

Introducing Postcolonialism in International Relations Theory

Written by Sheila Nair

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Postcolonialism examines how societies, governments and peoples in the formerly colonised regions of the world experience international relations. The use of ‘post’ by postcolonial scholars by no means suggests that the effects or impacts of colonial rule are now long gone. Rather, it highlights the impact that colonial and imperial histories still have in shaping a colonial way of thinking about the world and how Western forms of knowledge and power marginalise the non-Western world. Postcolonialism is not only interested in understanding the world as it is, but also as it ought to be. It is concerned with the disparities in global power and wealth accumulation and why some states and groups exercise so much power over others. By raising issues such as this, postcolonialism asks different questions to the other theories of IR and allows for not just alternative readings of history but also alternative perspectives on contemporary events and issues.

The basics of postcolonialism

Postcolonialism has specifically drawn attention to IR theory’s neglect of the critical intersections of empire, race/ethnicity, gender and class (among other factors) in the workings of global power that reproduce a hierarchical IR. This hierarchy is centred not on striving for a more equal distribution of power among peoples and states but on the concentration of power. A key theme to postcolonialism is that Western perceptions of the non-West are a result of the legacies of European colonisation and imperialism. Discourses – primarily things that are written or spoken – constructed non-Western states and peoples as ‘other’ or different to the West, usually in a way that made them appear to be inferior. In doing so, they helped European powers justify their domination over other peoples in the name of bringing civilisation or progress.

To better understand postcolonialism we can consider the discourses that make certain power relations seem natural or even inevitable. Postcolonialism views key issues in International Relations as constituting discourses of power. This notion of a discourse allows scholars to utilise a frame of reference for thinking about the world and its problems that does not merely reside in the empirically verifiable and ‘fact’-based inquiry that drives traditional IR theories such as realism and liberalism.

Take, for example, the issue of global inequality. Postcolonialism suggests that in order to better understand how global class relations emerge and are maintained we must address ideas about why these relations appear normal. This approach points to how characterisations of global poverty are often accompanied by images and narratives of non-Western governments and societies as simultaneously primitive, hyper-masculine, aggressive, childlike and effeminate. In short, postcolonialism argues that addressing and finding solutions to poverty and global inequality come up against representations of the other that make it difficult for Western policymakers to shed their biases and address the underlying global structural factors such as how capital and resources are accumulated and flow around the world generating inequality. For this reason, solutions often focus only on intervening to support a seemingly less developed state, rather than addressing the underlying causes of global inequality.

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In analysing how key concepts such as power, the state and security serve to reproduce the status quo, postcolonialism proposes a more complex view of such concepts than is characteristic of traditional theories. For example, the concept of sovereignty, and with it the contours of the modern state, were imposed on the colonial world by European powers. Yet it is a concept that is usually taken for granted by scholars of realism and liberalism. Postcolonialism also challenges the Marxist perspective that class struggle is at the root of historical change – instead demonstrating how *race* shapes history. Analyses that focus only on class fail to consider how the identification of the 'Third World' (a term developed during the Cold War to describe those states unaligned to the United States or the Soviet Union) as 'backward', 'primitive' or 'non-rational' are linked to persistent economic marginalisation. Similarly, while mainstream IR theories see the international system as an anarchy, postcolonial scholars see it as a hierarchy. Colonialism and imperialism fostered a long process of continued domination of the West over the rest of the world and cultural, economic and political domination still characterise global politics.

Postcolonialism also demonstrates how Western views about Islam and its adherents are a manifestation of the West's own insecurities. The rise of political Islam across the Muslim world – watermarked by Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979 – not only confronted neo-imperialist interventions but also revealed the impacts of core cultural and social shifts accompanying a more interconnected global economy. In the West, however, the view of this resurgence has been interpreted by prominent policymakers and academics as heralding a 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1993) and worse, constituting a direct threat to Western civilization. Edward Said (1997) showed how Western media, film, academia and policy elites rely on a distorted lens or framework used to describe the history and culture of Arab peoples and adherents of Islam. He called it Orientalism because it constructs a particular idea of the so-called 'Orient' that is distinct from the West and that in a binary or dualistic way of thinking ascribes to the Orient and its inhabitants characteristics that are essentially the opposite of the West. For instance, people of the Orient may be characterised as being exotic, emotional, feminine, backward, hedonistic, non-rational and so forth. This is in contrast to the more positive attributes usually associated with the West such as rationality, masculinity, civilization and modernity. Many postcolonial scholars emphasise how orientalist discourses are still visible in Western representations today. Representations and perceptions matter to postcolonial theorists because they dictate what comes to be seen as normal or as making sense.

Postcolonialism owes a significant debt to Edward Said for his work on developing Orientalism. Yet Said himself was influenced by the writing of anti-colonial and nationalist thinkers such as Frantz Fanon (1967) and Albert Memmi (1991) whose works discuss the power of 'othering'. For example, Fanon shows how race shapes the way that the coloniser relates to the colonised and vice versa by capturing how some people under colonial rule began to internalise – that is, identify with – ideas of racial difference that saw 'others' as inferior to white Europeans. Fanon explains that the 'black man' is made to believe in his inferiority to the 'white colonisers' through psychological aspects of colonisation, such as the imposition of the coloniser's language, culture, religion and education systems. Through such impositions, the colonised come to believe they are a culturally inferior other. This internalisation made it easier for colonisers to justify and maintain their rule. Postcolonialism thus brings into focus how racial binaries – that is, how races are constructed as different, opposite or 'other' – continue even after the end of formal colonial rule. It highlights how *racialised othering* frames not just history, but contemporary debates such as national security, nuclear politics, nationalism, culture, immigration, international aid and the struggle for indigenous rights.

An example of racialised othering can be found in discourses around nuclear non-proliferation. In such discourses, countries and their leaders in the Global South are usually deemed not to be trusted with nuclear weapons. These dominant discourses construct these states as dangerous, unpredictable or unaccountable and as violating basic norms on human rights. One need only look at how North Korea and Iran, two states that have pursued nuclear proliferation, are portrayed as rogue states in US foreign policy discourse. Yet, for decades, the West's disregard for human rights may be seen in uranium mining that has often taken place on lands that are populated by indigenous peoples around the world – including in the United States – and has caused death, illness and environmental degradation. Most importantly, what is often missing from the nuclear debate is the fact that the United States is the only power to have ever used nuclear weapons (aside from testing), when it dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945, with horrific and devastating loss of life.

Therefore, for postcolonial scholars such as Shampa Biswas (2014), the notion that some states can be trusted with

Introducing Postcolonialism in International Relations Theory

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nuclear weapons while others cannot because they are less developed, less mature in their approach to human life or less rational is a racialised discourse. In debates such as these, postcolonialism asks not who can be trusted with such weapons, but rather *who determines who can be trusted – and why?* Simply looking at the competition between states to accrue nuclear weapons will not tell us enough about the workings of power in international relations – such as how a nuclear arms race is underpinned by the power of some states to construct other states so that they are deemed not capable of having any such weapons at all.

Postcolonialism and the marginalisation of women of colour

As with all theories of IR, there are internal debates among postcolonial scholars and in this case also a significant overlap with feminism – especially ‘third wave’ feminism that became prominent in the 1990s. bell hooks (2000) observed that the so-called ‘second wave’ of feminism of the mid- to late twentieth century had emerged from women in a position of privilege and did not represent African American women such as herself who remain on the margins of society, politics and the economy. She called for an alternative, critical and distinctive feminist activism and politics.

For example, does a black woman from a poor neighbourhood on Chicago’s south side experience sexism in the same way as a white woman from its wealthier suburbs? Women who share the same ethnic identity might experience sexism in different ways because of their class. The same might be true for women of colour and white women from the same social class. Women of colour and white women in the United States experience ‘heteropatriarchy’ – a societal order marked by white male heterosexual domination – differently even if they come from the same social class. An illustration of how this works may be found in the video of Beyonce’s ‘Lemonade’ which not only draws on how sexism is filtered through this patriarchal order but also explores how race, gender, class and sexuality are intimately intertwined in the history of black women.

The fact that some black women may be more privileged in relation to class may not take away from their experience of racism. For this reason (and others), feminist postcolonial scholars (see Chowdhry and Nair 2002) call for more attention to the intersections of race and/or ethnicity, nationality, class *and* gender. By doing so they address the ways that different aspects of one’s identity, such as race, gender, class, sexuality and so forth, intersect to create multiple and distinct forms of oppression so that no one aspect can be privileged over another in understanding oppression. Instead, various identities must all be understood as intersecting in producing one’s experience of oppression. This idea of ‘intersectionality’ is central to third-wave feminist approaches.

Postcolonial feminists share a desire to go beyond simply analysing the impacts of patriarchy, gender inequality and sexual exploitation. Instead, they highlight the need to fight not only patriarchy (broadly understood as the power of men over women) but also the classism and racism that privileges white women over women of colour. They question the idea of universal solidarity in women’s movements, arguing that the struggle against patriarchy as well as social inequality must be situated in relation to racial, ethnic and sexual privilege. For example, while Western feminism has often portrayed the veil as a symbol of oppression of women, many Algerian women adopted the veil, standing alongside men, when protesting French rule. To them, it was a symbol of opposition to white, colonial patriarchy. In many other parts of the colonised world, women stood shoulder to shoulder with men in nationalist movements to overthrow colonial rule, showing that women in different cultural, social and political contexts experience oppression in very different ways. Postcolonial feminists are committed to an intersectional approach that uncovers the deeper implications of how and why systemic violence evident in war, conflict, terror, poverty, social inequality and so forth has taken root. Understanding power thus requires paying attention to these intersections and how they are embedded in the issue at hand.

Postcolonial feminism asserts that women of colour are triply oppressed due to their (1) race/ethnicity, (2) class status and (3) gender. An example can be found in the employment conditions of the many women in the Global South who work in factories producing textiles, semi-conductors, and sporting and consumer goods for export to the West. In one such factory in Thailand, the Kader Toy Factory, a fire in 1993 killed 220 female factory workers and seriously injured over 500 more. The doors to the building were locked at the time of the fire. The tragedy revealed the exploitation and deplorable working conditions of these women, who were employed by local contractors of

Introducing Postcolonialism in International Relations Theory

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American companies to make toys and stuffed animals for sale in Western markets. Despite decades of such abuses, there was little attention given to the conditions in these factories, or to the tragedy of the fire, in the mainstream Western media. One opinion piece captured the shocking disregard for these women's lives,

These executives know that their profits come from the toil of the young and the wretched in the Far East; they can live with that – live well, in fact. But they do not want to talk about dead women and girls stacked in the factory yard like so much rubbish, their bodies eventually to be carted away like any other industrial debris (Herbert 1994).

In another tragedy, the Rana Plaza – a garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh – collapsed, killing 1,135 garment workers, mostly women. It threw a spotlight on the workings of the global garment industry. Popular Western clothing lines profit from low wages, exploitation and sweatshop conditions by producing their clothes in countries with lax building codes and regulations and non-existent (or inadequate) labour standards. The clothing lines do not then hold the factories to account for working conditions or safety. Postcolonial scholars argue that the deeply exploitative conditions and the disregard for the safety of these workers show that lesser value is ascribed to brown bodies compared to white ones.

While there was much more coverage of this industrial accident in the Western media and the brands whose clothing was being made at the Rana Plaza did suffer some momentary bad publicity, there has been little sustained effort to right the wrongs in the operations of multinational firms. The quest for the highest possible profit margins forces developing countries into a 'race to the bottom' in which they compete to have the cheapest labour and production costs in order to attract investment from multinational corporations.

The results are low wages, exploitation and low safety standards. Post-colonial scholarship explains the failure to change these conditions by exposing how race, class and gender come together to obscure the plight of these workers, meaning that the factory overseers, like the owners of the Rana Plaza and Kader operations, are not held accountable until tragedy strikes. Even when they are held accountable, the punishment does not extend to the Western corporations further up the chain who sub-contract the task of exploiting workers – and ultimately killing some of them in these cases. It is almost impossible to imagine that a tragedy of a similar scale in a Western state would prompt so little action against those responsible or allow the conditions that caused it to continue virtually unchecked.

Conclusion

Postcolonialism interrogates a world order dominated by major state actors and their domineering interests and ways of looking at the world. It challenges notions that have taken hold about the way states act or behave and what motivates them. It forces us to ask tough questions about how and why a hierarchical international order has emerged and it further challenges mainstream IR's core assumptions about concepts such as power and how it operates. Postcolonialism forces us to reckon with the everyday injustices and oppressions that can reveal themselves in the starkest terms through a particular moment of crisis. Whether it has to do with the threat of nuclear weapons or the deaths of workers in factories churning out goods for Western markets, postcolonialism asks us to analyse these issues from the perspectives of those who lack power. While postcolonialism shares some common ground with other critical theories in this regard, it also offers a distinctive approach. It brings together a deep concern with histories of colonialism and imperialism, how these are carried through to the present – and how inequalities and oppressions embedded in race, class and gender relations on a global scale matter for our understanding of international relations. By paying close attention to how these aspects of the global play out in specific contexts, postcolonialism gives us an important and alternative conceptual lens that provides us with a different set of theoretical tools to unpack the complexities of this world.

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