

**CRITIQUING POSTCOLONIAL THEORY: SHIFTING FOUNDATIONS AND  
PARADIGMS**

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***Abstract***

*This paper examines the shifting focus of postcolonial theory from geographical domination, and argues that contemporary imperialism operates through globalization, neoliberalism, and transnational corporations. Drawing on theorists like Nkrumah, Lenin, Said, and Brennen, it critiques traditional definitions of colonialism tied to land exploitation, highlighting how postmodernity has enabled indirect control via cultural, economic, and informational avenues. The paper explores the role of education, media, and corporate capitalism in manufacturing consent, alongside the psychological colonization of "non-Western" societies. Case studies illustrate how neocolonialism perpetuates exploitation under the guise of progress. Ultimately, the study challenges the narrative that globalization transcends imperialism, revealing its continuity in new forms.*

**Keywords:** Neocolonialism, Globalization, Postcolonialism, Imperialism, Transnational Corporations, Cultural Hegemony.

It was Kwame Nkrumah who popularized the term ‘neocolonialism’ in 1960s with reference to the continuing influence that colonialism exerted in the ‘third world’ societies (Ashcroft et al 95). Although decades have passed since Nkrumah identified the persistence of colonial dynamics in formerly colonized regions, the global landscape has not changed substantially. This paper examines the validity of overlooked aspects in definitions of imperialism today, exploring how colonial systems of exploitation have shifted their focus from direct political control over territories to non-territorial domains. A form of remote-controlled colonization persists in the ‘third world,’ facilitated by the discourses of globalization and neoliberalism. Additionally, the idea of colonization as a nation-centered project, pursued for the

benefit of a specific nation, is also questioned, as nationalism and related ideologies have waned with the rise of postmodernity. Transnational corporations have now assumed roles once held by colonial powers.

Colonization, like imperialism, is an exploitative mechanism which has been attested to be the ‘highest stage of capitalism’ by Lenin (Woodfin 93). As he expatiates on the attributes of imperialism, one cannot but notice the incontestable affiliations that he thinks imperialism shares with geographical territories. For Lenin, domination over territorial spaces by a national ‘other’ is a prerequisite for imperialism, and it is evidenced by the vocabulary he employs in defining the phenomenon. He says:

Imperialism is capitalism in that stage of development in which the domination of monopoly and finance capital has taken shape; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the *division of the world* by international trusts has begun; and in which the *partition of the territory of the earth* by the greatest capitalist countries has been completed (93).

For Timothy Brennen, “imperialism is a later and more systematic organization of the foreign exploitation pioneered by colonialism....Imperialism makes the process begun by colonialism more efficient and generalized” (Brennen 135-136). Colonialism, according to Brennen, is located in the period before imperialism. In a categorical way he asserts that “imperialism can and does involve military *invasion and/or occupation*”. Brennen’s notion of imperialism is also inextricably linked to the idea of authority over geographical spaces. He admits that Lenin’s definition of imperialism as ‘the export of capital’ is a classic one, and *export* suggests transfer of items across national boundaries. The impulse behind imperialism and colonialism being capital, which is often identified as the natural resources obtained from land, territories used to be of vital import in the early history of colonization. Having power over land assured easy access to that capital and the growth of colonization can be deemed as a struggle for territories. The Latin word ‘imperium’ itself means ‘territory.’ History has witnessed so much bloodshed and pitched battles for domination over land.

The history of the world has been analyzed by Karl Marx as passing through the stages of capitalism, imperialism and colonialism. Marxian ideology purported to liquidate all rights of property in land and rights of inheritance (Woodfin 4). His notion of a bourgeois was one inevitably with right and power over land. Ownership of capital separated the bourgeoisie from the proletariat and led to exploitation of the latter. This Marxian paradigm was very much rooted in the nineteenth-century realities and could not have anticipated the course of history would

take. Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia comment that “imperialism refers to the formation of an empire, and as such has been an aspect of all periods of history in which one nation has extended its domination over one or several neighbouring nations” (The Paradox 89-90). Here too, nations are conceived of as geographical categories. They feel that Said’s definition of imperialism specifically invokes effects of culture. For Said, imperialism is “the practice, theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant *territory*”, which is distinct from colonialism which is “the implanting of settlements on a distant *territory*” (Ashcroft, *The Paradox* 89-90). Colonization was a programme that thrived on conquering the territories of various countries for sheer exploitation under the claims of ‘civilizing missions’.

Ashcroft and Ahluwalia expose Said’s preoccupation with geographical spaces by quoting him:

Underlying social and cultural ‘spaces’ are ‘territories, lands, geographical domains, the actual geographical underpinnings’ of the imperial contest, for *geographical possession of land is what empire is about*. Imperialism and the culture associated with it affirm both the *primacy of geography and an ideology about control of territory* (The Paradox 95-96).

All these thinkers and theorists seem to be obsessed with geographical territories as a prerequisite for colonization and imperialism. Though imperialism and colonialism at their inception and early stages of development were indubitably linked with geographical or territorial subjectification and exploitation of the colonized, since the advent of postmodernity, imperialism has been focusing on non-territorial spaces for ensuring and continuing with its exploitative projects. Since the arrival of postcoloniality- referring to the period following the transfer of power over national territories to the indigenous but mostly elite communities- colonialism operates not by establishing power over geographical spaces but other spaces. According to Said, imperialism “lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic and social practices” (8 Culture). Ashcroft and Ahluwalia remark that its very investment in culture makes imperialism a force that exists ‘far beyond a geographical empire’, suggesting the future direction of colonialism and imperialism (90).

Colonization in the present century functions with the construction and maintenance of postmodern sensibilities, which are strategically infused into all kinds of discourses. Lyotard defines postmodernism as the incredulity towards metanarratives. (xxiv) This is not an innocuous position as it may seem, for postmodernism zooms in on the project of composing an individual

as politically neutral, ideologically uncommitted, and historically and metaphysically insignificant entity. Territorial colonization dwindled by the middle of the twentieth-century, leaving a number of colonies politically independent at least per records, not because the colonizers became equitable all on a sudden or because the colonizers could not withstand the struggle for independence from the part of the colonized, but because it was no longer economically feasible for them to continue maintaining power over the natives, and because the colonial powers had identified better avenues for capitalizing on the colonized. Though the acquisition of political freedom had considerably reduced the pace at which the world was realigned with the exploitative strategies of colonialism in the initial stages, the slow but ever gradual imbuing of the ideology of postmodernism and discourses of globalization geared up grounds for what Noam Chomsky deplors as ‘manufacturing consent’ (1988), allowing for the interventions of imperial motives to define the lives of the colonized.

In course of time, the modus operandi of imperialism and colonialism has undergone a transition. The concern for territorial spaces has given way to non territorial spaces, the raw materials expropriated from third world countries have ceased to be identified as capital, being replaced by ‘knowledge/information’. Capital ceasing to be a territorial entity, colonization also has ceased to be territorial. National borders have become redundant but the propelling force behind it is not internationalism but corporatism. The notion of ‘colonizer’ as a (Western) nation has been deconstructed, and its place has been taken over by Multi National Corporate powers with the least sense of nationalism. Colonialism was national in nature. But the spirit of nationalism began to dwindle with the political freedom of erstwhile colonies. Nation has turned out to be a psychological category, an ‘imagined community’ in the terminology of Benedict Anderson (1983). The agenda of globalization has invalidated the respect for national territories, evincing incredulity towards the differences among the spaces for exploitation. In the information society, knowledge is identified as capital and the producers of knowledge are the new avenues colonizing whom do not involve the deployment of extensive and grandiose machinery like police or army- the coercive mechanisms of ‘ideological state apparatuses’ in the language of Althusser (1971). Engineering of consent is economically and strategically cheaper to run than maintaining subservience and obedience through the oppressive machinery of the administrative mechanism.

While the Eastern variety of imperialism was pre capitalist, its Western counterparts were capitalistic in orientation right from their inception. The Roman Empire dates back to a period even before the first century AD, and empires like Inca, Ottoman, Chinese, and Aztec also claim

long histories. If British imperialism heavily depended on the strategic maneuvering of colonial historiography of the 'Orient', whereas American imperialism neglected historiography as a tool for invasion. Its only recourse was the strategies envisioned by global capitalism which are explicitly materialistic than academic or philosophic. Postcoloniality refers not only to the empirical imperial experience realized through the colonial appropriation of the administrative mechanisms of national territories of the third world, but is more inclusive accommodating the neocolonial experiences facilitated through the discourses of globalization. Timothy Brennen comments that 'in an age of globalization the issue was about Eurocentric assumptions rather than military occupations' (132). The obsession with geographical spaces in the discourses of colonialism benefited only the colonial powers, in diverting the attention of the colonized from the real issues at hand. Attempts at colonization have almost always met with resistance, but it was largely directed towards the establishment of territorial and physical control of the national spaces, and was relatively unmindful of the impacts of indirect control or proxy colonization. Speaking about the all pervasive aspect of colonialism Ashis Nandi writes:

This [modern] colonialism colonizes the minds in addition to bodies, and it releases forces within the colonized societies [and] alter their cultural priorities once for all. In the process it helps [to] generalize the concept of the modern west from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in mind (xi.)

Pointing to the way trans-territorial imperial powers operate in the colonized spaces without asserting their physical presence but achieving their ends through elite 'middlemen,' Timothy Brennen writes:

Under imperialism, the cultural institutions in a foreign country that serve the imperial centre are no longer run by the imperial centre itself (at least directly). A whole sector of 'native' intellectuals and elites, inherited from the colonial era, identify with the colonial centre and carry out its wishes either out of conviction or through pay-offs, bribery, personal networks of affiliation, and so on. The ideology of civilisational superiority incipient under colonialism becomes under neo-colonialism a given, and is used by the imperial centre, as a natural justification for all its actions. There is no open enlistment, as under colonialism, of the rhetoric of a righteous cause, or a confrontation of the enlightened versus the benighted. These categories are rather fully internationalized, bureaucratized, and no longer controversial (124).

Though Britain was one of the most powerful imperial powers in the entire world, Britain's tardiness in identifying the non-territorial spaces amenable for colonization may be attested to be the reason for its diminishing sway in the contemporary international community. The US indeed was one of the early birds to catch its postcolonial worms. The trajectories of neocolonialism may be better identified by an analysis of what has often been discussed under the rubric 'American exceptionalism'. R. B. Kershner refers to the exceptionality of the United States, a former colony, later becoming a major imperial power and including its own 'colonized' minorities. The unsettling fact is that the least numerous of them are descendants of the original inhabitants. Kershner adds that the American experience is best understood through its basic difference from that of Europe (88). The US based information industries, knowledge process outsourcing (KPO) and legal process outsourcing (LPO) agencies account for a huge chunk of the heavy brain drain encountered by the postcolonial spaces.

Tejaswini Niranjana in her seminal text *Citing Translation* (1995) cogently lays bare the strategic underpinnings of the imperial gestures in India under Macaulay, and the trajectories through which the dissemination of translated literary works were turned into discourses which justified the imperial interventions in the national territories of the 'third world' countries. If Macaulay's educational reforms in India were aimed at facilitating the imperial administration of its territories and simultaneous utilization of its resources, the current education system followed in our country can be seen to have been shaped for catering to the requirements of the Transnational Corporations (TNC's). A reason for this remote controlled colonialism is that education in the postcolonial spaces has been realized to be a strategic avenue, which is funded and sponsored by the imperial powers. But in the postmodern globalized world, funding is made not out of charity but for the attainment of certain specific goals. The funding agencies would choke out master plans for the utilization of funds and would intervene in the functioning of the educational programmes to ascertain that everything is in tune with the objectives of the sponsors. *Sarva Siksa Abhiyan* (SSA) which was practiced in schools from 2000-2001 was criticized for its sheer neglect towards 'value-based education' and its concentration on pure functionalism (*Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad* 2003). What Britain did to the education in India by establishing control over the political and national territory of India, the US (as a metaphor referring to all the practices and ideologies of the imperial powers ) has been doing from a distance. The curriculum was fashioned in imperial India under the British to facilitate their administration of its territories, and not for making the people 'civilized' as they have

constantly harped upon. The claim of ‘civilizing’ was only a pretext for continuing with the exploitative programmes of the colonizers.

The colonial presence is conspicuous in a pervasive fashion almost everywhere. The BPO and KPO industries, online businesses, global entertainment industries, education, health, insurance, share markets etc are transnational avenues open for exploration and are functioning without any direct concern for geographical domination. Timothy Brennen brings to our attention “the ownership patterns of transnational corporations (TNCs), the explosive rise in internet traffic, the radical breakdown of treaties governing international law, the increasing recourse to offshore banking, the orchestrated planning imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank), or the flows of migrant labor in Southeast Asia” (125). Colonization persists in all these fields with the assistance of the mantras of globalization. A major strategy by which globalization functions is constructing needs and then fulfilling them. The expression ‘global village’ is a highly political euphemism which screens the fact that it is only a ruthless ‘global market’. Markets are for procuring things one needs, and also for selling commodities. The emotionally heightened sentiments associated with a village are crudely absent in the market. In the global market, needs are manufactured by continuous reiteration of the ‘deficiencies’ of the individual, and by complying one into demanding whatever would fulfill his/her ‘deficiency’. Media play a pivotal role in manufacturing needs. Advertisements function by invoking scenes or instances of people who are made happier by the use of products that are advertised round the globe. This Goebblesian strategy of reiterating lies or baseless arguments with the intent of making them resonate right and hence true, succeeds in achieving consent of the public, and escapes queries of its veracity and logic. Advertisements go in for unique blends of provincial, regional and local cultural ingredients with those expansionist ideologies motivated by market interests to attain their ends. The advertisement of ICICI Prudential exhibiting a saffron line suggests that the insurance/assurance it provides is as auspices and dependable as the saffron smear on the forehead of native Indian married woman, exemplifying cultural commodification.

The postindustrial society is information based, and Knowledge Process Outsourcing is a space mobilizing huge capital. The postcolonial ‘labour force’ engaged in BPO’s and KPO’s are having work hours which are strategically set up. Temptations like extra time allowances avert possibilities for their mutual interaction and organization. Most often, one engaged in such professions serves for different time zones, which may occur to be odd hours in the space where one physically exists, which results in a sense of estrangement which is comparable to the

Marxian idea of alienation (Woodfin 61-64). Besides, one's income is often calculated not as per the value of the currency of the geographical space of his or her subsistence. One may be drawing income from different geographical spaces, in different currencies, and traditional work hours envisioned by Marx or Thomas Moore in his *Utopia* do not apply. "As a result", says Brennen, "the subject is forced to *trust*, since abstract systems tend to 'disembody' the subject from immediate experience, transforming intimacy from the previously anchored criteria of kinship and obligation to a 'life politics' based on controlling one's own body" (124). One becomes alienated even from one's own job environments and is exploited to an extreme degree, not by coercion but by consent. 'A single social space', adds Brennen, "still allows for complex and dynamic internal variations across an interconnected system of localities and regions", since "the world is being reconstituted as a single social space" (123).

It is globalization that provides a springboard for the exploitative strategies of non-territorial colonization. Timothy Brennen states that for many, globalization "appears merely to euphemize corporatization and imperial expansion" (123). Following Bourdieu, Foster and Fridman, he suggests that it is perceived to be "a veiled way of alluding to the Americanization of foreignness in a world dominated by US power following the fall of the Soviet Union" (123). Echoing Valladao and Bauman he adds that it is possible to perceive American ideology as the "dynamic contemporary expression of capitalism" (126). Here, though it is not intended to be a critique of Brennen's perceptive insights of globalization, my use of the term 'American' does not refer to a national territory, but uses it as a trope for what it has come to connote in the contemporary times, that is transnational capitalist ideologies. The term 'American' is a representative term denoting non-territorial exploitative mechanisms, transgressing geographical delimitations. This "American twist on capitalism" says Brennen, "has made globalization seem desirable", and it also generates a "suspicion towards 'state'" (127). Both these are strategies for preparing congenial ground for neocolonial operations. The old wine of colonialism in its new bottle of globalization is tactfully prepared to ward off all resistance since "the latter is relentlessly cast as popularly willed, anonymous, permeating, and unplanned" (Brennen 137). But the truth remains that this tacit approval of globalization is a manufactured one.

Globalization practices rely upon "the dissemination of local values in the guise of global ones", in contrast to the practices of early colonialism and imperialism that coercively imposed the imperial values as a universal norm on the colonized. But it is not to be mistaken for a compromising move of those exploitative mechanisms, or its sudden acceptance of the universal and catholic nature of social values practiced by different cultures round the world. Instead, it is

a more strategic course to make inroads into the local as well as to the mainstream societies, without calling up resistance. The local values are taken up and appropriated by the imperial powers only to be marketed as a commodity with the ‘superior’ culture’s stamp upon it. The former advertisement of CNN about its special coverage of the issues of the Middle East questions one’s very foundations of cognition: “the Middle East: you may think you know it. But do you really? *We explain* the issues...” When a transnational channel appropriates the privilege to explain something local to the rest of the world, it is capitalizing on Said’s classic notion of Orientalism in a tactful way. Neither the ‘Orient’ nor the ‘West’ is a pure geographic territory.

Brennen’s perspectives are quite insightful when he says that though “the forms and styles of this imperialism are crucially different from those of the past, the intentions and effects are identical (conquest, occupation, and the stealing of resources continue...)” (127). But when he adds that the contemporary mode of imperialism does “enrich distinct national identities” (127), it becomes questionable, for as we have seen the motives of imperialism in the current stage have grown beyond territorial and national demarcations. It would not be amiss to examine what Brennen says about colonial subjugation of the national other:

Both colonialism and imperialism entail the subjugation of one people by another. Traditionally, neither term refers to individuals within one society subjugating others within that same society. What is meant, rather, is that people who live in one region of the world- not just living together, but acting as organized members of a recognizable political territory such as nation state- subjugate those of another part of the world (134).

Colonization and imperialism as strictly bound to nationalist foundations fail to acknowledge the significance they have taken in the globalized world. Though globalization cannot be taken as the exact contemporary equivalent of the ideologies of colonialism and imperialism, it has evidently accommodated a set of strategies endorsing these practices. However, Brennen’s argument that globalization “depicts the world as having moved *past* colonialism and imperialism” (138) cannot be taken for granted. Imperialism is such a force that finds out novel avenues for its own survival with the course of history.

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