

essay

Introducing Postcoloniality

by Fakrul Alam

THE title of Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* indicates the lien she will take in introducing us to postcolonial studies: she will not see them as binaries, locked in permanent opposition, but as categories whose boundaries must be broken down so that we can see how the one inheres within the other. In other words, Loomba approaches colonial cultural studies in the wake of deconstruction, and other contemporaneous movements such as feminism and Foucauldian discourse analysis. Her intention, then, is not to give us a superficial picture of a settled site, but a detailed analysis of a fast-evolving subject located at an intriguing intersection of theory.

Loomba, in fact, sees postcolonial studies as a "beleaguered" field and it is her aim in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* to present readers with a book which will allow them to focus on key issues which have generated debates about the structures and residues of colonialism and their cultural manifestations. She is aware of the many criticisms levelled against the field: for example, the Marxist critiques which stress the way discussions of post-colonialism elide over questions of economic exploitation. She is conscious too of the reductive and formulaic nature of much of the work done under the rubric of postcolonialism and the tendency to simplify complex ideological formations in discussing colonialism and its aftereffects. Nevertheless, she writes from the conviction that "diagnosing" colonialism's "occlusions and mystifications" is important, as is the notion of approaching the colonial past with "our own developing histories and possibilities."

Loomba divides *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* into three sprawling chapters. The first of these, titled "Situating Colonial and Postcolonial Studies", defines keywords, then traces the formative stages of colonial discourse analysis, and finally shows how colonisation impacted on literature. Remarkably, Loomba takes a "standard" definition of colonialism such as the one which is to be found in the Oxford English dictionary to demonstrate how it is based on the exclusion of the colonised; this is seen to be paradigmatic of the way colonisers have got about their jobs of arrogating other people's lands and wealth. She, on the other hand, approaches terms such as "colonialism" and "neocolonialism" not to come up with a "simple semantic meaning" since she is aware of the importance of relating the "shifting meanings" of the term to "historical processes." She is also sensitive to the subtle distinctions that need to be made in situating words such as "postcolonial" since being a postcolonial in, shall we say, Bangladesh, is very different from being a postcolonial in Australia, and even in postcolonial Bangladesh, being a divisional commissioner is quite something else from being a member of some subal-

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tern group. Without a doubt, it is a strength of Loomba's book that it makes us aware again and again of "differences between distinct kinds of colonial situations, or the working of class, gender, location, caste or ideology among people whose lives have been restructure by colonial rule."

Ania Loomba's book is also notable for the rigor, the conciseness, and the lucidity with which she traces the contexts of contemporary colonial discourse analysis. Starting with Maxim's intense critique of the collusion of capital and colonisation, and the way Marxist concepts such as deification found their way into the indictment of colonialism carried out by intellectuals such as Aime Cesaire and Frantz Fanon, Loomba moves on to discuss the relevance of Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" for the analyst of colonisation. She also notes the subterranean ways in which colonial domination was carried out through the unwitting participation of the colonised in the process of their enslavement. Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation has been crucial in this respect as is Foucault's archaeology which focuses attention on the discursive practices of colonial regimes.

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Loomba is a professor of English at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and a specialist in renaissance drama, and it is understandable that among the best pages of *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* are the ones on colonialism and literature. She thus discusses how literary texts have not only reflected colonial tendencies but have

also contained elements subversive of such tendencies. It is fascinating to follow Loomba as she traces rape as a key trope in colonial writing and uncovers the devices through which literary texts were taught to prop up racist ideologies and literature itself advocated as a tool for colonisation as in Macaulay's famous Minute on Indian Education. This last point, of course, was made by Gauri Viswanathan in *Masks of Conquest* (1990), but it is the strength of Loomba's work that she will also follow up the argument that our (colonial) education systems were initially designed for further enslaving us with Homi Bhabha's very different observation that mimicry of alien systems led, inevitably, to slip-pages and ambivalent actions which, in the long run, turned us against our colonisers. To put it somewhat differently, if one of the products of a colonial education is Defoe's Friday who is doomed to carry out the master's will endlessly in pidgin (or for that matter "babu" English), the other, and more powerful one is Shakespeare's Caliban, who had declared famously to his enslaver Prospero: "You gave me language, and my profit on't/Is, I know how to curse".

Loomba is sensitive to the charge that the post-colonial is too textual a category and that too much can be made of English literature's impact on colonisation by expatriate literary scholars from our part of the world who have little or no connection to active politics. "Fighting" our "battles" for us, they have often attained celebrity status in the western academic world through what can only be called textual radicalism. Certainly, to this reviewer reading a postcolonialist of the deconstructionist sort such as Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak is often like being witness to a display of "radical chic." One corrective to this, Loomba implies, is to relate the text to its economic and historical contexts and to always take stock of the "intricate, subtle, and even contradictory, connections between colonial representations, institutions, and policies."

Chapter 2 of *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* discusses issues such as the construction of racial and cultural difference, the roles of gender and sexuality in colonial discourse, and concepts such as hybridity. Following Said, Loomba details the stereotyping inherent in colonialist discourse. For example, she comments on the depiction of the colonised either as barbaric and degenerate on the one hand and childlike and primitive on the other. Either ways, such characterisations were often made

to further imperialist projects: the ignoble savage deserved to be conquered and the noble one subjected to a "civilising" scheme! Indeed, Loomba stresses that colonisations was to a great extent an "enlightenment" project, as the discourses of the human sciences such as ethnography (and even of the pseudo-sciences) were deployed to subjugate other races directly or indirectly. In the process, colonial categories were constructed, such as the one of martial races (as opposed to unreliable, effeminate ones). Similarly, Loomba explains how class division were constituted to serve imperialist projects. For instance, a certain group within colonial society was elevated on the basis of, let us say, their lighter skins, and this group was then privileged as agents of imperial rule and were allowed to lord it over another group.

Recent work in postcolonial studies has shown that psychoanalysis too can be a valuable tool in exploring the colonial past and the agency of colonisation in the present. The portrayal of Africa as the continent where the western mind may regress into madness and the orient as the area of sexual anarchy are two of the motifs Loomba cites in her examination of the ways in which westerners have pathologised their colonial encounters. Reading Loomba's survey of the subject, we become aware of how psychoanalysis, like literature and the human sciences, had become a tool for serving imperialism and perpetuating stereotypes about other cultures. Loomba treats the Martiniquan psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon as an exemplary figure who has seen colonialism as the source of "psychic oppression and trauma." Here, as elsewhere, Loomba cautions against over-theorisation and urges for a practice which combines "socio-political critique and activism with an analysis of colonial and anti-colonial subjectivities."

In addition to being a literary scholar, Loomba is an ardent feminist, and her commitment to gender issues is obvious throughout *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. There are thus fascinating pages in the book on the complex and contradictory colonial responses to *sati*. For example, we come to realise through her discussion that in the nineteenth century widow burning became a contentious issue not only because it revealed male cruelty in Eastern societies but also because it was used to justify English intervention. On some

occasions the burning widow was used by white males to draw an example of wifely devotion for white women. On the other hand, to some Indians the widow who burnt herself despite the ban on *sati* by the English became exemplary for an anti-colonial gesture. Loomba also notes the equation of the dark women with the dark continent in some colonial texts and the frequency with which images of rape become "an abiding and recurrent metaphor for colonial relations." Combining feminist and postcolonial perspectives frequently, Loomba makes a pitch for a mode of analysis which will alert us as often as possible to the way race, gender, and sexuality are factors to be taken into consideration in studying colonialism and its legacies. Moreover, she advocates greater participation of women in postcolonial political and social movements.

Loomba pays particular attention to two concepts which have achieved prominence in recent considerations of postcoloniality: hybridity and of diasporas. The colonialist may be contemptuous of hybrids and may strive to preserve the purity of his race in the colonised territory, but cross-fertilisation almost always is a result of his arrival and he is changed as much as the colonised as he comes into contact with the colonised race. The fact is that there can be no question of purity in contact zones and both the colonialist and the nationalist are myopic when they insist on racial/cultural purity. Students of postcolonialism are thus able to see that the colonial encounter complicates our lives endlessly and results in fluidity and movements back and forth across the colonial divide.

Loomba's final chapter deals with the resistance movements which sprung up all over the world in this century to challenge colonialism. Quite understandably, she begins this chapter with a review of Benedict Anderson's world and notes his observation that nationalism in Asia and Africa was modelled on European experiences, but she also considers Partha Chatterjee's critique of this view and his emphasis on local cultural elements in the construction of nationalist discourse. She also shows how nationalist movements have groped for an usable past, that is to say, after a cultural heritage which could be utilised as a source of inspiration in reconstructing societies devastated by colonisation. In addition, Loomba focuses on the way postcolonial writers have questioned colonialist histories and have demolished myths created about their soci-

eties. However, here as elsewhere in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Loomba reveals that she endorses only the type of nationalism which is liberal and broad enough to include all categories in society and which is aware of the dangers of neocolonialism and suspicious of elites who replace the colonial masters only to become tyrants themselves.

Loomba ends *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* by reviewing the work of scholars who have written on "the failure of the postcolonial nation-state." She does not agree with Aijaz Ahmed that too much has been made of "national oppression" and too little of "class conflicts" in recent work on post-coloniality and sees nationalism as a crucial element in the makeup of the contemporary world. She is undoubtedly right in dismissing Salman Rushdie's "wild assertion" in his *New Yorker* piece on the superiority of the literature produced in the English language in India over the writing being done in the vernacular languages of the sub-continent. Loomba cautions too against uncritical valorisation of nationalist agendas. True to her commitment to providing nuanced views of issues now being contested by writers on, she refuses to endorse Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak's view that women in colonial India were subalterns who could never speak for themselves.

"Nuanced", indeed, is a key word for Loomba and it is remarkable how often she worries her way through competing arguments to make important distinctions and give us what is on the whole a balanced view of colonialism and its intricate association with postcolonialism. Any reader of her book is bound to profit from her tough-minded but wide-ranging forays into contested terrains, even though I cannot help but feel feminism is a hobbyhorse for her at times. But if I have one major reservation about her book it is that she privileges theory over practice and is mostly uninterested in analysing colonial and post-colonial writing. It is as if she has locked herself for the most part of the book in a hermetic space where post-colonial theorists chop logic endlessly and qualify each others views in a kind of intellectual parlor game. The point is reinforced when we compare Loomba's book to Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995). Although similar in size and scope, Boehmer's book is particularly helpful because it combines theory and practice and does literary-critical readings of key texts time and again to illustrate crucial theoretical concepts. "I would, therefore recommend Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* to anyone interested in knowing about the theoretical debates centering on postcoloniality but I would think that the book would be much for meaningful when read in conjunction with Boehmer's work." In fact, the two books complement each other nicely and both could be required reading for students beginning to study colonialism and its aftereffects. ■

reflection

A Tribute to Hamlet

by Syed Maqsd Jamil

WE DO not come into the world of our own will. Nether can we determine where we are to be born. These are lessons, that much in life is beyond our control.

Many of the things that happen in our life are not to our liking or taste. Our helplessness often leads to pain — to tragedy. There is no way to confront the makers of these ills, to find why they fell on us. We rationalize, these are the ways of destiny. Of Providence. But they are often known to give rise to rebels. A Hamlet is born. There is a bit of Hamlet in many of us. For our thoughts turn hostile when circumstances wrong us, hurt us.

The phenomenon is common to mankind. Hamlet as a character can be found in any country. In any setting. In any age. He may not be a Prince. The setting may not be the medieval age. Nor it is necessary, he is only to be found in a country with dark, cold winters. Like Hamlet's Denmark.

In Hamlet, Shakespeare has presented a state of mind which has its roots in the circumstances of his birth, in the tragic situations of his life. A state of mind obsessed with dark melancholy thoughts, where little action follows.

Though Hamlet, Shakespeare has shown what destiny can do to a well born man. As a crown prince, he was destined to become a King. To raise a

family with a beautiful wife in Ophelia. His enlightenment was to give him a life of quality. But it was not to be. For something was rotten in the state of Denmark. His father died suddenly and in suspicious circumstances. His mother, the Queen married his uncle; his father's brother, but no more like his father. Hamlet who was to be the King, was destined not to be.

Instead, Hamlet became the principal player of the tragedy. He was lost in the grieving thoughts of his father's death. In the words of his uncle, the new King, the clouds still hang on him. But Hamlet sensed foul. And he was drawn into it. He was in the centre of it. In fact 'too much in the sun'. Hamlet was the chosen child of destiny in the tragedy. It was to devastate the Elsinore Castle — the seat of the Royal family of Denmark.

The look of sorrow on Hamlet was not merely 'the trappings and the suits of woe', as the King observed. An obsessive thought was settling deep into his depressive mind. Indeed, these are the ways of dark depression born in circumstances most foul, where the victim feels cruelly wronged.

This is a situation where the victim ponders over the unfair nature of life, the selfish ways of the world, and the pitiful subordination of human beings to fate. The world therefore appears to him 'an unweeded garden' where 'things rank and gross in nature possess it merely'. He expresses with disdain on the 'weary, stale, flat and unprofitable nature' of the 'uses of the world'. It is therefore with much revulsion

he views the hasty marriage of his mother with his uncle. Most men experience discomfort in accepting the situation of marriage of their mother to another man. It pricks a man to see another man in his father's place. The male ego, a sense of possession or if you go by a theory, perhaps, Oedipus complex is at work.

For Hamlet, the situation was crushing. Gertrude, his mother, married with such indecent haste. When his father was "But two months dead! Nay not so much not two so loving to my mother". A sense of deep desperation and anguish takes hold of the mind. The deeply hurt feelings breed indignation observation. Hamlet exclaims "O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason would have mourn'd longer —". The revulsion cries out "Frailty, thy name is woman."

The revulsion will not go away because he is hounded by thoughts with little action to follow. It considers him "indifferent honest". He speaks of him: "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious." Yet, Hamlet is unhappy about his honesty "with more offences at my beck that I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in".

The thought has a firm hold on him. He turns away the love of Ophelia, "for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty...". The indecent haste of his mother planted in him a deeply unfavourable opinion about the honesty of women. Hamlet pours out his indignation to Ophelia calling her to "marry a fool: for wise men know well enough

what monsters you make of them."

Mental turmoil puts a complex picture of Hamlet. On the one hand, he appears extremely unkind in turning down the love of Ophelia, of rashly killing her father Polonius. But on the other side, it needs a little bit of probing to find out how much he loved Ophelia. It comes out in open when he leaps into the grave of Ophelia and when her brother Laertes grapples with Hamlet. He no longer could restrain himself and yelled "I lov'd Ophelia, forty thousand brothers could not, with all their quantities of love make up my sum."

Hamlet, as a character, is a role model for honesty, fairness, and most of all for humorous enlightenment in tragic circumstances. He is incomparable in representing the totality of human thoughts caught in the ills of the world. Hamlet is amazingly profound and even righteous in his imagination and observation. Extremely intelligent in cloaking his pain, anger, in cutting humour and ready wit. And no less adorable for his straightforward nature in dealing with the foul murder of his father. Hamlet did not follow the dark alleys of conspiracy to avenge the murder of his father. Yes, he killed Polonius. It was a rash act. He thrust his sword through the screen, when Polonius, hiding behind, shouted for help, thinking that the Queen is about to be murdered. In fact, Hamlet took him to be the King, responding to her mother's chastisement with the admission and enquiry "No, I know not. Is it the King?" Hamlet's ready wit was sharply evident in his closed door encounter with

his mother. The Queen was rebuking her son "Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended". The ready reply was "Mother you have my father much offended". It progressed to an even cutting reply that pierced the very core of his mother's grief. Gertrude was anguished that Hamlet has forgotten her. Hamlet countered "No, by the rood, not so; You are the Queen, your husband's brother's wife".

A particular occasion where Hamlet's humour shone brightly was when Polonius engaged him in a conversation. The elderly courtier was an over inquisitive person with fishy ways. Polonius started by enquiring "Do you know me, my lord?" Hamlet's reply was remarkably humorous and to the point — "Excellent well, you are a fishmonger." When the conversation would proceed no further, Polonius hinted at Hamlet's queer talks, asking "will you walk out of the air, my lord?" Hamlet's reply was prophetic and humorous indeed — he sharply replied "Into the grave".

Hamlet, as a literary character, is principally known for his melancholy observations — on human fate, on the lowly nature of human beings and on the bleaker aspect of life. They are useful guides for better understanding of human character and life on earth. All in all, Hamlet is a character of enlightenment.

His soliloquies are absorbing reading for all times. It begins with his injured observation on his mother's frailty of marrying his uncle within less than two months of his father's death. Many such

solitary observations follow. Among those, the one that draws us most is where he summarizes the inner struggle of human beings in the brief sentence — "to be or not to be — that is the question."

Thus he begins and takes us where it hurts us most. We are brought to face the enslavement in life. He observes "For would bear the whips and scorns of time. The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay. The insolence of office ----? Who would these fardels bear, To grunt and sweat under a weary life, But the dread of something after death... ---- thus conscience does make cowards of us all."

The tragedy of human life humbles us much when Hamlet wandering across the graveyard, on his return to Denmark, playful with the human skulls, beholds our end with earthly contempt. From one skull to another, he keeps thinking "That skull had a tongue in it and could sing once ----. That might be the pate of politician, ---- There's another. Why may not that be the skull of lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillets, his cases --- his tricks?"

Hamlet is among the most widely known literary characters in the world. Rightly so. It is one of the greatest and perhaps the most adorable character Shakespeare has presented to mankind. Like many of us, I keep returning to Hamlet time and again. My kinship with Hamlet is lasting. A tribute was long overdue. And it has been done — "the rest is silence". ■