

*Orientalism, Terrorism, Indigenism: South Asian Readings in Postcolonialism*

Pavan Kumar Malreddy

170 pages, 2015, \$39.95 USD (hardcover)

SAGE

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Although postcolonial studies have become part and parcel of many university literature departments, the contributions and even the future of postcolonial theory have been intensely debated since at least the 1990s. Pavan Kumar Malreddy's book contributes to these ongoing debates by focusing on some of the shortcomings which postcolonial thinking has revealed, emphasizing a mood of crisis caused by the "antinomies" and "disjunctures" of postcolonial theory. This mood is immediately established in the book's preface, which provides a compelling overview of a recent major debate between two of the leading figures of postcolonial scholarship—Dipesh Chakrabarty and Robert Young—on the very "future" of postcolonial theory. However, the aim of Malreddy's reading of postcolonialism is not simply to confirm that crisis; rather he takes this as a starting point for his reflections on the ongoing challenges to postcolonial thinking, and how these can be made fruitful as a means of expanding and thereby reaffirming the value of a critical postcolonial perspective. As the author puts it, "this book attempts to *rescue* the enabling impact of postcolonialism's passage that courses through diverse claims and counterclaims over its origins, disjunctures, and emancipatory pathways" (xvi, my emphasis). The various essays collected in this book can indeed be read as an attempt to both identify shortcomings and overcome them, all the while acknowledging the impossibility of constructing a seamless postcolonial discourse—and perhaps herein lies the strength of postcolonial theory.

The "origins," "disjunctures," and "emancipatory pathways" of postcolonial theory serve roughly as the foundation for the book's three sections: "Orientalism, Terrorism and Popular Culture," "Disjunctures: Humanism and Interdisciplinarity," and "Indigenism(s): Cosmopolitanism, Rights, and Cultural Politics." Each section consists of a selection of independent chapters that can be read in isolation, but which nonetheless complement each other.

While each section deals with key issues of postcolonial theory, its limits and its potentialities, the first section is perhaps the most accessible for students of postcolonial literature. The section's main thread here concerns Edward Said's *Orientalism*, considered by many scholars to be the founding text of postcolonial studies. Malreddy provides an outstanding summary and contextualization of not only Said's theory itself, but also of the many critical voices that have risen against the concept of Orientalism between the book's publication in 1978 and the present day. Simultaneously, he highlights the major

contribution of Said's work to the development of a critical postcolonial perspective. In "Orientalism, Terrorism and Popular Culture," the first section of Malreddy's study, we trace the changes that Orientalism as a discourse has undergone, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century's so-called 'war on terror'. The recasting of Orientalism—as in fact a series of Orientalisms that serve(d) different aims and mutate(d) and influence(d) each other—is convincingly supported by the close reading of a number of texts, from classics of British imperialist literature, such as Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, to more recent examples of "Pulp Orientalism" in the wake of 9/11.

The first chapter of this section sets the stage by listing and defining the main variants of Orientalism—ranging from Military, to Travelling, to Pulp and Counter-Orientalism (to mention just a few). Based on this typology, the following two chapters illustrate its value for a greater understanding of the aims and the profound impact of colonial texts—not only in fiction but, most importantly, in administrative and criminal records—as well as more recent framings of people as "terrorists," to produce an image of the Oriental Other as invariably dangerous and violent. Referring to the ongoing so-called 'war on terror,' Malreddy convincingly demonstrates that this "strategic cultivation of the Muslim world as a collective terrorist world" (24) is to be found not only in the popular and restrictive genre of pulp fiction (as well as many Hollywood films), but also in military, geopolitical and political discourse at large. The readings in this section thus end up proving that Said's theory, for all its flaws, has indeed provided us with a valuable tool with which to critically address the way the colonized Other has been figured by colonial and neocolonial powers. As Malreddy concludes, "the saga of mapping, framing and criminalizing the Other continues until today" (26).

The next two sections of the book are markedly more theoretical, and concern mainly the limits of, and the challenges to, postcolonial thinking. At the core of both sections are the issues of Eurocentrism and essentialism, which have profoundly influenced postcolonial scholarship. When dealing with key topics such as difference, subalternity, nativism, cosmopolitanism, humanism and interdisciplinarity, to what extent is postcolonial theory in fact successful in articulating a post-essentialist perspective that breaks with the Eurocentric mold that first relegated the colonized Other to a position of marginality and inferiority? Can postcolonial studies really position itself as an alternative to Eurocentric scholarship? Malreddy does not offer clear yes/no answers, but he articulates the "conceptual fissures" (63) of postcolonial studies with great clarity.

Section 2, "Disjunctures: Humanism and Interdisciplinarity," effectively summarizes some of the major debates around those fissures. The value of the two chapters included in this section—one on humanism, the other on interdisciplinarity—lies in the succinct overview of some of the leading arguments advanced by such key figures of anti-colonial thinking as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, and postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Neil Lazarus, among others. The chapter on humanism reveals how difficult it has been for postcolonial scholars to devise a humanist perspective that is clearly demarcated from the European model of humanism advanced during the Enlightenment itself, and thereby intimately bound to the European colonial project that created the subaltern Other to begin with. Malreddy reveals a laudable capacity to condense and succinctly explain the most important insights advanced by notoriously difficult writers such as Spivak or Bhabha, and this constitutes another great contribution of this book. The chapter discussing the status of postcolonial studies as either “interdisciplinary” or “interdiscursive” further reveals Malreddy’s concern with the viability of postcolonialism among different disciplines. Here the focus on the “representational failures” (81) of postcolonial studies—especially in the “foundational disciplines” of literature, history and philosophy—again points to the author’s pressing concern with the limits of postcolonial theory, precisely because of its origins in and ongoing strong attachment to European thought and academic institutions and disciplines. In spite of this, Malreddy stresses the potential of postcolonialism to distinguish itself as “an interdiscursively evolving field,” based on its status as an “incomplete” and “travelling discourse” (85) that has already influenced numerous disciplines.

If the second section mainly deals with some of the paradoxes within postcolonial theory itself, the final section of the book, “Indigenism(s): Cosmopolitanism, Rights, and Cultural Politics,” successfully opens up postcolonial studies further by suggesting new avenues of thought and debate. Chief among them is the argument for taking the Indigenous Peoples Movement (IPM) as a model for a different humanism, one that is indeed removed from the European model. Malreddy effectively widens the scope of postcolonial thinking by bringing in the case of the IPM’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples from 2007, which advances a different understanding of human subjectivity and human rights. Whereas the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 posited the single, autonomous individual as the centre of its proclamations—thus actually continuing the model of humanism initiated during the era of European Enlightenment and colonial expansion, the Declaration proposed by the IPM stresses the importance of community and collective rights. Malreddy sees in this gesture a true alternative to the Eurocentric model of humanism (and humans), from which most postcolonial scholars have found it difficult to disentangle themselves.

Finally, Malreddy turns to Indian literature as the locus of different conceptions of cosmopolitanism and national culture. In the first case, the complex depictions of the fictional town of Malgudi in R. K. Narayan’s novels and short stories serve as an example of a different type of cosmopolitanism that is “local” and based on “domesticity and kinship” (91) rather than universalism, movement and detachment. Malreddy uses this as a basis for discussing the limits of the dominant conception of cosmopolitanism, which is closely associated with the Western “polis” and with globalization, thus

bearing the imprint of colonialism and urbanism. His insights are carefully supported by a host of different approaches, such as Anthony Appiah's "rooted" cosmopolitanism, Neil Lazarus' "local cosmopolitanism" or David Harvey's "geographically grounded" cosmopolitanism—all of which contradict the more common notion of cosmopolitanism as being "at home in the world" and thus effectively being nowhere and bearing no cultural or geographic links to a place. On a similar note, the final chapter of the book turns to what Malreddy perceives as "a new literary subgenre of nationalogue" (124), using the work of Kancha Ilaiah, the famous activist for Dalit rights. The chapter deals with the particular narrative devices used by Ilaiah to create a different sense of the Indian nation and its culture. Relying on a mixture of genres, such as autobiography, parabiography, life writing, testimonio, and minor literature, Ilaiah's nationalogue provides the means to articulate a new form of nationalism that, Malreddy suggests, is "post-Eurocentric" (139) while at the same time presenting a non-institutionalized modernism that "valorizes third world collectivity" (140). The nationalogue thus falls also beyond the scope of postcolonial literary studies, where a focus on the "national biography" (127)—in which the individual narrator gets equated with the new nation—has been most frequent. The case of Ilaiah's writing points to new avenues that also postcolonial literary criticism will need to explore.

All in all, the eight essays that constitute *Orientalism, Terrorism, Indigenism* raise many different questions and arguments that will be of interest to a wide audience within postcolonial studies. In spite of the proclaimed crisis in postcolonial theory, this carefully researched and brilliantly argued collection of "readings" in literary fiction, colonial texts, geopolitical texts, political declarations, activist testimonies and, most of all, theory is perhaps the most fitting example of the potential of postcolonial studies to maintain a critical edge and keep opening new paths for research—not least by continually probing the very limits of the "interdiscursive field" of postcolonialism itself.