

Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization

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In an essay in *Theory, Culture and Society*, Jan Nederveen Pieterse argued that “what hybridity means varies not only over time but also in different cultures and this informs different patterns of hybridity” (2001 219).¹ While the meanings of hybridity have been debated over the centuries, it has been privileged as an object of study in postcolonial theory. Coming more than two decades after the emergence of postcolonialism as a disciplinary formation, Amar Acheraïou’s *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization* is a welcome interrogation of hybridity that challenges postcolonialism’s obsessive preoccupation with hybridity. The book’s greatest strength lies in its disengagement of hybridity from its privileged position in postcolonial theory and in the light it throws on how it has been historically perceived in Western and non-Western cultures. By deconstructing hybridity as a practice, discourse and ideological construction, the book unpacks the positive and negative meanings of hybridity through history and its imbrication with the discourse of metissage not only to demonstrate that hybridity has been a norm rather than an aberration in major world cultures and civilizations but also to ‘resituate the power dynamics and multi-rooted nature of hybridity.’ While the book expertly glides from ancient Greece, Persia and Rome to the present in order to juxtapose alternative perceptions of hybridity against its postcolonial valorization and deftly returns the concept to the material realities of individuals and groups living under the difficult conditions of postcolonialism, it stops short of proposing a demotic theory of hybridity.

While the rise of anti-hybridity discourse is almost coeval with its privileging in postcolonialism, Pieterse argues that “what is missing in the antihybridity arguments is historical depth”(219). Acheraïou attempts to address this lacuna in anti-hybridity discourse by providing a detailed, in-depth examination of the meanings of hybridity through the ages. He cruises with amazing ease from ancient Greece and Rome to modern Europe across Persia, Africa, Latin America, Caribbean, and even India, to provide an overview of the contributions of major Western and non-western thinkers to the discourses of metissage and hybridity. The most fascinating finding of his comprehensive survey is the persistent trace of hybridity throughout history. By establishing its historical antecedents in the first part of the book, Acheraïou calls attention to the limitation

imposed by considering hybridity to be a child of the last two decades as part of the rise of postcolonial theory. He also makes the important point that its exclusive appropriation in postcolonial discourse to resist binary western structures tends to marginalize multiple understandings and uses of hybridity in history.

In the second part of the book, Acheraïou begins his critique of postcolonialism by rehearsing the same arguments that have been directed against postcolonial theory such as the elite, metropolitan location of postcolonial theorists, its privileging of migrancy and hybridity, its indenturement to poststructuralist discourse, its normalization of diaspora as the postcolonial condition and its discursive and linguistic turn. In his questioning of the theoretical formulations of Bhabha, Spivak, Gilroy and other postcolonial scholars, he borrows heavily from Aijaz Ahmad, Arif Dirlik, Neil Lazarus, Benita Parry and so on. In so far as Acheraïou regards hybridity as synonymous with *metissage*, the exclusion of the border theory of Nestor Garcia Canclini, Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa and the large body of literature on miscegenation is surprising. It is in his reinstatement of the anti-colonial positions of Fanon, Senghor and others as a strategic essentialism against postcolonialism's discursive obsession that Acheraïou takes an independent standpoint and makes a strong case for earlier decolonizing movements deeply entrenched in the material conditions of colonized societies and cultures.

But his major critique of postcolonial valorizations of hybridity stems from its discursive focus that prevents it from looking at its material contexts through a revisiting of race, class and gender. In his reiteration of the critique of postcolonial hybridity theories that focuses on their limitations in altering material conditions, Acheraïou adopts a sociological or even a cultural studies' position in which the anti-hybridity discourse often converges on the question of the uses of hybridity to inquire if the discursive valorization of hybridity has ameliorated the position of the other, particularly the non-western and mixed race other, in the material world. Despite the celebratory rhetoric surrounding multiculturalism, these critics argue, it has not altered the position of visible racial, gendered or class minorities in the metropolis.

However, the book goes beyond a materialist critique of hybridity to interrogate the postulations of postcolonial theory even at the discursive level. Through a meticulous unpacking of binary discourses and their interrogation by those of hybridity, Acheraïou disputes its claim to be an emancipatory narrative through its dismantling of essentialist discourses by arguing that it enables rather than disables binary thinking and dominant systems of control through its opening up a discursive space for binary and monolithic structures. In his assertion that hybridity, initially conceived as an interrogation of binary narratives, has itself become a fixed, unified, reductionist theory, he builds on earlier critiques of 'hybridity talk' by R. Radhakrishnan, Annie E. Coombes and Avtar Brah and others to suggest that its fuzzy, elastic nature and the apolitical stance of its proponents limits its resistive potential.

The book calls attention to a conspicuous absence of postcolonialism's engagement with the intersecting discourse of globalization. While theorists of globalization have addressed concerns similar to those of postcolonialism particularly through voicing their apprehensions about globalization as a form of neo-imperialism, postcolonial theorists have been surprisingly silent on the intersections between the two disciplines. Acherāiou's pointing to this major gap in postcolonialism is particularly relevant since its backward looking glance has blinded it to new forms of imperialism threatening the postcolonial world in the guise of modernization and development. However, in his cursory engagement with older theories of modernization and development and new ones of globalization, the author's own limitations in commenting on the newly emerging discourse of globalization become evident. Similarly, while taking stock of the literature on postcolonial engagements with globalization, he either skips or makes a fleeting reference to contributions by Simon Gikandi, Simon During, Imre Szeman and others to examine a few recent studies such as those of Ania Loomba, Coombes and Brah and Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley in detail. As the book claims to contest postcolonialism and hybridity from the point of view of globalization, these omissions as well as a sketchy examination of the vast, growing discourse on globalization prove rather unsatisfactory. It is in his invocation of anti-colonial discourse as a form of resistance to globalization that the author connects globalization with postcolonialism by projecting it as a form of neocolonialism and steers postcolonialism from its cultural and spatial turn to a genuinely counterhegemonic form of resistance to global capitalism. By emphasizing these links between colonialism and neocolonialism, the book sets a new agenda for postcolonial theory.

The book breaks new grounds in disentangling hybridity from the postcolonial hybridity discourse, in establishing the relationship between purity, hybridity and power and in interrogating the discursive appropriation of hybridity through its uses in the lived experiences of large populations. In pointing to the intersection between the colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial in their convergence on the discourse of hybridity, it also sets a new direction for postcolonial studies.

Note

1. Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Hybridity, So What? The Anti-Hybridity Backlash and the Riddles of Recognition" in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18-2-3 (2001): 219-45. Print.