

(Pre-) Fixing Colonialism. An Unfinished Business

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The term Colonialism —not unlike other ‘isms’— seems to be particularly prone to *prefix-ing*. Among the most ubiquitous affixes may be found those indicating chronological evolution (pre-, past-, post-, among others). For a long time, many have been hoping that «past the last post» —to borrow Adam and Tiffin’s phrase— Colonialism would run out of prefixes and would finally become a phenomenon of the past, thereby losing its —for some excessive— relevance in contemporary criticism and literature. And yet, new prefixes seem to keep on imposing themselves. The title of this new issue of *Links and Letters*, «Literature and Neo-Colonialism», makes one wonder whether through the insistence on *prefix-ing* colonialism one is really *pre-fix-ing* it, preventing its disappearance. Perhaps it cannot be otherwise. The term post-colonialism has been abundantly used and, simultaneously, highly contested both within and without the world of literary studies in English. Have we not yet passed the post-colonial age? Is Western academia responsible for a certain kind of neo-colonialism?

Rather than offering a single answer to these questions, I approached a series of scholars and writers from different personal and professional backgrounds asking them to share their thoughts on these matters. I hoped that more valuable insight could be gained by asking them to be as personal and «located» as they wanted. The result is, I think, a colourful mosaic. Absences have been inevitable. The gaps and fragmented tesserae reflect the unfinished nature of the picture. But these, too, may add value to it.

Rowland Smith
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I have always found the term postcolonial problematical even though I use it

—as does everyone— as part of the common critical currency of the age. As defined by influential postcolonial critics, the term refers to all societies that have ever experienced colonial conquest or domination; hence the «post-» applies to the arrival of the colonisers, not their departure. This is a little too all-inclusive for me; I do not see myself as a postcolonial critic, although many of the issues identified by postcolonial critics are issues that concern me, and have been of central interest to me for years. The problem I have with the term is that it defines an approach to literature as well as the body of literature to be studied. Courses in postcolonial literature or theory have an ideological base that makes them more like courses in Marxist interpretation rather than courses in the Renaissance, say, or in Romanticism, in which any number of critical approaches can be used.

In identifying postcolonial writing as that which reacts against an attempt by the metropolitan «Centre» to impose its standards and values on a colonised «Margin», postcolonial critics point helpfully at certain kinds of «writing back» by those on the colonised «margin». In particular, the determinedly non-conventional use of language (usually English) by certain writers from these colonised societies is incisively analyzed by postcolonial critics as a revolt against standardized, metropolitan values and usages.

But are all once-colonised societies the same? My answer would be clearly NO. And yet there is little room for divergence in postcolonial theory at its purest. Are writers from older past-colonies (Australia, Canada, New Zealand) reacting in the same way as those from Trinidad, India or Singapore? And when does the colonial legacy end? Is Chaucer a postcolonial writer «writing back» against a French-speaking, Norman hegemony? Are modern writers from Provence free of the cultural yoke of Roman occupation and colonisation? How easily do American writers move between their two worlds: once-colonised subjects of the English Crown, and the cultural (and in some cases political) colonisers par excellence of the second half of the twentieth century?

When there is insistence on the all-inclusiveness of certain kinds of critical or cultural theory (such as postcolonial theory, or types of feminist theory), there is a real danger that western critics are themselves imposing a «central,» «metropolitan» value-system on a «margin» —and that many of the cultures in non-western countries need to «write back» against this form of cultural imperialism. This kind of insensitive application —come what may— of western theory on all forms of writing from non-western cultures could be seen as one of the many norms of neo-colonialism that replaced the direct control and influence of former colonial powers on their colonies and colonised peoples. Although the great age of imperial conquest appears to be over, we are as much in a period of real mini-colonialisations (straight power-based take-overs) as in an era of neo-colonialist penetration by western multinational and capitalist interests. And the current colonisers-by-force are not western. The newly-subdued territories may be forgotten corners of once-colonised lands, or they may be neighbours of newly-emerging regional powers. As yet, the West has not developed a cultural or literary theory to deal with the phenomenon.

Kirpal Singh

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I believe it might be a little simplistic to assume that we are past even the Colonial Age in literature (not only are many countries still under colonial rule, the study of literature is still very much inspired and dictated by the dictums of a former Colonial Age) to have moved on to a Neo-colonial Age. And yet, the Neo-part of it could simply be a reiteration of the nature of this vicious cycle. The point for me both as a writer and scholar is: can we ever rid ourselves of the «colonial» in «colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial»?

I am right now teaching my Singaporean students Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. I'm trying very hard not to prejudice their understanding ideologically by adopting any one position on the play, except to discuss it in terms of its place within the broad history and tradition of English literature. But can this be done satisfactorily? I find it very hard because even if many of us in the various parts of the world labelled post-colonial offer new or radically alternate ways of reading the text, our own intellectual cast still tends to be dominated by what we learnt, the way we were taught and by what is readily accessible. So there is a real threat of entering a Neo-colonial Age in which only those that get the nod and approval from the centre (whether London or New York) may be acceptable and internationally profiled. In order to stem ghetto-isation, the parallel danger always is central domination. I think this situation still obtains; not much has really changed.

Yasmine Gooneratne

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Some years ago a visiting American academic, a self-styled apostle of the gospel according to Derrida, Foucault et al, put it to me that postcolonial studies—which were at the time engaging at least part of my attention—were really nothing more than an off-shoot of 'Western' critical theory. He seemed quite taken aback when I rejected this idea. On getting to know him and his ideas better, I came to realise that he had no knowledge or understanding whatever of the colonial experience of Asia or Africa, and precious little even of the experience of settler ex-colonies other than the USA, such, for example, as the nations of Australia and Canada.

Most students of the British Empire and of the social milieux and literatures that developed under its 'protection' would be aware of the way the distinctive features of many ancient cultures and literatures became blurred, and their histories almost obliterated, by the process of modernisation that was undertaken under the aegis of Empire. It does seem that this sad history is being repeated as, after a brief period during which national literatures asserted themselves enough after Independence to draw with some confi-

dence on their own past in creating fresh and original work, a new imperialism of ideas emanating from Europe and America (and having little, or only incidental relevance to the actual experience of regions beyond) is being imposed upon them.

In a context in which criticism has developed its own opaque jargon—a form of expression irrelevant to literature—writers have had to literally create the milieu in which they can work. One cannot help noticing how often contemporary writers either oppose or ignore the theories put forward by the critics, saying: «But this does not apply to my writing», or even: «This has no relevance whatever to literature». Regi Siriwardena, critic, poet and playwright of Sri Lanka, recently wrote that 'Literary theory and critical practice have come to acquire the prestige once possessed by creative writing. And when that theory and practice are articulated in a language that's accessible only to a minority educated in a special way, then power is again a monopoly'. I could not agree more. It would seem that literary criticism, once an art in itself, has fallen into the hands of people who are largely out of touch with creativity, who are interested in building empires rather than addressing literature, and who simply do not know—and possibly cannot even imagine—what it means to create a work of literary art.

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Australia's social situation in relation to colonialism is weirdly paradoxical. In one sense, for the past century, it has been a separate and independent post-colonial nation with its own specific and highly democratic system of government. In other ways it is a perfect example of the insidious ways in which colonialist mentalities and activities persist in any former colony of an imperial power long after official colonial rule is over. In other words, Australia's experience demonstrates very clearly the common and perhaps universal pattern of neo-colonialist structures rising out of and building upon colonial traditions during the second half of this century.

These structures don't look like the original colonial structures because they don't depend to the same extent upon territorial ownership but they are nevertheless deeply colonial in that they support the old distribution of power, now through the more subtle means of economic and cultural manipulations. In many ways these are stronger and more difficult to break down in that they are masked by the fact that territorial colonialism is officially and technically over. Neo-colonialism is more difficult to pin down and more difficult to resist precisely because it evolves out of and benefits from the old powerhouse and its bureaucratic machinery, in guises of all kinds: it can emerge from policies as enlightened as multiculturalism in Canada, as benign as indigenous land rights policy in Australia, as easily as it can arise from activities as blatantly economically opportunist as the so-called mafia in the

former Soviet Union. The common factor is the old structure itself which, even when it is deemed to be transformed into something else —something more liberal, more democratic or more just, etc.— is nevertheless the only possible matrix for that «transformation». Colonialism spawns neo-colonialism.

How does this pattern apply in Australia and is there any way out? To illustrate the problem it is useful to look at the current position of Aboriginal people in Australia and the position of post-war immigrants. The specific circumstances of Australia's colonisation by Britain two centuries ago are well known. Because the land was considered officially to belong to no-one —it was known as «terra nullius»— there was no recognition of the rights of the indigenous peoples nor any attempt to negotiate a formal treaty with any of them. The colonisers simply claimed the land unquestioningly as their own, seeing themselves as settlers rather than as invaders, as they also did in Canada and New Zealand. It was only in 1967 that Aboriginal people were granted citizenship and even now, almost 30 years later, there is no doubt that the «terra nullius» myth lives on in the minds of many Australians. One only has to think back to the bicentennial celebrations in 1988 to realise how insensitive official Australia still is to the Aboriginal presence, let alone to Aboriginal claims on a share of the history and culture of the land they occupied for millennia before the arrival of the British. For many Australians the history of this country began in 1788. Only last night on a popular television programme which has recently focussed on the stories of Australia's settler explorers, the comment was made that Australia is a «young country» and it has very few legends as yet. Comments such as these show that colonial attitudes and assumptions are alive and well in Australia. If anything they are more pernicious now than ever because they are somehow rendered «harmless» and legitimate by the very fact that there is an official policy of Reconciliation, indigenous land claims procedures and special affirmative action funding available to Aboriginal people. It is as though all that is «taking care» of the problem and releasing the nation from having to confront the facts of colonialism's history of systematic genocide in Australia. By giving with one hand, post-colonial Australia absolves itself of guilt and keeps on taking with the other: while the policies improve, the social attitudes and the discourses don't change and in fact, in their neo-colonial incarnations, they get worse by being more righteous.

My second example is the less obvious one of immigrants in post-colonial Australia. In the years immediately after the second world war immigrants from southern continental Europe and refugees from Eastern Europe were welcomed as a much needed labour force; but most welcome of all, to fill the elite positions in the public service, in universities, in the professions, as well as simply to fill the cities, were British immigrants during this «populate or perish» recruiting frenzy in Australia.

As a member of an immigrant family, I remember well the puzzles and paradoxes of our situation. We were welcomed as a matter of public policy but repeatedly barred from the advantages available to Anglo-Australians: promotion, superannuation, access to work for which we were qualified. Fur-

ther, under assimilationist government policies our cultural background and language had to be hidden or played down. We were the newly colonised within a country which prided itself on its post-colonial independent and egalitarian spirit. Recent multicultural policies have made a positive contribution but here too, there are dangers of neo-colonialist backlash, once again encouraged by the sense that the «problem» of immigrants has been taken care of by a liberal and enlightened policy. The Australian community can under these circumstances turn a blind eye on the actual position of immigrants, particularly the new wave of immigrants from East Asian countries and the refugees known as «boat people».

Put simply, it seems that neo-colonialism flourishes and finds cover under liberal post-colonial policies, however well-meaning. This is not to say that such policies will not gradually have a positive influence on cultural attitudes. In the cases I have mentioned the new policies represent a great improvement on the old. What I would argue for is constant watchfulness for those specific moments and situations when oppressive actions which could be described as neo-colonialist spring from or are permitted by the very same policies, such as those of Aboriginal Reconciliation or of multiculturalism, which champion post-colonial and anti-colonial cultural change.

The same can be said of post-colonial cultural theory. While there is no doubt of the positive work it has done and can still do to raise awareness and promote the cause of under-represented and mis-represented groups of people who have been disempowered by colonialism or neo-colonialism, there is a need for theory to imagine and respect the lived experience of the people who are theory's ultimate subjects of analysis. This requires an understanding of the fact that while theory must generalise, people and their experience are always caught up in specific and ever-changing social webs created by the multiple pressures of unrepeatable historical moments lived in specific locations which are unreachable in that form again even to themselves.

Grant Duncan

Poet and academic born and living in New Zealand.

NEO colonial. There is nothing 'post' or 'past' about colonisation in Aotearoa. From the perspective of a young immigrant culture in a small and insignificant country living alongside an indigenous culture, I believe colonisation continues in a new phase along two dimensions: the values and practices of the immigrant culture dominating the indigenous, and the domination of global market economics and telecommunications. While direct British colonial rule is a thing of the past, colonisation, in its more general sense, is certainly present in New Zealand today, and I would think that this is the case elsewhere. Today you don't have to rule a country directly in order to exploit it!

In Academia, for instance, indigenous forms of scholarship are squeezed out. I see the effects of that in my own university. The university is a specifi-

cally European institution. In New Zealand we follow the Oxbridge model. Indigenous Maori culture, on the other hand, has its own cosmology, culture, language, knowledge and processes of transmitting learning from one generation to the next, all of which is quite different from the content and process of European educational practices. We now have officially recognised Maori educational institutions, run by and for Maori in their own language, but the colonial assumptions of the State have made it a struggle to keep Maori language and culture alive. The Universities have tended to be tokenistic in their treatment (or mistreatment) of indigenous culture.

Speaking more personally, as a poet, I find that my inheritance of a tradition of European literature, extending back to Homer, is nonetheless something which gives me a sense of pride. Poetry, though, is today rather the 'poor relation' among the arts and is made even more marginal by mass media and market economics (it fails to entertain those with short attention spans, and it does not sell well). Colonialism at this level is ongoing and is detrimental to the development of unique cultural forms. The Universities, moreover, appear to maintain some kind of a haven, though personally I have found that the teaching of poetry says little about my own approach to writing. The currently fashionable cultural-political form of critique (though valuable in itself) does not do justice to my own experience of poetry as a psychological and symbolic process.

Rajiva Wijesinha

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Sri Lanka has claims, which I suspect no other former colony would contest, to being the most brainwashed of former British possessions. These claims are those of its social establishment, which takes pride on speaking English with a proper accent such as would be readily understandable in London, centre of all authority, unlike what are thought to be the very strange accents of Indians or Africans. Indeed upper class Sri Lankans tend to talk to each other exclusively in English, and not engage in the bilingualism a similar strata would use in the rest of the subcontinent. Only in Sri Lanka is tremendous stress laid on pronunciation, so that rural children learning English for the first time are scolded if they are unable to produce vowel sounds that do not exist in their own languages.

A corollary of this is that the literary establishment is keen on maintaining traditions of which it thinks Britain would be proud. There is therefore a tendency to celebrate writers accepted in the West, while downplaying the achievements of Sri Lankan writers. This again is unusual, because in most other former colonies critics take pride in some at least of their local writers, and have built up a canon that is studied together with the great British tradition that still dominates literary courses. In Sri Lanka however the local

writer continues to find it difficult to gain acceptance. In this respect it is noteworthy that the university department that has the most radical programme with regard to new literatures in English is in fact the one that is least concerned with Sri Lankan writers. Instead there is a preponderance of post-colonial literary theory (featuring Spivak and company) as well as of African drama, perhaps reflecting the fact that the lecturers concerned did their postgraduate studies at the Universities of Columbia and Kent.

Of course it can be argued that this is because most Sri Lankan writers are just not worth studying. This view has been expressed, for instance, in a recent publication intended to celebrate Sri Lankan poetry in English, in which the majority of the academics invited to contribute engaged in trenchant criticism of the writers that left readers with the view that Sri Lankan poetry should be suppressed. Similar opinions have been expressed about fiction. There is a long tradition of such views within the academic community, though over the years the focus of criticism has shifted. Looking at the pronouncements of the dominant voices from the various universities, we can see in the fifties the assertion that Sri Lankan English had no metaphorical vigour; in the sixties it was said that writing in English was useless anyway; in the seventies the criticism was the English used was ungrammatical; in the eighties writers who were dead were praised while the living were considered comparatively worthless; and finally in the nineties credit was given to Sri Lankans who published, and had indeed grown up, abroad, while those who engaged with the country from within were condemned.

My despair about all this may of course spring from the fact that, unusually for this country, I am a writer as well as a critic. However I believe that underlying the plethora of views outlined above is not merely the pettiness endemic in a society as small as the Sri Lankan one but, more seriously, a diffidence about endorsing anything that does not have a seal of approval from the West. This I believe is the fundamental reason why the same critics who find Sri Lankan writers inadequate are more than indulgent to Sri Lankan writers settled in the West.

Of course there are exceptions to this sort of attitude. The English department of the University of Peradeniya, the oldest in the country, has gradually over the years introduced the study of Sri Lankan writers systematically into its curriculum. Yet by and large the essential problem remains. Judgments are still made and validated in the West. Writers perhaps need to conform to Western requirements to gain recognition in the West, but at least it is still possible to publish and be read in one's own country without such recognition; for critics however, given the realities of academic life, validation for those in English departments is tied up with at least a certain amount of conformity. It is the interests and the judgments of the West that must receive priority, and accordingly those writers who do not fit in with such patterns have a long road to trudge before they achieve academic recognition even in their own country—or especially in their own country.

Syd Harrex

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«Literature and Neo-Colonialism» implies, via the grammatical connective, either a consensual or antithetical partnership. How ubiquitous is neo-coloniality to-day? How do we decide whether we live «in a Neo- rather than Post-Colonial age»? Is literary theory oppressive or liberating? Either way, a «cultural studies» approach to these issues—to the binary oppositions of metropolis/periphery and power-centre/disempowered margin—can unite art and politics to counteract neo-colonialism.

I don't dispute the verifiable activities of neo-colonialism in the following forms: imperialistic free-world capitalism; corrupt post-colonial oligarchies, military regimes, dictatorships; the re-colonialism experienced by, for example, minority societies like East Timor, or diasporic Indian communities in Fiji and Malaysia. That a tangible continuum from Pre-Colonialism, to Colonialism, to Post-Colonialism, to Neo-Colonialism constitutes a kind of unnatural history of the world is a thesis I have attempted to address in some of my poems, and what follows is a pair of sonnets which attempt to monitor history with, what George Lamming refers to as, the «backward glance»:

Port Arthur

Which of my ancestors who grossed
the earth,
planted vegetables and vine-
bedecked
them with fruits timorous and
edenic,
might have dreamed me during
their labours?
After their looms were cobwebbed,
farms destroyed,
when engine dinosaurs devoured
their fields,
what use then, forgiving the sins of
others,
what charitas from Cain's line of
brothers?
but convict time aborts my ques-
tions in
the uterus of family history,
and shredder death's bureaucracy
eviscerates the hymn of parchment
stone.
Restored facades ingratiate the past.
Swallows riddle honey light; the
crimes last.

Post-colonial Awakening

From winter sleep we wake in fog-
time now
to see our season of the south
invaded
by deciduous troops of northern
trees;
their labours, their leaves, shed like
dried blood, reveal the stiff
transparencies of colonial power:
those arterial silhouettes out there.
We should not be deterred by their
tradition
but stretch ourselves out of hyper-
nation's
foetus posture and attend to the
grey
business of our responsibilities
for Here and Now. One magpie on
a bough
refracting song-lines is templet
enough
to help us celebrate the simplest act:
the unconscious consummation of
love's pact.

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Cynthia vanden Driesen

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Bearing in mind the reminders, restrictions, stipulations for this exercise, perhaps the best strategy to pursue may be to have recourse to the personal and anecdotal. To begin with my «inventory of traces»: now an Australian citizen, my beginnings in Sri Lanka mean I am the product of a colonial education system which, in turn, has meant that the 'discovery' of the 'new literatures' in English has been essentially a postgraduate adventure. It has represented for me part of that 'decolonization of the mind' which is the legacy of so many of us who have inherited the 'post-colonized' terrain from which the colonizer has now departed for some decades. It has made me particularly sensitive to such scenarios as the following—all drawn from the world of academe...

Scenario one: SPACLALS' (South Pacific Association of Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies) Conference, Fremantle '92

A panel has been assembled to discuss postcolonialism and feminism. All the members of the panel are white females except for one solitary female Maori writer. When she rose to speak her first words, 'Where are my sisters?...' Embarrassed organisers had to respond to the effect that none of the invited aboriginal women writers could be present...

Scenario two: Factions and Frictions Conference, Flinders University, Adelaide '93.

Again a panel of women. Again exploring contemporary feminism. Again white women predominate. An Asian woman academic rises to protest that for Indian women motherhood was not to be regarded as a state of disempowerment—it was rather the diverse. Her spiel was barely tolerated; an attempt she made a little later to reiterate her point was effectively foiled by the white female chair-person.

Scenario three: Conference on African Women's Writing, La Trobe University, Melbourne '93.

Jane Tapsuei-Creider (Kenyan woman writer, now living and writing in Canada) protests the terminology 'genital mutilation' with all its associations of persecuted woman. To her and others of her generation, she maintains, it was a signifier of female maturity, a practice on a par with those which marked male initiation into manhood. The white male and female academics who controlled the proceedings afforded her a polite but manifestly unconvinced audience.

Now, on a slightly different note...

Scenario four: Oxford conference on 'New Cartographies', April '95.

The continuing «rift» that seems to mark off the theorists in the field from its practitioners surfaced in one episode. After a brilliant presentation by one of the better-known names in the field, the question was put to the Indian writer Nayantara Sahgal as to how she felt the theorists contributed. Her gentle reply was food for thought: «They do not seem to have much to say to me. I am often not sure what they are talking about...»

Is Western academia responsible for a new kind of colonialism? What do these scenarios suggest to you?