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COLONIALISM/ POSTCOLONIALISM

Ania Loomba

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are approached here, not in a descriptive manner but by considering the crucial debates they engender about authenticity and hybridity, the nation, ethnicity and colonial identities. Theories of nationalism and pan-nationalism are then considered, as are the complexities within colonised countries, and how nationalism is fractured by gender, class and ideological divides. This chapter will look at some recent writings that discuss the relationship between literary production and nationalist thought. One of the most vexed questions in postcolonial studies is the agency of the colonised subject, or 'subaltern', and whether it can be recovered and represented by postcolonial intellectuals. Another is the relationship between post-modernism and postcolonial studies, and the last two sections will consider these questions and connect them to previous discussions of agency and representation.

Although this volume does not even attempt the impossible task of 'covering' every major thinker, event or controversy, I hope its selection of the major debates and issues will stimulate and enable its readers to explore, and to critique, further afield.

1

SITUATING COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

DEFINING THE TERMS: COLONIALISM, IMPERIALISM, NEO-COLONIALISM, POSTCOLONIALISM

Colonialism and imperialism are often used interchangeably. The word colonialism, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), comes from the Roman 'colonia' which meant 'farm' or 'settlement', and referred to Romans who settled in other lands but still retained their citizenship. Accordingly, the *OED* describes it as,

a settlement in a new country . . . a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state; the community so formed, consisting of the original settlers and their descendants and successors, as long as the connection with the parent state is kept up.

This definition, quite remarkably, avoids any reference to people other than the colonisers, people who might already have been living in those places where colonies were established. Hence it evacuates the word 'colonialism' of any implication of an encounter

between peoples, or of conquest and domination. There is no hint that the 'new locality' may not be so 'new' and that the process of 'forming a community' might be somewhat unfair. Colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history. In *The Tempest*, for example, Shakespeare's single major addition to the story he found in certain pamphlets about a shipwreck in the Bermudas was to make the island inhabited before Prospero's arrival (Hulme 1986b: 69). That single addition turned the adventure story into an allegory of the colonial encounter. The process of 'forming a community' in the new land necessarily meant *unforming* or re-forming the communities that existed there already, and involved a wide range of practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement and rebellions. Such practices produced and were produced through a variety of writings – public and private records, letters, trade documents, government papers, fiction and scientific literature. These practices and writings are an important part of all that contemporary studies of colonialism and postcolonialism try to make sense of.

So colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other people's land and goods. But colonialism in this sense is not merely the expansion of various European powers into Asia, Africa or the Americas from the sixteenth century onwards; it has been a recurrent and widespread feature of human history. At its height in the second century AD, the Roman Empire stretched from Armenia to the Atlantic. Under Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century, the Mongols conquered the Middle East as well as China. The Aztec Empire was established when, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, one of the various ethnic groups who settled in the valley of Mexico subjugated the others. Aztecs extracted tributes in services and goods from conquered regions, as did the Inca Empire which was the largest pre-industrial state

in the Americas. In the fifteenth century too, various kingdoms in southern India came under the control of the Vijaynagara Empire, and the Ottoman Empire, which began as a minor Islamic principality in what is now western Turkey, extended itself over most of Asia Minor and the Balkans. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, it still extended from the Mediterranean to the Indian ocean, and the Chinese Empire was larger than anything Europe had seen. Modern European colonialism cannot be sealed off from these earlier histories of contact – the Crusades, or the Moorish invasion of Spain, the legendary exploits of Mongol rulers or the fabled wealth of the Incas or the Mughals were real or imagined fuel for the European journeys to different parts of the world. And yet, these newer European travels ushered in new and different kinds of colonial practices which altered the whole globe in a way that these other colonialisms did not.

How do we think about these differences? Was it that Europeans established empires far away from their own shores? Were they more violent or more ruthless? Were they better organised? Or a superior race? All of these explanations have in fact been offered to account for the global power and drastic effects of European colonialisms. Marxist thinking on the subject locates a crucial distinction between the two: whereas earlier colonialisms were pre-capitalist, modern colonialism was established alongside capitalism in Western Europe (see Bottomore 1983: 81–85). Modern colonialism did more than extract tribute, goods and wealth from the countries that it conquered – it restructured the economies of the latter, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonised and colonial countries. This flow worked in both directions – slaves and indentured labour as well as raw materials were transported to manufacture goods in the metropolis, or in other locations for metropolitan consumption, but the colonies also provided captive markets for European goods. Thus slaves were moved from Africa to the Americas, and

Other
Colonial
writing

in the West Indian plantations they produced sugar for consumption in Europe, and raw cotton was moved from India to be manufactured into cloth in England and then sold back to India whose own cloth production suffered as a result. In whichever direction human beings and materials travelled, the profits always flowed back into the so-called 'mother country'.

These flows of profits and people involved settlement and plantations as in the Americas, 'trade' as in India, and enormous global shifts of populations. Both the colonised and the colonisers moved: the former not only as slaves but also as indentured labourers, domestic servants, travellers and traders, and the colonial masters as administrators, soldiers, merchants, settlers, travellers, writers, domestic staff, missionaries, teachers and scientists. The essential point is that although European colonialisms involved a variety of techniques and patterns of domination, penetrating deep into some societies and involving a comparatively superficial contact with others, all of them produced the economic imbalance that was necessary for the growth of European capitalism and industry. Thus we could say that colonialism was the midwife that assisted at the birth of European capitalism, or that without colonial expansion the transition to capitalism could not have taken place in Europe.

The distinction between pre-capitalist and capitalist colonialisms is often made by referring to the latter as imperialism. This is somewhat misleading, because imperialism, like colonialism, stretches back to a pre-capitalist past. Imperial Russia, for example, was pre-capitalist, as was Imperial Spain. Some commentators place imperialism as *prior* to colonialism (Boehmer 1995: 3). Like 'colonialism', this concept too is best understood not by trying to pin it down to a single semantic meaning but by relating its shifting meanings to historical processes. Early in its usage in the English language it simply means 'command or superior power' (Williams 1976: 131). The *OED* defines 'imperial' as simply 'pertaining to empire', and 'imperialism' as the 'rule of

an emperor, especially when despotic or arbitrary; the principal or spirit of empire; advocacy of what are held to be imperial interests'. As a matter of fact, the connection of *imperial* with *royal* authority is highly variable. While royalty were both financially and symbolically invested in early European colonisations, these ventures were in every case also the result of wider class and social interests. Thus although Raleigh named Virginia after his Queen, and trading privileges to the English in India or Turkey were sought and granted not simply in the name of the East India Company but to Englishmen as representatives of Elizabeth I or James I, it was a wider base of English merchants, traders, financiers as well as feudal lords that made English trade and colonialism possible. The same is true even of the Portuguese empire, where royal involvement was more spectacular.

In the early twentieth century, Lenin and Kautsky (among other writers) gave a new meaning to the word 'imperialism' by linking it to a particular stage of the development of capitalism. In *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1947), Lenin argued that the growth of 'finance-capitalism' and industry in the Western countries had created 'an enormous superabundance of capital'. This money could not be profitably invested at home where labour was limited. The colonies lacked capital but were abundant in labour and human resources. Therefore it needed to move out and subordinate non-industrialised countries to sustain its own growth. Lenin thus predicted that in due course the rest of the world would be absorbed by European finance capitalists. This global system was called 'imperialism' and constituted a particular stage of capitalist development – the 'highest' in Lenin's understanding because rivalry between the various imperial wars would catalyse their destruction and the demise of capitalism. It is this Leninist definition that allows some people to argue that capitalism is the distinguishing feature between colonialism and imperialism.

Direct colonial rule is not necessary for imperialism in this

sense, because the economic (and social) relations of dependency and control ensure both captive labour as well as markets for European industry as well as goods. Sometimes the words 'neo-imperialism' or 'neo-colonialism' are used to describe these situations. In as much as the growth of European industry and finance-capital was achieved through colonial domination in the first place, we can also see that imperialism (in this sense) is the highest stage of colonialism. In the modern world then, we can distinguish between colonisation as the take over of territory, appropriation of material resources, exploitation of labour and interference with political and cultural structures of another territory or nation, and imperialism as a global system. However, there remains enormous ambiguity between the economic and political connotations of the word. If imperialism is defined as a political system in which an imperial centre governs colonised countries, then the granting of political independence signals the end of empire, the collapse of imperialism. However, if imperialism is primarily an economic system of penetration and control of markets, then political changes do not basically affect it, and may even redefine the term as in the case of 'American imperialism' which wields enormous military and economic power across the globe but without direct political control. The political sense was predominant however in the description of the relations between the former USSR and other Eastern European countries as 'Soviet imperialism'. As we will discuss in later sections, the tensions between economic and political connotations of imperialism also spill over into the understanding of racial oppression, and its relationship with class or other structures of oppression.

Thus, imperialism, colonialism and the differences between them are defined differently depending on their historical mutations. One useful way of distinguishing between them might be to not separate them in temporal but in spatial terms and to think of imperialism or neo-imperialism as the phenomenon that originates in the metropolis, the process which leads to domination and

control. Its result, or what happens in the colonies as a consequence of imperial domination is colonialism or neo-colonialism. Thus the imperial country is the 'metropole' from which power flows, and the colony or neo-colony is the place which it penetrates and controls. Imperialism can function without formal colonies (as in United States imperialism today) but colonialism cannot.

These fluctuations also complicate the meanings of the term 'postcolonial', a term that is the subject of an ongoing debate, which we shall unravel slowly. It might seem that because the age of colonialism is over, and because the descendants of once-colonised peoples live everywhere, the whole world is postcolonial. And yet the term has been fiercely contested on many counts. To begin with, the prefix 'post' complicates matters because it implies an 'aftermath' in two senses – temporal, as in coming after, and ideological, as in supplanting. It is the second implication which critics of the term have found contestable: if the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased, it is perhaps premature to proclaim the demise of colonialism. A country may be both postcolonial (in the sense of being formally independent) and neo-colonial (in the sense of remaining economically and/or culturally dependent) at the same time. We cannot dismiss the importance of either formal decolonisation, or the fact that unequal relations of colonial rule are reinscribed in the contemporary imbalances between 'first' and 'third' world nations. The new global order does not depend upon direct rule. However, it does allow the economic, cultural and (to varying degrees) political penetration of some countries by others. This makes it debatable whether once-colonised countries can be seen as properly 'post-colonial' (see McClintock 1992).

Even in the temporal sense, the word postcolonial cannot be used in any single sense. Formal decolonisation has spanned three centuries, ranging from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, to the

Separation
of
empire
(colony)

1970s in the case of Angola and Mozambique. Pointing to this fact, Ella Shohat trenchantly asks, 'When exactly, then, does the "postcolonial" begin?' (1993: 103). This is not just a rhetorical question; Shohat's point is that these diverse beginnings indicate that colonialism was challenged from a variety of perspectives by people who were not all oppressed in the same way or to the same extent. Thus the politics of decolonisation in parts of Latin America or Australia or South Africa where white settlers formed their own independent nations is different from the dynamics of those societies where indigenous populations overthrew their European masters. The term is not only inadequate to the task of defining contemporary realities in the once-colonised countries, and vague in terms of indicating a specific period of history, but may also cloud the internal social and racial differences of many societies. Spanish colonies in Latin America, for example, became 'mixed' societies, in which local born whites (or 'creoles') and mestizos, or 'hybrids', dominated the native working population. Hybridity or mestizaje here included a complex internal hierarchy within various mixed peoples. As J. Jorge Klor de Alva explains, one's experience of colonial exploitation depended on one's position within this hierarchy:

In most places, the original inhabitants, who logically grouped themselves into separate cultural units (i.e. ethnicities), all but disappeared after contact, wiped out physically by disease and abuse, and later, genetically and socially by miscegenation, and lastly, culturally, by the religious and political practices of the Europeans and their mixed progeny. Even in the regions where native peoples survived as corporate groups in their own greatly transformed communities, especially in the 'core' areas of Mesoamerica and the Andes, within two or three generations they were greatly reduced in number and politically and socially marginalized from the new centers of power. Thus, those who escaped the orbit of native communities but

were still the most socially and economically proximate to these dispossessed peoples could be expected to distance themselves from them wherever possible.

(1995: 243)

The term 'postcolonial' does not apply to those at the bottom end of this hierarchy, who are still 'at the far economic margins of the nation-state' so that nothing is 'post' about their colonisation. On the other hand, those elites who won the wars of independence from Spain, Alva argues, 'were never colonial subjects' and they 'established their own nation-states in the image of the motherland, tinged by the local color of some precontact practices and symbols, framed by many imperial period adaptations and suffused with European ideals, practices and material objects' (1995: 270). The elite creoles, writes another critic, Mary Louise Pratt, 'sought esthetic and ideological grounding as white Americans' and attempted to create 'an independent, decolonised American society and culture, while retaining European values and white supremacy' (1992: 175). The quarrels of these Americans with colonial powers were radically different from anti-colonial struggles in parts of Africa or Asia and so, Alva concludes, they cannot be considered 'postcolonial' in the same sense.

In Australia, New Zealand or Canada, 'hybridity' is less evident between descendants of white settlers and those of the original inhabitants. But because the former also feel estranged from Britain (or France) they want to be considered postcolonial subjects. However, we cannot explore in what ways they are postcolonial without also highlighting internal differences within these countries (Mishra and Hodge 1991: 413). White settlers were historically the agents of colonial rule, and their own subsequent development – cultural as well as economic – does not simply align them with other colonised peoples. No matter what their differences with the mother country, white populations here were not subject to the genocide, economic exploitation, cultural

decimation and political exclusion felt by indigenous peoples or by other colonies. Although we cannot equate its history with those of these other settler-countries, the most bizarre instance of this may be South Africa, where nationalist Afrikaners 'continued to see themselves as victims of English colonisation and . . . the imagined continuation of this victimization was used to justify the maintenance of apartheid' (Jolly 1995: 22).¹

These internal fractures and divisions are important if 'post-colonialism' is to be anything more than a term signifying a technical transfer of governance. But at the same time, we cannot simply construct a global 'white' culture either. There are important differences of power and history between New Zealand or Canada and the European (or later United States) metropolis. Internal fractures also exist in countries whose postcolonial status is not usually contested, such as India. Here the ruptures have to do with class and ethnicity in a different sense. In a moving story, 'Shishu' (Children) the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi describes how tribal peoples have been literally and figuratively crippled in post-independence India. National 'development' has no space for tribal cultures or beliefs, and the attitude of even the well-meaning government officer, Mr Singh, towards the tribals replicates colonialist views of non-Western peoples – to him, they are mysterious, superstitious, uncivilised, backward. In other words, they are like children who need to be brought in line with the rest of the country. The rebellious among them have literally been pushed into the forests and have been starving there for years. At the chilling climax of the tale, we are brought face to face with these 'children' who thrust their starved bodies towards Mr Singh, forcing the officer to recognise that they are not children at all but adult citizens of free India, and stunted by free India:

Fear – stark, unreasoning, naked fear – gripped him. Why this silent creeping forward? Why didn't they utter one word? . . . Why were they naked? And why such long hair? Children, he

had always heard of children, but how come that one had white hair? Why did the women – no, no, girls – have dangling, withered breasts? . . . 'We are not children. We are Agarias of the Village of Kuva. . . . There are only fourteen of us left. Our bodies have shrunk without food. Our men are impotent, our women barren. That's why we steal the relief [the food Singh brings from the Government to distribute to the more docile among the tribals]. Don't you see we need food to grow to a human size again?' . . .

They cackled with savage and revengeful glee. Cackling, they ran around him. They rubbed their organs against him and told him they were adult citizens of India . . .

Singh's shadow covered their bodies. And the shadow brought the realization home to him.

They hated his height of five feet and nine inches.

They hated the normal growth of his body.

His normalcy was a crime they could not forgive.

Singh's cerebral cells tried to register the logical explanation but he failed to utter a single word. Why, why this revenge? He was just an ordinary Indian. He didn't have the stature of a healthy Russian, Canadian or American. He did not eat food that supplied enough calories for a human body. The World Health Organization said that it was a crime to deny the human body of the right number of calories . . .

(Mahasweta Devi 1993: 248–250)

Even as it is careful to demarcate between what is available to citizens of different nations, the story reminds us that anti-colonial movements have rarely represented the interests of all the peoples of a colonised country. After independence, these fissures can no longer be glossed over, which is why, like some of their Indian counterparts, African novelists since the 1960s can also be regarded as 'no longer committed to the nation' (Appiah 1996: 66). The newly independent nation-state makes available the fruits of

inhabited

inhabited Africa

liberation only selectively and unevenly: the dismantling of colonial rule did not automatically bring about changes for the better in the status of women, the working class or the peasantry in most colonised countries. 'Colonialism' is not just something that happens from outside a country or a people, not just something that operates with the collusion of forces inside, but a version of it can be duplicated from within. So that 'postcolonialism', far from being a term that can be indiscriminately applied, appears to be riddled with contradictions and qualifications.

It has been suggested that it is more helpful to think of post-colonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism. Such a position would allow us to include people geographically displaced by colonialism such as African-Americans or people of Asian or Caribbean origin in Britain as 'postcolonial' subjects although they live within metropolitan cultures. It also allows us to incorporate the history of anti-colonial resistance with contemporary resistances to imperialism and to dominant Western culture. Jorge de Alva suggests that postcoloniality should 'signify not so much subjectivity "after" the colonial experience as a subjectivity of oppositionality to imperializing/colonizing (read: subordinating/subjectivizing) discourses and practices'. He justifies this by arguing that new approaches to history have discredited the idea of a single linear progression, focusing instead on 'a multiplicity of often conflicting and frequently parallel narratives'. Therefore, he suggests that we should 'remove postcoloniality from a dependence on an antecedent colonial condition' and 'tether the term to a post-structuralist stake that marks its appearance. That, I believe, is the way postcoloniality must be understood when applied to United States Latinos or Latin American hybrids' (Alva 1995: 245).

This statement is worth unpacking for it leads us into the heart of the controversy surrounding postcolonial studies today.

Although we shall only discuss this controversy later in the book, we can take a quick look at the direction in which some current debates are moving. Alva wants to de-link the term postcoloniality from formal decolonisation because he thinks many people living in both once-colonised and once colonising countries are still subject to the oppressions put into place by colonialism. And he justifies this expansion of the term by referring to post-structuralist approaches to history which have suggested that the lives of various oppressed peoples can only be uncovered by insisting that there is no single history but a 'multiplicity of histories'. It was not only post-structuralists who discredited master narratives, feminists also insisted that such narratives had hidden women from history. Anti-colonial intellectuals also espoused a similar view. However, the idea has received its most sustained articulation within post-structuralist writing. Thus Alva suggests that postcoloniality is, and must be more firmly connected to, post-structuralist theories of history.

Recently, many critics of postcolonial theory have in fact blamed it for too much dependence upon post-structuralist or post-modern perspectives (which are often read as identical). They claim that the insistence on multiple histories and fragmentation within these perspectives has been detrimental to thinking about the global operation of capitalism today. The increasing fragmentation and mobility of communities and peoples needs to be contextualised in terms of the new ways in which global capitalism works. According to this argument, an accent on a multiplicity of histories serves to obfuscate the ways in which these histories are being connected anew by the international workings of multinational capital. Without this focus, the global imbalances of power are glossed over, and the world rendered 'seemingly shapeless' (Dirlik 1994: 355). A too-quick enlargement of the term postcolonial can indeed paradoxically flatten both past and contemporary situations. All 'subordinating' discourses and practices are not the same either over time or across the globe.

works
def
of
postcolonialism

Erstwhile colonial powers may be restructured by contemporary imperialism but they are not the same phenomena. Opposition to colonial rule was spearheaded by forms of nationalist struggle which cannot offer a blueprint for dealing with inequities of the contemporary world order. In fact, as the Mahasweta Devi story quoted above exemplifies, many struggles in the postcolonial world are sceptical about precisely those forces and discourses that were responsible for formal decolonisation.

And so, we might ask not only when does the postcolonial begin, but where is postcoloniality to be found? Although 'minority' peoples living in the West (and they may not in every place be literally a minority at all) and the peoples living in 'third world' countries share a history of colonial exploitation, may share cultural roots, and may also share an opposition to the legacy of colonial domination, their histories and present concerns cannot simply be merged. African-Americans and South African blacks, for example, may both be engaged in the reconstruction of their cultures, yet how can we forget that blacks in South Africa are the marginalised majority of the population or that African-Americans are citizens of the world's mightiest state although their own position within it might be marginal? These differences are highlighted by a production of Shakespeare's *Othello* by the South African actress Janet Suzman. Suzman had been living in Britain for many years when she returned home to mount the play for the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, in which she cast a black actor in the central role. In the context of a long history of *Othello* productions where the hero is played by a white man, or which simply gloss over the racial politics of the play in favour of the 'universal' themes of male jealousy, doomed love, and devoted female victims, and especially in the context of South Africa's laws against mixed marriages, this production was radical. And to place *Othello* in one of the cultures of 'his' origin is to allow us to rethink the entire history of the play. But at the same time, Shakespeare's drama is about a black man trying to

live in a white society, assimilating yet maintaining his identity. His loneliness is an integral feature of the play – he is isolated from other black people, from his history and culture. To place Shakespeare's *Othello* in South Africa is to open up a powerful new reading of the play, but also to elide two different kinds of marginality: the one which arises out of displacement and another in which black people and cultures were victimised but not literally isolated from each other.

Othello's situation of course does not translate exactly into today's European context because so-called metropolitan societies are now literally changing their colours. *Othello*'s successors are not so alone. And yet, British Asians face a different sort of pressure on their self-definition than people within India or Pakistan or Bangladesh. Further, by now there are as many differences between each of these groups as there are similarities. Similarly anti-colonial positions are embedded in specific histories, and cannot be collapsed into some pure oppositional essence. They also depended on the nature of colonial rule so that nationalist struggles in Algeria against the French were different from Indian resistance to the British, and neither can be equated to Vietnamese opposition to French and United States imperialism. As we will see, many writings on postcolonialism emphasise concepts like 'hybridity' and fragmentation and diversity, and yet they routinely claim to be describing 'the postcolonial condition', or 'the postcolonial subject' or 'the postcolonial woman'. At best, such terms are no more than a helpful shorthand, because they do not allow for differences between distinct kinds of colonial situations, or the workings of class, gender, location, race, caste or ideology among people whose lives have been restructured by colonial rule.

As mentioned earlier, by the 1930s colonialism had exercised its sway over 84.6 per cent of the land surface of the globe. This fact alone reminds us that it is impossible for European colonialism to have been a monolithic operation. Right from its earliest

years it deployed diverse strategies and methods of control and of representation. European discourses about 'the other' are accordingly variable. But because they produced comparable (and sometimes uncannily similar) relations of inequity and domination the world over, it is sometimes overlooked that colonial methods and images varied hugely over time and place. Most contemporary commentators continue to generalise about colonialism from their specific knowledge of it in a particular place or time. Thus, for some critics such as Gayatri Spivak, nineteenth-century India, and particularly nineteenth-century Bengal, has become a privileged model for the colonised world. Laura Chrisman finds that 'an Oriental/Occidental binarism, in which continents and colonies which do not belong to this West/East axis are nonetheless absorbed into it' is detrimental to recovering the specificity of certain situations in Africa. Although such homogenising might partially have arisen from the desire to emphasise how colonial discourses themselves blur difference, its effect, as Chrisman points out, is to overlook how these discourses also deploy strategies of exaggerating and playing off differences among diverse others:

It is just as important to observe differences between imperial practices – whether it be geographical/national (for example, the differences between the French imperialism of Baudelaire and the English imperialism of Kipling) or historical (say the differences between the early-nineteenth-century imperialism, prior to its formal codification, and late-nineteenth-century imperialism) – as it is to emphasize what all these formations have in common.

(Chrisman 1994: 500)

The legacies of colonialism are thus varied and multiple even as they obviously share some important features.

If the term postcolonial is taken to signify an oppositional

position or even desire, as Alva suggests, then it has the effect of collapsing various locations so that the specificities of all of them are blurred. Moreover, thought of as an oppositional stance, 'postcolonial' refers to specific groups of (oppressed or dissenting) people (or individuals within them) rather than to a location or a social order, which may include such people but is not limited to them. Postcolonial theory has been accused of precisely this: it shifts the focus from locations and institutions to individuals and their subjectivities. Postcoloniality becomes a vague condition of people anywhere and everywhere, and the specificities of locale do not matter. In part the dependence of postcolonial theory upon literary and cultural criticism, and upon post-structuralism is responsible for this shift. So we are back to the critique articulated earlier – that post-structuralism is responsible for current inadequacies in theorising postcoloniality. We will return to this issue when some of the terms in the debate have been further clarified. For now, we can see some of the problems with expanding the term postcolonial to signify a political position.

There is yet another issue at stake in the term, and this time the problem is not with 'post' but with 'colonial'. Analyses of 'postcolonial' societies too often work with the sense that colonialism is the only history of these societies. What came before colonial rule? What indigenous ideologies, practices and hierarchies existed alongside colonialism and interacted with it? Colonialism did not inscribe itself on a clean slate, and it cannot therefore account for everything that exists in 'postcolonial' societies. The food, or music, or languages, or arts of any culture that we think of as postcolonial evoke earlier histories or shades of culture that elude the term 'colonial'. Critics such as Gayatri Spivak have repeatedly cautioned against the idea that pre-colonial cultures are something that we can easily recover, warning that 'a nostalgia for lost origins can be detrimental to the exploration of social realities within the critique of imperialism' (1988: 211–313). Spivak is suggesting here that the pre-colonial is

past

always reworked by the history of colonialism, and is not available to us in any pristine form that can be neatly separated from the history of colonialism. She is interested in emphasising the worlding (i.e. both the violation and the creation) of the 'third world' by colonial powers and therefore resists the romanticising of once-colonised societies 'as distant cultures, exploited but with rich intact heritages waiting to be recovered . . .'. Other critics such as Kwame Anthony Appiah (1991) have also criticised the tendency to eulogise the pre-colonial past or romanticise native culture. Such 'nativism', they suggest is espoused by both certain intellectuals within postcolonial societies and some First World academics. But while such caution is necessary, it can also lead to a reverse simplification, whereby the 'Third World' is seen as a world defined entirely by its relation to colonialism. Its histories are then flattened, and colonialism becomes their defining feature, whereas in several parts of the once-colonised world, historians are inclined to regard colonialism 'as a minor interruption' in a long, complex history (Vaughan 1993: 47).

Postcolonialism, then, is a word that is useful only if we use it with caution and qualifications. In this it can be compared to the concept of 'patriarchy' in feminist thought, which is applicable to the extent that it indicates male domination over women. But the ideology and practices of male domination are historically, geographically and culturally variable. English patriarchal structures were different in the sixteenth century from what they are today, and they varied also between classes, then and now. All of these are further distinct from patriarchy in China, which is also variable over time and social groupings. But of course all of these also have something in common, so feminist theory has had to weave between analysing the universals and the particulars in the oppression of women. Patriarchy then becomes a useful shorthand for conveying a structure of inequity, which is, in practice, highly variable because it always works alongside other social structures. Similarly, the word 'postcolonial' is useful as a generalisation to

the extent that 'it refers to a *process* of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and is probably inescapable for all those whose worlds have been marked by that set of phenomena: "postcolonial" is (or should be) a descriptive not an evaluative term' (Hulme 1995: 120).

Postcolonial studies have shown that both the 'metropolis' and the 'colony' were deeply altered by the colonial process. *Both* of them are, accordingly, also restructured by decolonisation. This of course does not mean that both are postcolonial *in the same way*. Postcoloniality, like patriarchy, is articulated alongside other economic, social, cultural and historical factors, and therefore, in practice, it works quite differently in various parts of the world. Frankenburg and Mani (1993) and Hulme (1995) make this point by tracing some of the ways in which the meaning of the term shifts across different locations. Hulme argues that, contrary to Alva's suggestion, the American continent is postcolonial, even though its anti-colonial wars were not fought by the indigenous peoples. American postcoloniality, in Hulme's argument, is simply *different* from the one that operates in India, and it also includes enormous variety within itself (the USA is the world's leading imperialist power but it once was anti-colonial in a limited sense; the Caribbean and Latin America still struggle with the effects of colonial domination and neo-colonialism). To impose a single understanding of decolonisation would in fact erase the differences within that term. In this view, there is a productive tension between the temporal and the critical dimensions of the word postcolonial, but postcoloniality is not, Hulme points out, simply a 'merit badge' that can be worn at will. We can conclude, then, that the word 'postcolonial' is useful in indicating a general process with some shared features across the globe. But if it is uprooted from specific locations, 'postcoloniality' cannot be meaningfully investigated, and instead, the term begins to obscure the very relations of domination that it seeks to uncover.