trajectory of current hegemonic theories is insidious, namely, “flexibility,” particularly in a poststructuralist climate where meaning is replaced by floating signifiers, the individual by the subject, and so on. In fact, this “flexibility” is a mystification of rigid theoretical structures. When this “flexibility” is extended to “foreign bodies (texts and critics), it becomes a semiotic tyranny in which “old-fashioned” categories like “identity,” “reality,” and all essential notions must be abandoned and replaced by multiple consciousnesses floating and “playing” freely. I am not advocating a simple-minded and unreconstructed return to notions of “identity” and “nation”; however, given the history and politics of colonization, these concepts are useful in postcolonial literature, and hence they are valid tools for a critical endeavor that is in line with struggles for social change. Yes, representations of reality, reconstructions of identity politics, negotiated configurations of nationhood, these may be strategically used for a progressive postcolonial critical practice. We must recuperate these categories as and when required by literary and other cultural products, and not as dictated by fashionable theory.

The postcolonial critic must recognize integral and dialectic links between cultural and critical productions which both create and respond to economic/political factors controlling a consumer marketplace. This includes i) the publishing world in general; and ii) the market for theory, per se. In terms of postcolonial literary texts, a profit-oriented publishing industry capitalizes on the low literacy levels in these societies to the extent that ironically enough even literate people in these societies cannot find, or afford books by their own writers. For instance, Black and Third World Book Fairs hosted by western publishers are commonly held in various parts of the first world; but a text like *Lionheart Gal: Lifestories of Jamaican Women*, after a sale of 1,000 copies in the entire Caribbean was judged by its distributor to have “exhausted the region.” When the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986 was awarded to Wole Soyinka, his books were unavailable in his native Nigeria. Recently (March 1989), at the African Literature Association conference in Dakar, Senegal, several African participants who live and work in their universities

spoke of a “book famine” in African countries. This scenario raises serious questions about the control and dissemination of knowledge and cultural productions.

A marketplace may be guided by relatively straightforward principles of economics, and by overdetermined conditions which feed a public taste for anything from books by black women writers, to books on “cultural illiteracy” and so on. The marketplace is a key conditioning factor in producing and consolidating marginality. The commodification of “blackness,” of “third worldism” as items for sale in the marketplace which include equally, affirmative-action policies, publishing priorities, conference topics, has serious consequences for the creative artist/worker. The commodification of theory is just as serious in today’s academic marketplace that is hungry for theory in general. At a recent MLA Book Exhibit I was struck by the crowds of consumers for theory at the Routledge, Cornell, Indiana University Press booths, whereas presses selling primary texts were languishing. To critics producing and consuming theory, let us point out how far away from the very sources of their work, i.e. from the writers they have travelled. Further, why is this so legitimized in today’s academic climate, and how can this be confronted?

In our academic marketplace today, desirous of theory, the post-colonial critic’s generally marginal position in terms of the writers that s/he deals with can be centered by the use of a fashionable discourse. This has serious implications for the development of a postcolonial literary tradition. Theoretical domination rests solidly on economic power and privilege, and raises issues of agency and of access—who gets to learn a certain theoretical language, in what spaces that talk is produced, consumed, and rewarded, who the audience is. The market for theory has certainly infected our graduate students. When they come to my office and say, “I need theory,” or “I’m not going on the job market without theory,” I need to critically assess this “need” in the light of what texts they are studying, the marketplace in terms of job listings and their wording, and the hegemonic positions of certain types of theory. What has our enterprise as critics and scholars become? I would like to recognize an uncomfortable distance that some critics seem to have travelled away from the very sources of their work, i.e. texts and other cultural products.

The types of theory that one practices, address some audiences, and leave out others; theory is centered, the “people” about whom the theory may be talking are marginalized. There are significant imbalances here. By and large, postcolonial cultural production comes from the third world, though critical work is mainly produced and consumed in the first. The producers are consumed and then reproduced in theoretical work without having access to nor the means to even see this material. And even when third world cultural producers get to read what their creative work has inspired, the inaccessibility of theoretical language often renders those very producers marginal in a discourse that is supposedly about them! Critical work from postcolonial areas is not given serious attention here—often dismissed as “not theoretical enough” by Western standards. So, the critical/activist work done by Merle Hodge (Trinidad), *Stereotypes of Caribbean Women*, Erna Brodber (Jamaica), *Yards in the City of Kingston*, Manushi Collective (India), among others, is largely ignored. Their work, often appearing in local publications needs to be read here.

Is postcolonialism's current legitimacy in the academy, part of a literary, theoretical fashion which has given currency to notions of "difference"? What can the socially responsible postcolonial critic do to make the postcolonial intervention in English studies an enduring one? The issue of "difference" brings me to explore an alliance between postcolonialism and feminism which is both productive and problematic. It is perhaps a commonplace today to speak of *feminisms* that allow intellectual spaces for difference. In constructive terms, perhaps postcolonial theory can learn from the problematics of the institutionalization of feminist theory, such as a growing academic feminism which is often divorced from the women's movement. Within a postcolonial context, there may be more serious challenges than in the first world between academic feminism and women's movements because often, women are facing literally life and death issues, such as dowry murders in India, and the resurgence of *sati* (widow-burning). In terms of making productive alliances between feminist and postcolonial theory, we need to assert that contrary to many, even progressive voices of third world intellectuals who dismiss feminism as western, and who confuse, as Kumari Jayawardena has pointed out, anti-westernism with anti-imperialism, we need to redefine feminism for our particular historical and social contexts.⁷ We need to discover the roots of feminism in different parts of the third world, to discover the herstories which have been "hidden from history," and to document that feminism is not simply an ideology borrowed from the west. Further, lessons and gains from women's movements in the third world can be brought to bear on women's movements in the first world—for instance, literacy campaigns, and drama-in-education workshops by the Sistren Collective in Jamaica; popular songs, street theater, or the work of the Lawyers Collective in India on popular education through pamphlets about issues like rape and inheritance rights. Such information-sharing would reverse the stereotypical flow from the "developed" to the "developing" world, and challenge the image of a third world trapped forever in backwardness and dependency. In my own work, I attempt to lessen the gap between feminist theory and activism, and to make postcolonial feminist criticism respond to and recognize the issues that women's movements in the third world deal with.

In conclusion, the intellectual *site* (which includes geographic location) of both postcolonial writer and critic is already always politicized, whether it be a position which validates the status quo ("Naipaulcity"), or whether it is in line with struggles for social change. Literal enslavement and forced dissemination of black peoples has taken on more figurative and insidious configurations today when migrations by "choice" are necessitated by extreme economic hardships. Embodied in our journeyings as expatriates and exiles, postcolonial peoples often walk a type of tightrope where even as we travel with relative ease (direct flights on supersonic jets), we cannot with as much ease step out of our skins, assume identities, and kaleidoscopes of colors as we step off the ladder into the humid air and tropical smells of Bombay, or into the brisk coolness of jetway corridors and white-washed efficiency of Heathrow, or Kennedy. A socially responsible postcolonial critic's position is highly mediated—in particular, the confluence of geography with language a dialectic of space and speech, poses new challenges to be negotiated in terms of one's audience, identity, and sense of belonging.

NOTES

¹ Chandra T. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Boundary 2*, no. 12.3 (1984), 333-358.

² Quoted in Barbara Harlow, "Commentary: 'All That is Inside is not Center': Responses to the Discourses of Domination", in *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics*, ed. Elizabeth Weed (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 162.

³ The silencing of critical voices here echoes the various silencings represented in postcolonial women's texts—particularly, female protagonists' social ostracization for socio-cultural or political reasons.

⁴ I draw upon Barbara Harlow's inspiring work on the insider/outsider positioning particularly for Palestine, and by extension for other areas of the postcolonial world—how the intifada *inside* forces a transformation of political practices of Palestinian intellectuals and others like Harlow herself, *outside*; of how critical practices in a literary arena can be in touch with say the actual sites of struggle such as in Harlow's forthcoming work on prison narratives.

⁵ Meenakshi Mukherjee, "The Centre Cannot Hold: Two Views of the Periphery," *Kunapipi*, XI, 1 (1989), 41-48.

⁶ Forum sponsored by the MLA Commission on the Status of Women, December 1989.

⁷ Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Press, 1986), Introduction.