

POSTCOLONIALISM AND ORIENTALISM

Postcolonial theory takes on the politics of the study of 'English' literature and culture from the perspective of those who were colonized by it. Postcolonial theory would ask whether an 'English department' necessarily reinforces the hegemony of Western cultural practices and thus supports the political and economic forces which have subordinated what we have come to call the 'third world.'

Postcolonial theorists and scholars argue a lot about the meaning of the word 'postcolonial,' and particularly about when a 'post-colonial' theory or literature begins to emerge. Does the 'post' of postcolonial begin with national independence? With economic independence from the colonizing country? With cultural independence? In US history, we are taught that 'America' became an independent nation on July 4, 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was signed. But the Revolutionary War still had to be fought to assert that claim of national independence, and to be followed, for emphasis; with the War of 1812, before the US was internationally recognized as a nation independent from Britain. Even then, US economics were closely linked to British manufacturing, and US artists and authors spent a great deal of effort throughout the nineteenth century in trying to establish a clear distinction between British and American literature, and to proclaim the quality of the latter with minimal reference to the former.

So when does a colony become postcolonial? For this book, we'll take the easy definition: postcolonial designates the time after official colonial rule. For most former British colonies, postcoloniality begins in the mid- to late twentieth century, when most of the British

colonies, such as India, fought for their independence from the British Empire, and became separate nations. Postcolonial theories begin to arise in the 1960s as thinkers from the former colonies began to create their own forms of knowledge, their own discourses, to counter the discourses of colonialism: these postcolonial discourses articulated the experience of the colonized, rather than the colonizer, giving what's called the 'subaltern' – the subordinated non-white, non-Western subject of colonial rule – a voice. Postcolonial theorists examine how Western cultures, the colonizers, created the colonial subject, the subaltern, through various discursive practices, and examine also how subaltern cultures both participated in and worked to resist colonization, through various overt or covert, direct or subversive, means.

Postcolonial theory is thus centrally concerned with examining the mechanisms through which the colonizing powers persuaded the colonized people to accept a foreign culture as 'better' than their own indigenous methods of government and social organization. Among the most important kinds of power/knowledge brought by the colonizers was the construction of the concept of 'race,' and more specifically the racial binary opposition of 'white' and 'other' – be that other 'black,' 'yellow,' 'brown,' 'red,' or whatever other color became the signifier for the 'otherness' of the colonized people. In the case of the United States, the 'native' population (once the Native Americans had been colonized or killed) was itself defined as white, a fact which deprived the colonizing British of a dominant form of power/knowledge which worked successfully with non-white colonies to produce their native inhabitants as inferior.

Race and postcolonial theorists are interested in studying how distinctions based on race are made, circulated, and enforced. When you think about how you know what race someone belongs to, usually you will think about the physical or biological traits that supposedly mark 'race,' such as hair color, eye color and skin color. These traits or markers show that the concept of 'race' is actually a signifying system, wherein certain physiological facts become signifiers connected to specific ideological signifieds. Within the system of 'race,' a dark skin color becomes a signifier, and the signified it is connected to might be 'athletic ability' or 'musical talent.' The connections of physical signifiers to ideological signifieds in this system is 'racism' – and you can come up with your own examples of how

pejorative the signifieds can be that *get* connected to a particular physiological signified.

'Race,' as a genetic or biological construct, does not exist. Rather, it is a signifying system wherein physical signifiers become connected with concepts of ability to create the 'meaning' of one's 'race' appearance. As in any signifying system, these connections are *arbitrary*; there is no essential or provable connection between the physical signifiers of 'race' and the cultural conceptions (and misconceptions) which we assume those physical signifiers point to.

The question for theorists of race, then, is how these arbitrary connections between signifiers and signifieds *get* made, enforced, expanded, reproduced, and/or modified. The answer that most give is Foucault's idea of discourse. Writings about race, coming from the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology, criminology, biology, medicine, and (of course) literary studies connect a certain kind of eye shape with a certain kind of intelligence, or a hair texture with a social behavior. That is how 'racial traits' are created, elaborated, and perpetuated. And when we have made those associations, connected certain signifiers with certain signifieds, we then view those signs of race as 'real,' as 'true,' as 'factual.'

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is one of the foundational studies of how signifiers *get* connected to signifieds through discursive means to create the ordering system we call 'race.' Following Foucault, Said argues that discourse works to create 'knowledge' about a supposed 'racial' group. The best example of this is what anthropology used to be: a discipline to create knowledge, from the perspective of the dominant (usually Western) culture, about the subordinated/colonized culture. This knowledge wielded power, as it defined and described a culture or racial group, and thus produced the social attitudes, the ideologies and practices, which surrounded and delimited the group or culture being written about.

Said uses the word 'orientalism' to refer to the set of discursive practices, the forms of power/knowledge, that Western Anglo-European cultures used to produce (and hence control) a region of the globe known as 'the Orient.' You might want to take a moment to think about the stereotypes associated with the word 'Orient' and 'Oriental,' all of which labeled 'the Orient' as a place of mystery and exoticism. Such 'otherness' exists in relation to the familiarity of the Western Anglo-European world; the basis of 'orientalism,' like the basis of any form of racism or ethnocentrism, is the idea that

'we' are 'selves' who are 'familiar,' and that 'others' are necessarily 'exotic.'

'Orientalism' depends upon the binary opposition 'occident/orient,' meaning 'west/east' – but from whose perspective? How are 'east' and 'west' determined in the discursive construction of 'occident' and 'orient?' The answer, of course, is that 'the orient' is whatever is east of the Anglo-European perspective. 'Orient' and 'Occident' are a product of the ways that Anglo-European explorers drew the map of the world from the seventeenth century onward. Said points out that maps are not just representations of a 'real world' that is out there, a way to locate where rivers and mountains are. Rather, maps are texts which, like literary texts, carry with them a cultural perspective and work to create an ideologically-based reality.

An example of this is how the world figures time. In international time, there's a 24-hour clock, and the earth is divided into 24 'time zones.' Where does time begin? In Greenwich, England, 0:00 is midnight GMT, or Greenwich Mean Time, and the rest of the world measures time in relation to GMT. The same idea works with longitude: zero degrees longitude, the 'starting point' of global navigation, runs just east of London.

In both of these examples, England is the center of the world, the place where time and space begin, the starting point for all other models of mapping. And that's because England drew the maps and created the time-measuring system. And that's because England was the largest colonial power in the modern world (from the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century), and had the power to create the knowledge of the entire globe.

Said's work outlines how the cultural knowledge about, and representations of, 'the Orient' and 'the oriental' constructed by the West produce 'the Orient' as a place of 'otherness.' When we list the (racist) associations our Anglo-European culture makes with the concept of 'oriental,' what we're doing is listing all the things that our culture doesn't want to have defining us. For example, we might hear 'oriental' and think 'opium-smoking, heathen, mysterious, exotic' – all terms which are negative when compared to their binary opposites: sober, Christian, known, familiar. Said argues that the West's construction of the Orient projects all the things that the West considers negative, all the things that have to be repressed – all the things on the right-hand side of the slash in a binary opposition – onto our construct of the other, the Orient. So 'the Orient' becomes the place

where body (as opposed to mind), evil (as opposed to good), and the feminine (as opposed to masculine) all reside. By placing all of these forms of 'otherness' on the Orient, Said says, the Occident can construct itself as all positive.

Examples of the West's projection of otherness onto the idea of the Orient or the oriental appear all over the place in Western popular culture, from the Charlie Chan movies all the way to *The Karate Kid* series. The character of Mr Miyagi represents the American assumptions about a typical Japanese man: he is asexual, has no wife or girlfriend, cultivates bonsai trees, practices martial arts, speaks in broken sentences inflected with a heavy accent (despite having lived in California for 30 years!) and has 'inscrutable' behaviors, such as catching flies with chopsticks.

The history of imperialism is the history of discourses about colonized places, whether in the form of official government reports, personal travel narratives, or imaginative fiction set in 'exotic' foreign lands. You might think about Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as an example of imperial discourse – and as a novel which shows the contradictions and the collapse of imperial forms of power/knowledge. Said argues that the creation of discourse about a colonized culture, about 'the other,' works also to silence that colonized culture, which cannot 'talk back,' or write about itself. Rather, such discourse renders the people of the colonized culture the powerless subjects of Western power/knowledge, and anything the colonized culture tries to say or write about itself is by definition considered illegitimate, non-knowledge, nonsense.

Postcolonial literary studies, and postcolonial theory in general, focus on what happens when the formerly colonized culture starts to, or insists on, producing its own knowledge about itself. What happens when 'the empire writes back' to the dominant culture, when the silenced subjects of knowledge insist on becoming the producers of knowledge? One way to think about this is via deconstruction. The discourses that create the colonizers as the knowers and the colonized as the subjects of knowledge all depend on our old friend, the structure of binary oppositions, including West/East, Occident/Orient, civilized/native, self/other, educated/ignorant, etc. When 'the empire writes back,' these binary oppositions are deconstructed; when a colonized subject insists on taking up the position of 'self,' as the creator of knowledge about his or her own culture, rather than as the subject of that knowledge, these binary oppositions start to fall apart.