



Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism

History, Method, Practice

R. S. Sugirtharajah

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Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Introduction

I tried to tell myself that the answers were irrelevant, that the questions had to be asked differently.¹

When I was a student, biblical studies was a mild and a minor discipline. It meandered along with its own business which nobody outside the discipline took any notice of. Occasionally there were minor disputes, such as the Matthean priority which questioned the traditional conjecture that Mark was the first gospel, or the doubting of the authenticity of the resurrection narratives. In between these disputes, it was simply a case of academics recycling the nineteenth-century historical questions or of biblical scholars reverentially quoting each other's work. But this cozy world was succeeded by a state of upheaval and confusion in the 1980s. This was caused by reading practices informed by Marxism, feminism, and African-American and Third World interpretation. These new methods energized biblical studies. The proliferation of methods

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and the pluralization of voices resulted in the emergence of a semi-autonomous subfield of studies within the larger rubric of biblical studies.

One of the new reading practices which made a difference was postcolonial criticism. For those of us who were from the former colonies and taught by missionary scholars, and who were tired of interacting with Western agendas, the arrival of postcolonial criticism came as an act of emancipation from the tyranny of Western biblical scholarship. These Western reading strategies grew out of nineteenth-century Europe's rationalism and pietism and were not of the remotest interest to us in any of our hermeneutical quests. Before the advent of postcolonialism, some of us were like the character in M.J. Vasanth's novel *No New Land*, going through "battle by battle" and reliving "all their battles" and "spiritual struggles." Postcolonial criticism enabled us for the first time to frame our own questions rather than battling with somebody else's. It provided us with a new set of conceptual tools to investigate the text and interpretation. This volume is the story of how a critical theory which emerged in the secular humanities departments entered the arena of biblical studies.

Postcolonial biblical criticism is basically about posing its question differently to the biblical narratives and to the manner in which they have been interpreted. It approaches texts with the same kind of questions as any other critical practice: "What is a text?"; "Who produced it?"; "How is its meaning determined?"; "How is it circulated?"; "Who interprets it?"; "Who are the beneficiaries of the interpretation?"; "What were the circumstances of the production?"; "Does a text have any message?"; "If so, what sort?" Like historical criticism, postcolonialism is committed to a close and critical reading of the text. But there are crucial differences. While both mainstream biblical criticism and postcolonialism pay attention to the context of the text, one concentrates more on the history, theology, and religious world of the text, the other on the politics, culture, and economics of the colonial milieu out of which the texts emerged. One is about revealing the kingdom of god and its implications for the world, and the other is about unveiling biblical and modern

empires and their impact. One focuses on justification by faith for individuals, the other on the freedom of subjected nations; one uplifts the prophetic writings which are largely against other cultures, the other prefers the Book of Proverbs, an amalgam of international wisdom sayings. When mainstream biblical critics pose their questions to the text, they are driven by Reformation and Enlightenment agendas. When those who are not shaped exclusively by Western cultural norms employ postcolonialism, their approach is not necessarily motivated by a European ecclesiastical or intellectual agenda. Essentially, postcolonial biblical criticism is about exploring who is entitled to tell stories and who has the authority to interpret them.

My aim is not to resolve tensions, arguments, and disputes surrounding postcolonial theory, or to frame its ideas, issues, and concepts in a more sophisticated way. That task is well beyond the scope of this volume. My objective ultimately lies not only in critiquing both ancient and modern colonialism, but also in spelling out what kinds of hermeneutical approaches are possible, and how to be vigilant when politicians and commentators speak of a new imperium and scholars revert to Oriental practices in their writings. The hope of the volume is not simply to identify, describe, and analyze marks of colonialism in scholarly discourse, but to understand the past in order to assess the present and be alert.

About the Contents of the Volume

The first chapter, "Postcolonialism: Hermeneutical Journey through a Contentious Discourse," is an attempt at providing a brief history of the emergence of postcolonialism. In addition to this, the chapter narrates the main concerns and preoccupations of postcolonialism and its innovative contribution to reading practices such as contrapuntal reading. This chapter not only traces and records more recent forms of colonialism but also considers how postcolonial theory itself has moved on since its inception. The chapter ends with highlighting the theory's flaws and achievements.

The major focus of the second chapter, "The Late Arrival of the 'Post': Postcolonialism and Biblical Studies," is the mapping of the historical factors which paved the way for the advent of postcolonialism in biblical studies. It sets out the major marks of postcolonial biblical criticism and its major thrusts. This chapter also addresses the awkward question of the colonizing tendencies enshrined in the Bible and the complicated story of the unsavory association between biblical studies and colonialism.

Chapter 3, "Postcolonial Biblical Studies in Action: Origins and Trajectories," surveys some of the leading biblical scholars who work in the area of postcolonialism, their working practices, and the important texts that emerged during the period. It also examines the context and the contents of empire studies, especially in the US, and the interaction between postcolonialism and feminism. This chapter is written by Ralph Broadbent.

Chapter 4, "Enduring Orientalism: Biblical Studies and the Repackaging of Colonial Practice," has two related aims. One is to argue that biblical studies should be placed within the parameters of Oriental studies. The contention of the chapter is that the geographical focus, the culture, and the texts that biblical studies deal with make the discipline an ideal candidate to be part of Oriental studies. Second, the chapter provides examples of how current biblical studies, especially popular books written for mass audiences by those who practice social-scientific criticism, regurgitate some of the discredited and questionable characteristics of Orientalism in their exegetical and commentarial practices.

Chapter 5, "Postcolonial Moments: Decentering of the Bible and Christianity," recounts the two important postcolonial moments that happened during the halcyon days of colonialism: the publication of *The Sacred Books of the East* in 1879 and the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. Both had deep implications for Christian theology and biblical interpretation. The chapter highlights how the publication of the religious texts of the East challenged the unique beliefs of the Bible. It also recalls how the delegates from the East used the occasion of the Parliament to blame and shame the West for its moral failures. The strategy they used

involved the very Orientalism constructed by the West. The chapter also discusses the differences between the resistance that happened during the colonial period and the oppositional stance of the current postcolonialism.

Chapter 6, "The Empire Exegetes Back: Postcolonial Reading Practices," provides examples of how to read the biblical texts from a postcolonial perspective. The first example utilizes the contrapuntal method, a method which has come to be associated with postcolonialism as its own distinguished contribution, to read the birth narratives of two masters – the Buddha and Jesus. The second example makes use of Edward Said's "late style" to understand the writing of two of the most interesting and complicated New Testament authors – Paul and John. Late style, a method that Edward Said proposed near the end of his life, was about comprehending the dramatic changes one finds in the late works of writers, or in artists when they arrive at a position which is completely different from the one they held earlier in their career. The third example is about the rhetoric of representation, and as a case study it looks at the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and investigates how the rich and the poor are represented in the parable and the ideological biases which undergird the subsequent interpretations of the parable.

The Afterword, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: The Unfinished Journey," brings the volume to a close by asking whether postcolonialism will have any future or just fade away like other critical practices. The contention of this chapter is that postcolonial critical practices will have a role to play as long as a culture thinks of itself as superior to others; as long as markets are there to be exploited; as long as sacred texts sanction conquest; and as long as people assume that they are chosen to carry out god's special task. The chapter also provides some markers for the next step in postcolonial biblical criticism.

The merit of the volume lies not only in its registering of the faults and failures of imperialists and missionaries, but also in recording the hermeneutical habits of nationalists who pressed into action some of the classical patterns of Orientalism and turned these

into a convenient weapon to meet various hermeneutical and political needs. Sometimes they appropriated that very Orientalist message in order to recover their identity and repair their culture, battered by colonial and missionary onslaughts. At other times they were simply imitating the standard rhetoric of Orientalism as a suitable way to get approval and recognition from the West.

Readers who are used to inclusive language may find some of the quotations from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers offensive. I have left them as they are to indicate the type of thinking that prevailed at that time.

Let me end with a quotation from Crispin Salvador, a character in Miguel Syjuco's novel *Ilustrado*. It comes out of a Filipino context, so substitute Filipino with Indian or Chinese or Nigerian. Similarly, instead of Tagalog, insert Sankrit or Mandarin or Swahili. Salvador's words could act as a warning against, a manifesto for, or a caricature of postcolonial criticism and those who engage with it:

What is Filipino writing? Living on the margins, a bygone era, a loss, exile, poor-me angst, postcolonial identity theft. Tagalog words intermittently scattered around for local color, exotically italicized. Run-on sentences and facsimiles of Magical Realism, hiding behind the disclaimer that we Pinoys were doing it before the South Americans.²

Notes

- 1 Shashi Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989), p. 379.
- 2 Miguel Syjuco, *Ilustrado* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 207.

Postcolonialism

Hermeneutical Journey through a Contentious Discourse

Too much theory and not enough literature. What do I know about “terror” and the “colonial encounter”?¹

I came to theory because I was hurting ... Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.²

The British government’s Home Office has recently produced a booklet *Life in the United Kingdom* – a booklet which is essential reading for those who wish to apply for British citizenship. Let me quote a passage from the booklet to illustrate how the prospective candidates are informed about the British empire:

However for many indigenous peoples in Africa, the Indian sub-continent, and elsewhere, the British Empire often brought more regular, acceptable and impartial systems of law and order than many had experienced under their own rulers, or under alien rulers

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other than European. The spread of the English language helped unite disparate tribal areas that gradually came to see themselves as nations. Public health, peace and access to education, can mean more to ordinary people than precisely who are their rulers.³

What this supposedly peaceful and progressive colonial history fails to disclose to the soon-to-be British citizens is the other face of imperialism – the atrocities committed by the empire. Apart from calling the Atlantic slave trade an “evil,” the Home Office’s version of colonial history is silent about the unsavory aspects of the empire.

There are four tyrannical “isms” which have played a dominant role in recent history: fascism, communism, racism, and colonialism. In the vanquisher’s version of history, two of these “isms” – fascism and communism – are projected as heinous crimes. Since it was the West which had a major role in bringing down the cruel regimes and ending the atrocities of Hitler and Stalin, fascism and communism are seen as inhuman and unparalleled in human history. To this, the crimes of other despots – China’s Mao, Cambodia’s Pol Pot, North Korea’s Kim Il-sung, and Ethiopia’s Mengistu – are also added. But when it comes to colonialism, there is a willful amnesia and a moral blindness. For most of the last century, many countries in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean were under the governance of Western nations which never fail to remind others of their proud liberal and democratic credentials. But the atrocities of colonialism are not given equal attention to those of Nazism and communism. There are works on Nazism which record the evil committed by those who pursued this ideology. Then there is the highly acclaimed *Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* by a group of European academics which tries to catalogue the murders, tortures, extrajudicial killings, deportations, and artificial famines faced by those under communist rule. The report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission deals with the question of apartheid in South Africa. There has, however, been no similar comprehensive documentation or condemnation of the colonial record except for sporadic disapproval of slavery. The question

which the late Edward Said posed is still a valid one: "We allow justly that the Holocaust has permanently altered the consciousness of our time: why do we not accord the same epistemological mutation in what colonialism has done, and what Orientalism continues to do?"⁴

To revert to the Home Office's booklet, this citizenship exam is likely to be taken not only by those who were part of the former British colonies but also by those who were affected by British imperial adventures in China, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. The booklet maintains a total silence about the British imperial buccaneering in these regions: the Opium Wars caused by the British attempt to force the drug on China; the three Afghan Wars where the British were trying to impose their authority and will; the British occupation of Mesopotamia (Iraq) from 1918 to 1958 and the brutal suppression of several national uprisings; and the violent restraint of the Dervish uprising in Somalia. In the colonies themselves, in Kenya for example, the Mau Mau uprising resulted in thousands of detainees dying as a result of starvation, torture, exhaustion, and disease in the "British gulags" organized well before Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Then there are examples of the British gassing the Kurds, and the massacre of the Malaysian communists by the Scots Guards. Besides these political atrocities, there were disasters created entirely by willful political and commercial decisions. For example, millions died in the famine in India between 1876 and 1908, which Mike Davis calls a "Victorian holocaust" – a misfortune caused not by the weather but by a mixture of British insensitivity and free-market ideology. These misdeeds were not exclusive to the British empire. In the early 1900s, nearly 10 million Congolese died because of the forced labor and mass murder by the Belgian government, while during the 1960s, when Algerians fought for their independence, nearly a million of them died at the hands of French forces.

The Home Office's booklet and current commentators, politicians, historians, and theologians talk about the benefits that came in the wake of modern colonialism, such as the railways, the rule of law, and education. But they conveniently forget the tyranny,

torture, poverty, desolation of lands, and destruction of cultures that accompanied the empire. If you look at places like Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Palestine, and Sri Lanka, where conflict is raging, a close scrutiny will reveal that the cause of the conflicts goes back to colonial administrative mismanagement and policies. These are stains on the seductive story of the British empire's civilizing mission which its sympathizers would prefer to overlook. The current advocates of humanitarian intervention conveniently write out these colonial atrocities.

Also omitted from the Home Office's booklet are any references to the "native" resistance to the empire except for a brief passing comment about the growth of "liberation or self-government movements" in India in the 1930s. The booklet also notes that the British did not try to impose Christianity on India, which prompts the comment that "the English tolerance of different national cultures in the United Kingdom itself may have influenced the character of their imperial rule in India."⁵

The litany of British imperial misdemeanors is recalled not to apportion blame or to induce guilt feelings, but as a reminder that along with all well-meaning measures like health, education, transport, law and order, and parliamentary democracy, there were also brutality and intolerance. The purpose of this rehearsal is not to impose and judge an earlier generation by contemporary values but to recognize that the past is problematic and that it cannot be reduced to one tidy version. To phrase it differently, the empire is not a straightforward story of success, as the apologists want to portray it, but a complicated ensemble of atrocity and generosity.

I started with the Home Office document to demonstrate how totalizing forms of knowledge production are at work, and the need for a critical revision. Postcolonial criticism offers such a rereading. Its utility lies in its ability to question both the idea of colonialism as a structure of economic exploitation and profit, and the idea of colonialism as a structure of systematic gathering of reliable knowledge about the colonized.

Postcolonialism: A Compendious History

This book is mainly aimed at readers who are interested in postcolonial biblical criticism. Before we look at that, a brief note about the status of postcolonialism as a field of inquiry. Its arrival, its historical reach (where does colonialism start? Columbus's voyage?), its geographical scope (should one include settler colonies like Australia?), and the range of responses varying from antagonism to appreciation that the term "postcolonial" has invoked, have been competently documented in various anthologies and therefore there is no need for me to repeat them here.⁶ What I propose to do in the rest of the chapter is to recall some key events and issues related to postcolonialism which have relevance to biblical studies. Postcolonial critical approaches first made their mark in the humanities, especially in English literature departments in the 1980s and mainly on British and American campuses, and made an impact which was contentious, to say the least. Postcolonial theory developed from a variety of sources, critical traditions, and historical experiences such as anti-colonial resistance writings, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism.

It is worth remembering that postcolonialism did not begin its career in the academy. Before postcolonialism became a potent scholarly discourse in the Western academies, there was a variety of anti-colonial practices which were later incorporated into the discourse as connected to and consonant with what is now known as postcolonial criticism. It had a lengthy, heterogeneous, and complicated history before it made its mark nearly two decades after the end of formal colonialism. The critique of colonialism was initiated by two sets of people – activists and creative writers – who participated in anti-colonial struggles and reflected on them. The current theory owes an intellectual debt to theorist-activists, such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, and C.L.R. James, whose resistant writings and strategies were energized by colonial racism and Marxist thinking. Novelists like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in their writings explored colonial

prejudices concerning African peoples and the cultural havoc caused by the introduction of Christianity to the continent. To this initial list of novelists, which was confined to Commonwealth countries under British control, other theoreticians and creative people were added when postcolonialism was expanded to include the Spanish, the Portuguese,⁷ the French,⁸ and the current superpower, the USA.⁹ Robert Young, in his near-encyclopedic history of postcolonialism, has found historical and theoretical significance in Irish, Algerian, negritude, and pan-African liberation movements which were absent in the earlier literature.¹⁰

The text which is often credited with the inauguration of postcolonialism is Edward Said's *Orientalism*. This book produced a cluster of disciplinary approaches, and among them were postcolonialism and colonial discourse analysis. It is worth remembering that Edward Said, in his lifelong pursuit of the study of literature, rarely used postcolonialism as a mode of inquiry. In an interview he called it a "misnomer." Abstract theories did not enthuse him. In the same interview, he said that he "was always trying to gear [his] writing not towards a theoretical constituency but towards a political."¹¹ For a systematic analysis, his preferred term was "secular criticism." What he was dismissive of was the vacuous and notably tedious and at times unreadable stuff which passed for high theory and not the sort of postcolonial political and cultural concerns that he championed in his life. To the writings of Edward Said, one could add the works of Homi Bhabha¹² and Gayatri Spivak¹³ who were in a way responsible for providing a theoretical and much less readable framework.

Any critical theory which has "post" as its prefix is not easy to pin down, and its definition remains unsettled. Postcolonialism is no exception. Postcolonialism, as a term, has both historical and theoretical nuances. In one sense, as an expression, it marks the formal decline of Western territorial empires. On the other, as a theory, it has several functions: (a) it examines and explains especially social, cultural, and political conditions such as nationality, ethnicity, race, and gender both before and after colonialism; (b) it interrogates the often one-sided history of nations, cultures, and

peoples; and (c) it engages in a critical revision of how the “other” is represented.

Postcolonialism is largely an intellectual and political pursuit and has unashamedly a committed stance. Unlike other theoretical categories, it is not too preoccupied with detachment and neutrality. It emerged from both indigenous and diasporic contexts. Its critical stance is a creative adoption of the practical insights gleaned from those involved in anti-colonial and neo-colonial struggles and the theoretical tools and perspectives gained from a wide variety of disciplines. This includes a combination of clashing and contradictory voices from literary theory, philology, psychology, anthropology, political science, and feminist studies, with a view to exposing the collusive nature of Western historiography and its hidden support for imperialism. It is an attempt to explore the often one-sided, exploitative, and collusive nature of academic scholarship.

Right from its inception, postcolonialism has functioned as a political indicator and a literary critical tool. One of the least troublesome ways to describe postcolonialism is to recall the words of John McLeod. For him, it is an exploration of “the inseparable relationship between history and culture in the primary context of colonialism and its consequences.”¹⁴ To put it at its simplest: it is about the impact created by Western colonization on individuals, communities, and cultures. As with all theoretical practices, the purpose and serviceability of postcolonialism have changed over the years. In the initial stages Homi Bhabha, one of the triumvirate who were at the forefront in shaping the theory, wrote that the aim of postcolonialism was to

intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent movements within the “rationalizations” of modernity.¹⁵