

Power, Post-colonialism and International relations: Reading race, gender and class

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In the post-Cold War era, global infatuation with neo-liberal economics has intensified the cultural, socio-economic, political and economic peripheralization of the South. The neo-liberal paradigm does not only shape the field of International Relations, but also both the national and international policies and policy. To elaborate, there is an increasing dissimulation around issues regarding inequality, justice, power and powerlessness. In Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair's *Power, Post-colonialism and International relations: Reading race, gender and class* edited volume, the authors argue that it is essential to deconstruct International Relation's claims to universality, rationality and objectivity in a way that is sensitive to crucial post-colonial discourses on race and gender, representation and the construction of North-South hierarchies. In other words, Chowdhry and Nair reveal the intricacies in the IR field to both justify and reproduce gender, class and race inequalities constitutive of Western, namely US and Europe domination. Both post-structuralist and neo-realist critical IR tend to downplay, through different measures and for different reasons, the "imbrications of race, gender and class with imperialism and capitalism." Although there have been numerous criticisms in the last decade regarding the ahistorical race and gender-neutral rational actor mainstream theories, these critics have not clearly explained and analyzed why these models remain. By analyzing the concept of post-colonialism in Alison Blunt and Cheryl McEwan's *Postcolonial Geographies* and Cheryl McEwan's *Post-colonialism and Development* books, it will become clear that the

definition of post-colonialism in this edited volume is incomplete. I will also provide an in-depth analysis of J. Marshall Beier essay entitled *Beyond Hegemonic State(ments) of Nature*.

This edited volume is an engaging read that makes an important contribution to the critical literature on globalization. One can argue that the types of structural inequality at all different levels lead to the perpetuation of the "peripheralization of the south along economic, political, social and cultural lines."¹ I find it convincing that the international reality's representations have remained grounded in the discursive and institutional practices of the West. The strength and complexity of this volume rests on a multiplicity of interpretations that explain the benefits that the dominant and powerful gain by silencing or choosing to be blind on alternative explanations of the world, the power of representation, the persistence of imperial practices that are necessary to make the field of IR more relevant and to contribute to struggles against global inequality and injustice.

Drawing on contemporary and past documentations and providing profound theoretical argumentations, the authors combine theories and real-world examples. There are numerous voices and struggles that are evident across different chapters. Most theorists of international relations would most probably agree that the a French-educated Algerian, a Romanian

¹ Chowdhry, Geeta, and Sheila Nair. *Power, Postcolonialism, and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender, and Class*. London: Routledge, p.1. 2002. Print.

sex worker in Cyprus, child rug maker in India and Muslims living in Europe and the US do not have anything in common. However, Chowdhry and Nair give examples that expose the incapacity of the field of IR to contribute to a crucial debate that are taking place within as well as between countries and regions. For example, Cypriot women used “black” Sri Lankan women as domestic workers because, they believe, it is a way to relieve themselves professionally while resenting the “white” Romanian women who use their bodies to steal the men of Cypriot’s women.² Another example is that of some Indian child laborers demanding better working and living conditions, while others want to completely eliminate all child labor and participate in training and education.³ I would argue that each situation conveys the complexities that overwhelm the theoretical containers of dominant theories of international relations. By highlighting these real world issues, Chowdhry and Nair succeed in opening the reader’s eyes on the post-colonial projects of global hierarchy, in which power plays a crucial role in constructing class, gender and racial inequalities.

In an illuminating and thorough introductory chapter, the primary purpose of the Chowdhry and Nair is to familiarize the reader with what they call “postcolonial shift”⁴; such as the impact of colonial practices on the production of representations and identities, the importance of gender, race and class for grasping resistance and domination, the relationship between power as well as capital. There are several problems in the IR field, among them, thin deliberations on issues concerning justice and inequality as well as a seeming “dissimulation around questions concerning equality, poverty, and powerless.”⁵ The intensification of the neoliberal economic ideology was a turning point in the IR field, in the 1990s. There was an intensive level of proof in the argument that this led to the processes that “obscure the working of power in a global political

economy”⁶ which in turn “elide the racialized, gendered and class processes that underwrite global hierarchies.”⁷ The root cause of these problems for conventional IR and, to a lesser extent, the critical IR such as Marxist, feminist, and post-modernist approaches are that they give little attention to both the past and present of colonialism as well as imperialism. Imperialism plays a major role in the world of political economy; it structures the identities of the postcolonial world and the West. In his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said argues that the West is posited through a series of binaries civilized, and superior over an inferior, irrational and barbaric Orient. This power relation led to a wide range of Western representations and powerful discourse of the “*Otherness*.”⁸ Situating imperialism and colonialism at the heart of IR gave rise to four main themes: the relation between capital and power, the recovery of moment of resistance against the imperial project, the production of representation of identities and the intersection of race, gender and class. These are interpretative guides for the readers.

Although the authors bravely engage the four themes in all chapters, the emphasis on the four themes in each chapter differs. The chapters of Anne Agathangelou and L.H.M place gender in the foreground of globalization. In Siba Grovogui, J. Marshall Beier and Randolph Persaud’s essays, they highlight race in terms of “Franco African contestations over the nature of the postcolonial order”⁹ a racialized binary opposition between European colonization and indigenous Americans, and immigrants from former colonies of the Third World and the US, respectively. The chapters by Shampa Biswas, Dibyesh Anand and Sankaran Krishna explain the transnational dimensions of cultural, nationalism and religion identity. The final two chapters by Chowdhry and Nair address all four themes effectively as they take up the human rights discourse in reference to child labor in Burma. The emphasis on racialized and

² Ibid., Pp.151-152
³ Ibid., Pp. 249-250
⁴ Ibid. p.33
⁵ Ibid. P.1

⁶ Ibid., p.1
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, p.96. 1979. Print.
⁹ Ibid., p.34

gendered representations of the “other” in reference to the politics of global capital make their argument unique and strong in the field of IR; they interrogate liberal human rights discourse and give voice to the voiceless, the child laborers. The authors warn about the complicity of IR particularly in constructing global hierarchies. According to them, there is a paradox of how to be an ethical and political human being while at the same time belonging to a profession that produces global hierarchies. Hence, there is an urge for a “strategic writing of IR”¹⁰ and for a “dialectical joining of the academic enterprise” with the “politics of resistance.”¹¹

Fully cognizant of the complex field of post-colonialism, the introduction succinctly deliberates the term “post-colonialism” in three ways. Firstly, it is described as both political and historical issue. Secondly, it is seen as a set of theoretical debates. Finally, it is perceived as a rich base of the literature. Post-colonialism is a critical as well as turning point in gender, race and class studies. It does not have a single origin; but a diverse set of strategies and approaches. Although “post-colonial” is a contested term¹² and emerges from a “variety of disciplines and theories”¹³ that are central to one’s understanding of power in IR, the editors define it as a variety of “colonizing” practices that structure power relations globally, and resistance to those practices.”¹⁴ The interconnection between postcolonial approaches and IR can be productive in several areas of inquiry such as the power of representation, historical specificities of both gender and race within the everyday workings of *global* capitalism, class and post-coloniality as a discursive practice. In Blunt Alice and Cheryl McEwan’s *Postcolonial Geographies*, they argue that Post-colonialism has five principal meanings; it is a the notion of a new epoch or time, defined as “after colonialism,” condition in terms of the cultural, political or/and economic situations of certain societies that still live in the aftermath of colonialism, metaphysical,

political and ethical theory that deals with gender, identity, race, ethnicity, relationships between knowledge and power, literary theory that criticize and re-examine the perpetuation of representations of colonized people and a criticism of colonial power such as cultural, economic or political.¹⁵ This is the so-called anti-colonialism.¹⁶ Hence, post-colonialism consists of various discursive legacies as well as critiques of the material of colonialism.¹⁷ One may also argue that in this context, post-colonialism can be seen as having two central meanings: a temporal aftermath of colonialism, a period of time after colonialism and a critical aftermath of colonialism, discourses, critiques and cultures that were created against colonialism. Therefore, the interaction and the amalgamation between these two meanings might have made the term “post-colonialism” contested. By reviewing the definition of “post-colonialism” by Blunt and McEwan, influential scholars and feminists in the field of post-coloniality, it is clear that Chowdhry and Nair’s explanation of the concept is vague and incomplete.

The brief of explaining post-colonialism is elucidated by way of case studies, like domestic workers and textile artisans, the use of historical exegeses, as well as literary works on Francophone Africa, immigration policy and secularism. They also use various sorts of discourse analysis about immigration, indigenous people and their histories, as well as IPE and International Law themes (i.e. Human rights and Asian crises). The contributors to this volume take into account the “cultural politics of the colonial past and post-colonial present”¹⁸ and made a contribution to ‘rewriting’ the discipline. They highlight numerous sorts of resistance to old and new forms of subjugation ‘from below’. The ten chapters draw on a rich set of sources from peripheral geographical regions: Cyprus, Algeria, Greece, Tibet, Burma and

¹⁰ Ibid., p.28

¹¹ Ibid., p.28

¹² Ibid., p.10

¹³ Ibid., p.11

¹⁴ Ibid.,p. 12

¹⁵ Blunt, Alison, and Cheryl McEwan. *Postcolonial Geographies*. London: Continuum, p.3. 2002. Print.

¹⁶ McEwan, Cheryl. *Postcolonialism and Development*. London: Routledge, p. 17. 2009. Print.

¹⁷ Blunt, Alison, and Cheryl McEwan. *Postcolonial Geographies*. London: Continuum, p.3. 2002. Print.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.2

Northern Great Plains in the US and its indigenous people.

One of the volume chapter, entitled *Beyond Hegemonic State(ments) of Nature* essay by J. Marshall Beier, offers a clear example of how postcolonial theory productively disturbs mainstream IR. Among the enduring omissions of IR, Beier states that there is a “near total neglect of the Indigenous peoples, Lakota,”¹⁹ and their knowledge particularly the First Nations of the Americas. In other words, reproducing the hegemonic knowledge led to the invalidation of non-Western worldviews whom their history was absent and invisible to the orthodoxy of international relations. Beier convincingly explained that the fascination of the early European travelers with, what they called, “chaos” as well as “anarchy” among the Plains Indians “has underwritten not only orthodox international relations theory but the project of state-making and construction(s) of the modern Western ‘self’ as well.”²⁰ Basing himself off Lakota accounts, Beier argues that Europeans arbitrarily gendered and racialized Lakota and dismissed them as ‘war-obsessed savages.’ He cleverly connects this to US and European conceptions of the state that tactfully distort, reduce, and marginalize the Native American presence. In other words, the subaltern or the people of inferior rank because of race, class or gender do not have access to hegemonic power in society and do not have a position from which to speak and be heard. Equally important, they do not have the means to control their own representation. In post colonialism era, the “voices from the edge”²¹, have been at the center of debate in IR. Although Beier highlights the production of representation of identities and the intersection of race, he fails to achieve Nair and Chowdhry purpose by covering the four main themes of the edited volume.

¹⁹Ibid., 82

²⁰ Ibid., p.83

²¹ Chaturvedi, Vinayak. *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*. “ voices from the edge: the struggles to write subaltern histories,” P.281. London: Verso, 2000. Print.

This edited volume advances alternative post-colonial readings of International Relations. It combines numerous voices, interpretations and perspectives across different chapters concerning the ways in which gender, race and class relations on both a global as well as national scale continue to be critical to the production of power in the IR field. However, the essays in this volume are not equally successful at reaching Chowdhry and Nair’s goal. Not all the contributors deconstruct the field of IR to reconstruct a “counter-narrative” that actively resists domination. Siba Grovogui and Sankar Krishna illustrate this in an essay comparing contemporary IR scholars’ dismissal of postcolonial theory, post-independence leftist Algerian claims and the use of a Guyanese human primary source shedding light on ethnic and national identity tensions. These two essays in specific are unsatisfying in this regard. Additionally, there is an uneven contribution regarding the attention given to race, gender and class. There are only three contributors, Agathangelou, L.H.M. Ling and Chowdhry, who adequately address the concern of the editors in highlighting how global processes are determined by race, class and gender, specifically, the study of migrant sex and domestic workers. The analysis by L.H.M. Ling claims that there were several attempts by the US and Europe to recolonize Asian economies in the late 1990s.²² Chowdhry criticizes human rights discourse on child labor. In the other essays, there is little attention and analysis given to gender, in particular. For example, gender was briefly mentioned in Biswas essay in relation to controversies over the hijab. The essays in *Power, Post-colonialism and International relations: Reading race, gender and class* do not only serve as both methodological and theoretical models for future anti-imperialist but also feminist readings. It is a reconfiguration of the world and a basis for a much-needed rethinking of the IR field.

²² Ibid., p. 135