

POST-COLONIALISM/POSTCOLONIALISM

Post-colonialism (or often postcolonialism) deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies. As originally used by historians after the Second World War in terms such as **the post-colonial state**, 'post-colonial' had a clearly chronological meaning, designating the post independence period. However, from the late 1970s the term has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization. Although the study of the controlling power of representation in colonized societies had begun in the late 1970s with texts such as Said's *Orientalism*, and led to the development of what came to be called colonialist discourse theory in the work of critics such as Spivak and Bhabha, the actual term 'post-colonial' was not employed in these early studies of the power of colonialist discourse to shape and form opinion and policy in the colonies and metropolis. Spivak, for example, first used the term 'post-colonial' in the collection of interviews and recollections published in 1990 called *The Post-Colonial Critic*. Although the study of the effects of colonial representation were central to the work of these critics, the term 'post-colonial' *per se* was first used to refer to cultural interactions within colonial societies in literary circles (e.g. Ashcroft *et al.* 1977). This was part of an attempt to politicize and focus the concerns of fields such as Commonwealth literature and the study of the so-called New Literatures in English which had been initiated in the late 1960s. The term has subsequently been widely used to signify the political, linguistic and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies. Thus the term was a potential site of disciplinary and interpretative contestation almost from the beginning, especially the implications involved in the signifying hyphen or its absence. The heavily poststructuralist influence of the major exponents of colonial discourse theory, Said (Foucault), Homi Bhabha (Althusser and Lacan) and Gayatri Spivak (Derrida), led many critics, concerned to focus on the material effects of the historical condition of colonialism, as well as on its discursive power, to insist on the hyphen to distinguish post-colonial studies *as a field* from colonial discourse theory *per se*, which formed only one aspect of the many approaches and interests that the term 'postcolonial' sought to embrace and discuss (Ashcroft 1996). While this distinction in style still exists, the interweaving of the two approaches is considerable. 'Post-colonialism/ postcolonialism' is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre-and post-independence nations and communities. While its use has tended to focus on the cultural production of such communities, it is becoming widely used in historical, political, sociological and economic analyses, as these disciplines continue to engage with the impact of European imperialism upon world societies. The prefix 'post' in the term also continues to be a source of vigorous debate amongst critics. The simpler sense of the 'post' as meaning 'after' colonialism has been contested by a more elaborate understanding of the working of post-colonial cultures which stresses the articulations between and across the politically defined historical periods, of precolonial, colonial and post-independence cultures. As a result, further questions have been asked about what limits, if any, should be set round the

term. Aijaz Ahmad complains, for instance, that when the term 'colonialism' can be pushed back to the Incas and forward to the Indonesian occupation of East Timor, then it becomes 'a transhistorical thing, always present and always in process of dissolution in one part of the world or another' (1995: 9). It is clear, however, that postcolonialism as it has been employed in most recent accounts has been primarily concerned to examine the processes and effects of, and reactions to, European colonialism from the sixteenth century up to and including the **neo-colonialism** of the present day. No doubt the disputes will continue, since, as Stephen Slemon has argued, 'post-colonialism', is now used in its various fields, to describe a remarkably heterogeneous set of subject positions, professional fields, and critical enterprises: It has been used as a way of ordering a critique of totalizing forms of Western historicism; as a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of 'class', as a subset of both postmodernism and post-structuralism (and conversely, as the condition from which those two structures of cultural logic and cultural critique themselves are seen to emerge); as the name for a

condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; as a cultural marker of non-residency for a Third World intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power; as an oppositional form of 'reading practice'; and – and this was my first encounter with the term – as the name for a category of 'literary' activity which sprang from a new and welcome political energy going on within what used to be called 'Commonwealth' literary studies. (Slemon 1994: 16–17) Yet the term still continues to be used from time to time to mean simply 'anti-colonial' and to be synonymous with 'post-independence', as in references to the **post-colonial state**. To further complicate the issue of how these overlapping projects continue to collide in recent discussions, Slemon notes also that the existence of the three overlapping fields has led to a 'confusion . . . in which the project . . . of identifying the scope and nature of anti-colonialist resistance in writing has been mistaken for the project . . . which concerns itself with articulating the literary nature of Third and Fourth-World cultural groups' (Slemon 1990: 31). As he sees it, the second of these projects retains a concern with 'whole nations or cultures as [its] basic [unit]' and sets up comparisons or contrasts between these units, whereas the first project is concerned with 'identifying a social force, colonialism, and with the attempt to understand the resistances to that force wherever they may lie'(31). Slemon is well aware that this raises its own problems, problems that have been part of the recent debate. As he notes, Colonialism, obviously is an enormously problematic category: it is by definition trans historical and unspecific, and it is used in relation to very different kinds of historical oppression and economic control. [Nevertheless] like the term 'patriarchy', which shares similar problems in definition, the concept of colonialism . . . remains crucial to a critique of past and present power relations in world affairs. (Slemon 1990: 31)

Slemon also makes the point in this same essay that an assumption that the reactions of oppressed peoples will always be resistant may actually remove agency from these people. Not only are they capable of producing 'reactionary' documents, but as Ahmad (1992) and others have insisted, post-colonial societies have their own internal agendas and forces that continue to interact with and modify the direct response to the colonial incursion. Clearly any definition of post-colonialism

needs to include a consideration of this wider set of local and specific ongoing concerns and practices. It is unlikely that these debates will be easily resolved. At the present time, though, no matter how we conceive of 'the post-colonial', and whatever the debates around the use of the problematic prefix 'post', or the equally problematic hyphen, the grounding of the term in European colonialist histories and institutional practices, and the responses (resistant or otherwise) to these practices on the part of all colonized peoples, remain fundamental. An equally fundamental constraint is attention to precise location. Every colonial encounter or 'contact zone' is different, and each 'postcolonial' occasion needs, against these general background principles, to be precisely located and analysed for its specific interplay. A vigorous debate has revolved around the potentially homogenizing effect of the term 'post-colonial' (Hodge and Mishra 1990; Chrisman and Williams 1993). The effect of describing the colonial experience of a great range of cultures by this term, it is argued, is to elide the differences between them. However, there is no inherent or inevitable reason for this to occur. The materiality and locality of various kinds of post-colonial experience are precisely what provide the richest potential for post-colonial studies, and they enable the specific analysis of the various effects of colonial discourse. The theoretical issues latent in these two fundamentals – materiality and location – lie at the basis of much of the dispute over what the term references and what it should or should not include. Yet, despite these disputes and differences, signs of a fruitful and complementary relationship between various post-colonial approaches have emerged in recent work in the field. Whether beginning from a basis in discourse theory, or from a more materialist and historical reading, most recent discussions have stressed the need to retain and strengthen these fundamental parameters in defining the idea of the post-colonial/postcolonial. As critics like Young have indicated, the crucial task has been to avoid assuming that 'the reality of the historical conditions of colonialism can be safely discarded' in favour of 'the fantasmatics of colonial discourse' (Young 1995: 160). The most cogent criticism of discourse theory has been offered by materialist thinkers such as Mohanty, Parry and Ahmad who, as Young suggests, argue that it should not proceed 'at the expense of materialist historical enquiry' (161). On the other hand, as Young also warns, although the totalizing aspects of discourses of the postcolonial/post-colonial is of real concern, it is necessary to avoid a return to a simplified form of localized materialism that refuses entirely to recognize the existence of and effect of general discourses of colonialism on individual instances of colonial practice. The project of identifying the general discursive forces that held together the imperial enterprise and that operated wherever colonization occurred is often in conflict with the need to provide detailed accounts of the material effect of those discourses as they operated in different periods and different localities. To suggest that colonialism or imperialism were not themselves multivalent forces, and operated differently according to the periods in which they occurred, the metropolitan cultures from which they proceeded, or the specific 'contact zones' in which they took effect, is clearly to over-simplify. But to suggest that it is impossible to determine widespread common elements within these local particularities, especially at the level of ideology and discursive formation, seems equally inadequate as a basis for any but the most limited accounts. Not every colony will share every aspect of colonialism, nor will it share some essential feature since, like any category, it is, to use Wittgenstein's metaphor, a rope with many overlapping strands (1958: 87). Nevertheless, it is likely that, as

Robert Young has said, the particular historical moment can be seen to interact with the general discourse of colonialism so that: The contribution of colonial discourse analysis [for example] is that it provides a significant framework for that other work by emphasising that all perspectives on colonialism share, and have to deal with a common discursive medium which was also that of colonialism itself: the language used to enact, enforce, describe or analyse colonialism is not transparent, innocent, ahistorical or simply instrumental. (Young 1958: 163) Young concludes a discussion of these recent disputational positions with a wise conclusion. Yet at this point in the postcolonial era, as we seek to understand the operation and effects of colonial history, the homogenization of colonialism does also need to be set against its historical and geographical particularities. The question is whether it can maintain, and do justice to, both levels. It is likely that the debate will not be resolved finally in favour of either extreme position, but that the increasingly detailed archival work done on all aspects of colonial/post-colonial culture will continue to correct the more simplistic generalizations that characterize early formulations of the field without overthrowing the validity of a general, comparative methodology in framing important questions that a strictly local materialist analysis alone could neither pose nor answer.
