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Colonial/Postcolonial: Re-contesting the Imperial Baggage and A Critical Study of the Rhetoric of Domination and Control

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Abstract:

Colonialism and Imperialism, two terminologies that although closely related, are not identical forms of domination. These terms involve the control of one group of people by another, yet their historical validation and connotations differ considerably (Kohn and Reddy "Colonialism," sec. 1). Colonialism commonly refers to the movement of settlers into a foreign territory where they establish durable communities while remaining politically tied to the metropolitan power. Imperialism, by contrast, describes a broader structure of command through which one state exercises authority over another, whether by direct rule, settlement, economic pressure, or indirect political influence. This paper examines the relationship between colonialism, Imperialism, and the condition of postcoloniality by tracing the terminologies through which domination has been defended, normalised, and even critically challenged and debated. It argues that colonial power cannot be reduced to mere military conquests or economic exploitation. The idea of an empire stamps its authority through language most notably through claims of civilisation, progress, rationality, improvement, and empirical knowledge. Such ideas make domination appear natural, necessary, or even beneficial, while obscuring the subtext of violence and dispossession through which colonial rule thrives. The paper first clarifies the distinction between colonialism and Imperialism, while acknowledging their historical entanglement. It then considers how imperial authority persists beyond the end of formal rule, particularly through the organisation of knowledge, historical time, and cultural value. By treating colonialism as both a political practice and a system of meaning, the paper shows that postcolonial critique addresses not only the inherited institutions and economic inequalities but also lay bare the deeper assumptions that continue to shape what counts as reason, development, and civilisation.

Keywords: colonialism, postcolonialism, discourse, Marxism, Subaltern Studies, knowledge and power.

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Introduction

The traditional understanding of Imperialism was a system of military domination and sovereignty over territories. The shift away from this traditional understanding of empire was greatly influenced by the Leninist analysis of Imperialism as a system oriented towards economic exploitation. According to Lenin, Imperialism was the necessary and inevitable result of the logic of accumulation in late capitalism. Thus, for Lenin and subsequent Marxists, Imperialism represented a historical stage of capitalism rather than a trans-historical practice of political and military domination. The lasting impact of the Marxist approach is quite apparent in contemporary debates about American Imperialism which usually views the growth of American economic hegemony, regardless of whether any political power is exercised directly or indirectly (Young 2001).

Colonialism is commonly understood as the political, economic, and cultural domination of one people by another while Imperialism is a related but broader formation involving the extension of power beyond national borders through settlement, military authority, economic dependency, political influence, or cultural hegemony. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, the distinction is analytically quite significant. Colonialism generally refers to a concrete system of territorial occupation and administration, whereas Imperialism may operate through direct rule or through indirect economic, political, and ideological mechanisms (Young 8). Imperialism, by contrast, is derived from ‘imperium’, meaning command or authority (Kohn and Reddy “Colonialism,” sec. 1). The latter emphasises the exercise of power, whether or not permanent settlement occurs. Now, the idea of a “civilizing mission” was by no means an invention of the British in the nineteenth century. The Spanish conquistadores and colonists explicitly justified their activities in the Americas in terms of a religious mission to bring the light of Christianity to the native peoples. The Crusades

provided the initial impetus for developing a legal doctrine that rationalized the conquest and possession of infidel lands. Whereas the Crusades were initially framed as defensive wars to reclaim Christian lands that had been conquered by non-Christians, the resulting theoretical innovations played an important role in subsequent attempts to justify the conquest of the Americas.

Even the spread of Christianity, however, did not provide an unproblematic justification for overseas conquest. The Spanish conquest of the Americas was taking place during a period of reform when humanist scholars within the Church were increasingly influenced by the natural law theories of theologians such as St. Thomas Aquinas. According to Pope Innocent IV, war "could not be waged against infidels and they could not be deprived of their property" simply because of their non-belief (Innocent IV 154). Under the influence of Thomism, Innocent IV concluded that force was legitimate only when infidels violated natural law (Innocent IV 154). Thus, the nonbelievers had a legitimate dominion over themselves and their property. However, this dominion was abrogated if they proved incapable of governing themselves according to the principles that every reasonable being would recognize. The Spanish quickly concluded that the habits of the Native Americans, from nakedness to unwillingness to labour to alleged cannibalism, clearly demonstrated their inability to recognise natural law. From this, they legitimised the widespread enslavement of the Indians as the only way of teaching them to be civilised and further introduce them to Christianity.

It is due to these moral and ethical grounds of conquering a people and then legitimising the authoritative control over them that this paper uses the phrase "imperial baggage" to refer to the inherited conceptual categories through which colonial power continues to shape modern knowledge production in the form of the opposition or dichotomy between civilised and

uncivilised, rational and irrational, modern and traditional, developed and underdeveloped, and universal and particular. The paper asks three related questions:

a. How is domination justified by colonial and imperial authority through religious, legal, economic, and philosophical discourse?

b. How did the Marxists and postcolonial thinkers reinterpret those justifications?

c. How can postcolonial criticism contest imperial categories without replacing the earlier rigid historical model with another?

A critical study of colonialism must therefore examine both the structures of exploitation and the rhetoric through which those structures acquire legitimacy.

The terminological legitimacy and veracity of colonialism became a topic of critical exchange among French, German, and British philosophers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Adam Smith (1723-1790) and Denis Diderot (1713-1784) were highly critical of the barbarity of colonialism and quite equivocally challenged the idea that only Europeans had the obligation and right to "civilise" the rest of the world. The system of colonial domination, which involved some combination of slavery, quasi-feudal forced labour, or expropriation of property, is antithetical to the basic Enlightenment principle that each individual is capable of reason and self-government (Kohn and Reddy "Colonialism," sec. 1). Hence the need to 're-contest' the baggage which, it is hoped, will provide ample scope for new areas of research.

Review of Literature

Denis Diderot's *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770) offers an early and forceful critique of the claim that indigenous peoples gained considerably from European civilisation. Far from

portraying Europeans as vanguards of Enlightenment, Diderot suggests that colonial settlers often became the true "savages" once they left the moral and legal restraints of their home societies. He argues that "national character" and cultural habits cultivate restraint, respect, and moral responsibility. Nevertheless, when these European colonial masters operate in distant colonies where such sanctions are weak, these restraints may get derailed or significantly collapse, revealing a more violent, self-interested human disposition. Colonial spaces, in this account, "do not civilise but frequently intensify brutality" (Muthu 74).

Diderot also questions the legal and moral arguments used to justify European expansion. While he accepts that uninhabited land may be settled, he rejects the idea that traders, explorers, or missionaries possess an undisputed right to enter inhabited territories. This position directly challenges a tradition of colonial justification associated with thinkers such as Francisco de Vitoria, who also maintained that indigenous peoples could not refuse peaceful traders and missionaries without violating the Law of Nations (Vitoria 24). According to this logic, resistance could become a pretext for war and conquest. Diderot tries to reverse the moral equation by presenting Europeans not as benign guests but as "dangerous" intruders whose commercial and religious missions often conceal the instinct of domination (Muthu 75).

The broader significance of Diderot's argument lies in the tension it exposes within Enlightenment thought. The anti-imperialists Enlightenment thinkers who defended universal human dignity and rational capacity failed to enshrine the same ideals in the minds of the colonial masters who perpetually judged unfamiliar cultural practices as irrational or inferior. Diderot responds to this debacle by treating cultural particularity itself as a universal human trait. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he does not assume that non-European societies were necessarily primitive, nor does he regard more complex political and social systems as

inherently superior. His position rather anticipates a more pluralistic understanding of civilisation, one that resists reducing cultural difference to a hierarchy of progress and development.

This pluralism stands in contrast to the developmental theories of history that shaped much of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European thought. Influenced by Montesquieu, Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith developed the influential "four-stage" theory, according to which societies progressed naturally from hunting to herding, agriculture, and finally commerce. This sequence was commonly mapped onto a moral hierarchy extending from "savagery" through "barbarism" to "civilisation." Such assumptions were not confined to a single intellectual tradition. Writers as different as Edmund Burke, Karl Marx, and John Stuart Mill employed the vocabulary of civilisation, barbarism, and savagery in their writings. However, recent scholarship complicates any simple opposition between liberalism and empire. Jennifer Pitts and Uday Mehta demonstrate that liberal ideals—liberty, representative government, and individual autonomy—were often applied unevenly, especially when European thinkers discussed colonized peoples. J.S. Mill linked representative institutions to political maturity while simultaneously defending despotic rule over colonial populations as a temporary means of preparing them for self-government (Mill 371). Burke, by contrast, condemned the abuses of the East India Company and questioned arbitrary colonial administration, though his criticism fell short of rejecting the ideological notion of empire altogether (Burke 12).

Again, Adam Smith's opposition to Imperialism followed a different path. His critique was primarily economic: he argued that colonial dependence distorted the self-regulating mechanisms of the market and imposed heavy military costs on taxpayers (Pitts 21). Nevertheless, the developmental idea that civilisation represented the highest stage of

historical progress continued to provide a powerful justification for imperial rule. It allowed European powers to present domination not as conquest or exploitation but as a paternalistic project of improvement.

Mill's writings make this paternalism especially visible. He argues that so-called savage people lack the capacity for self-government because of their excessive attachment to freedom, while serfs, enslaved people, and peasants in "barbarous" societies may be so conditioned by obedience that their rational capacities remain underdeveloped. Only commercial society, in his view, provides the material and cultural conditions necessary for individuals to develop and exercise their full potential (Mill 38). On the basis of this reasoning, Britain's governance of colonized peoples appears not as domination but as a civilizing mission. Despotism therefore, becomes a temporary instrument for producing the conditions of eventual self-rule.

While Mill is not blind to the dangers of imperial administration. As a long-serving employee of the East India Company, he acknowledges that foreign rule could produce injustice and economic exploitation, thereby weakening both the legitimacy and effectiveness of the empire. In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), he identifies four reasons why metropolitan powers were poorly suited to govern dependencies. First, politicians in Europe often lacked detailed knowledge of local conditions. Second, cultural, linguistic, and religious differences made sympathy between colonizers and colonized highly unlikely, increasing the risk of tyranny simultaneously. Third, even well-intentioned British officials tended to identify with fellow Europeans, thereby distorting their judgment over disputes involving native populations. Finally, colonists and merchants frequently pursued short-term wealth rather than long-term development, making exploitation more likely than improvement.

These concerns echo Edmund Burke's sustained criticism of British misgovernment in India, especially his *Speech on Fox's East India Bill* (1783). Taken together, these writers reveal that Enlightenment and liberal thought did not speak unanimously on empire. Some thinkers challenged colonial violence and defended indigenous rights, while others transformed ideals of progress and liberty into justifications for paternalistic rule. The present study builds on this debate by treating colonial discourse and material power as interdependent forces—imperial ideas of civilisation helped legitimize conquest, while the realities of economic and political domination in turn shaped the language through which empire was defended.

While existing scholarship has carefully documented the tension between Enlightenment universalism and imperial domination, it has tended to treat Diderot's 'anti-Imperialism' and Mill's liberal Imperialism as separate ideological positions rather than as stages within a continuous debate over civilisation, progress, and political capacity. Moreover, previous studies have focused primarily on European political thought, leaving insufficient attention to colonial agency, material structures of empire, and the contradictions within anti-imperial discourse itself. It does not adequately examine how colonized communities resisted, negotiated, adapted, or contested the conceptual notions and categories of "savagery," "barbarism," and "civilisation." This omission risks reproducing the Eurocentric focus of the very imperial discourses under critique. The present study therefore seeks to addresses this gap by examining how imperial discourse and material power jointly produced, sustained, and contested the ideology of colonial civilisation. Hence, the need for a re-contesting the imperial baggage. These perspectives, it is believed, would strengthen the study's claim to move beyond a purely European history of imperial ideas.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and historically grounded research design. It combines comparative intellectual history and postcolonial critical discourse analysis in order to examine how European thinkers *constructed* (italics mine) the categories of "civilisation," "barbarism," and "savagery," and how these categories legitimised or challenged imperial power. The study also follows a qualitative comparative design rather than a quantitative or survey-based approach. Its primary concern is not to measure attitudes statistically but to interpret how imperial ideas were formulated, contested, and deployed within particular historical contexts. A comparative framework allows the study to trace continuities and ruptures across eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political thought, especially the movement from Diderot's critique of colonial violence to Mill's justification of colonial despotism. This approach is consistent with postcolonial discourse analysis, which examines texts as social practices embedded in wider relations of power rather than as isolated works of ideas.

The study employs postcolonial critical discourse analysis as its principal method. Connotative validation and an inquisitive framework will assess key terms such as "civilisation," "improvement," "progress," "savagery," "barbarism," "despotism," "liberty," and "self-government." The analysis will address how these terms acquire different meanings in different texts and contexts and how they function to include or exclude colonized peoples from political agency. This method will enable the study to show how liberal and Enlightenment vocabularies could simultaneously critique domination and authorise paternalistic rule. To avoid treating colonized peoples merely as passive subjects of the 'constructive-ness' of the European discourse, the study will incorporate anti-colonial responses, subaltern perspectives, and postcolonial theoretical interventions where available.

The study recognizes that its primary archive consists largely of European texts and that these sources necessarily mediate the voices of colonized subjects. It therefore adopts a reflexive approach by treating the archive itself as part of the object of analysis. Rather than assuming that European writings can fully represent colonial experience, the study will read them critically for their silences, contradictions, and strategies of exclusion.

The principal limitation, however, is that the study focuses on a selected group of canonical thinkers rather than offering an exhaustive history of imperial thought. Such a grand project would require a full-length thesis which the current study does not seek to embark upon, given the paucity of space and time. Nevertheless, by concentrating on the works of Diderot, Burke, Smith, and Mill, the study aims at developing a focused comparison of how anti-imperial critique, economic liberalism, and imperial liberalism emerged from shared Enlightenment assumptions about reason, progress, and civilisation.

Analysis

The nineteenth-century liberal thinkers held a wide range of views on the legitimacy of foreign domination and differed about what tactics should be used to achieve that goal. Alexis de Tocqueville, for example, made a case for colonialism that did not rely on the idea of a civilizing mission. Tocqueville recognised that colonialism probably did not bring good government to the native peoples, but this was irrelevant since his justification rested entirely on the benefit to France. Tocqueville insisted that French colonies in Algeria would increase France’s stature vis-à-vis rivals like England; they would provide an outlet for excess population that was a cause of disorder in France. Moreover, the imperial endeavours would incite a feeling of patriotism that would counterbalance the modern centrifugal forces of materialism and class conflict.

de Tocqueville and Settler Colonialism

Tocqueville was actively engaged in advancing the project of French colonisation of Algeria. Tocqueville's first analysis of French colonialism was published during his 1837 electoral campaign for a seat in the Chamber of Deputies. As a member of the Chamber of Deputies, Tocqueville argued for expanding the French presence in Algeria. He traveled to Algeria in 1841 composing an "Essay on Algeria" that served as the basis for two parliamentary reports on the topic. Unlike the more naïve proponents of the "civilising mission," Tocqueville recognised that the brutal military occupation did little to introduce good government or advance civilisation. In an apparent reversal of the 'four-stage' theory of the Scottish Enlightenment, he acknowledged that "we are now fighting far more barbarously than the Arabs themselves" and "it is on their side that one meets with civilisation" (Tocqueville 70). This realization, however, was not the basis of a critique of French brutality. Instead, Tocqueville defended controversial tactics such as destroying crops, confiscating land, and seizing unarmed civilians. His texts, however, provide little in the way of philosophical justification and dismiss the entire just war tradition with a curt statement that "I believe that the right of war authorizes us to ravage the country." (Tocqueville 70).

Tocqueville was unfazed by the use of martial law against indigenous peoples, but felt that it was counterproductive when applied to the French. For Tocqueville, the success of the French endeavor in Algeria depended entirely on attracting large numbers of permanent French settlers. Given that it was proving impossible to win the allegiance of the indigenous people, France could not hold Algeria without creating a stable community of colonists. The natives were to be ruled through military domination and the French were to be enticed to settle through the promise of economic gain in an environment that reproduced, as much as possible, the cultural and political life of France. After a brief period of optimism about

"amalgamation" of the races in his Second Letter on Algeria" (Tocqueville 25), Tocqueville understood the colonial world in terms of the permanent opposition of settler and native, an opposition structured to ensure the economic benefit of the former.

Fanon, Césaire, and the Indigenous Critique of Settler Colonialism

Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire offer a decolonial thought that strategically declines to treat colonialism as a regrettable episode in an otherwise progressive history; instead, they expose it as a total system of racialised violence, economic plunder, and psychic deformation that must be overcome through the recovery of collective selfhood and political agency. In *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), Césaire argues that colonisation "decivilises" the colonizer as much as it brutalizes the colonized, revealing that the violence later associated with European fascism had long been normalised in the colonies before returning to Europe through a "boomerang effect" (Césaire 13). His argument therefore shifts the moral center of the debate: colonialism is not a European civilizing mission that occasionally fails, but a well-knit structure whose very success depends on dehumanization, dispossession, and the denial of the colonized person's capacity to think, create, and govern. Fanon develops this insight in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) where he presents decolonisation as not merely the formal transfer of governmental power but the replacement of one "species" of humanity by another. To him, it is a disruptive, embodied process through which the colonized confront the colonial world's racial and economic hierarchy and begin to remake themselves as historical subjects (Fanon 35–36). For Fanon, colonial domination also operates internally, producing alienation, self-doubt, and a desire for recognition from the very order that negates the colonized; hence liberation requires not only national independence but "a transformation of consciousness, social relations, and the material conditions of life" (Fanon 210).

The resulting indigenous critiques of settler colonialism extend and revise this decolonial inheritance by insisting that colonialism is not simply a past event or a problem of unequal citizenship, but an ongoing structure organised around the seizure of land and the suppression of indigenous sovereignty. Glen Sean Coulthard, drawing explicitly on Fanon, argues that liberal "recognition" can reproduce colonial power when indigenous peoples are asked to seek legitimacy from the settler state that continues to dispossess them. He therefore advocates a politics of resurgence grounded in indigenous land-based practices, self-recognition, and collective self-determination rather than state-granted inclusion (Coulthard 16). This critique is especially important because settler colonialism differs from extractive colonialism— the aim being not merely to exploit indigenous labour but to eliminate indigenous political authority and replace it with settler judicial authority. Read together, Césaire, Fanon, and indigenous theorists such as Coulthard thus articulate a shared decolonial demand of freedom cannot be reduced to formal equality within colonial institutions, because those institutions were primarily built upon racial hierarchy, land theft, and the silencing of the colonized and indigenous ways of knowledge production. Their work calls instead for a 're-contestation', a more radical decolonisation—one that restores land, language, memory, and political agency.

Marxism, Capitalism, and Colonial Expansion

Marxism, however, has been extremely influential on both postcolonial theory and anti-colonial independence movements around the world. Marxists have drawn attention to the material basis of European political expansion and developed concepts that help explain the persistence of economic exploitation after the end of direct political rule.

Although Marx never developed a theory of colonialism, his analysis of capitalism emphasized its inherent tendency to expand in search of new markets. In his classics works

such as *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), *Grundrisse* (1941) and *Capital* (1867), Marx predicted that the bourgeoisie would continue to create a global market and undermine any local or national barriers to its own expansion. Expansion is a necessary product of the core dynamic of capitalism: overproduction. Competition among producers drives them to cut wages, which in turn leads to a crisis of under-consumption. The only way to prevent economic collapse is to find new markets to absorb excess consumer goods. From a Marxist perspective, some form of Imperialism is inevitable. By exporting population to resource-rich foreign territories, a nation creates a market for industrial goods and a reliable source of natural resources.

In a series of newspaper articles published in the 1850s in the *New York Daily Tribune*, Marx specifically discussed the impact of British colonialism in India. His analysis was consistent with his general theory of political and economic change. He described India as an essentially feudal society experiencing the painful process of modernisation. According to Marx, however, Indian feudalism was a distinctive form because, he believed (incorrectly) that agricultural land in India was owned communally. Marx used the concept of "Oriental despotism" (Marx 125) to describe a specific type of class domination that used the mechanism of the state and taxation in order to extract resources from the peasantry. Oriental despotism emerged in India because, agricultural productivity depended on large-scale public works that could only be financed by the state, particularly irrigation. This meant that the state could not be easily replaced by a more decentralised system of authority. In Western Europe, feudal property could be transformed gradually into privately owned, alienable property in land. In India, communal land ownership made this impossible, thereby blocking the development of commercial agriculture and free markets. Since "oriental despotism" (Marx 125) inhibited the indigenous development of economic modernisation, British domination became the agent of economic modernisation.

Marx's analysis of colonialism as a progressive force bringing modernisation to a backward feudal society sounds like a transparent rationalization for foreign domination. His endorsement of British domination, however, reflects the same ambivalence that he shows towards capitalism in Europe. In both cases, Marx recognised the immense suffering brought about during the transition from feudal to bourgeois society while insisting that the transition is both necessary and ultimately progressive. He argued that the penetration of foreign commerce is causing a social revolution in India. For Marx, this upheaval has both positive and negative ramifications. When peasants lose their traditional livelihoods, there is a great deal of human suffering, but he also pointed out that the traditional village communities were hardly idyllic; they were sites of caste oppression, slavery, misery, and cruelty. The first stage of this process is entirely negative, because it involves heavy burdens of taxation to support British rule and economic upheaval due to the glut of cheaply produced English cotton. Eventually, however, British merchants begin to realise that Indians cannot pay for imported cloth or administrators if they don't efficiently produce goods to trade, which provides an incentive for British investment in production and infrastructure. Even though Marx believed that British rule was motivated by greed and exercised through cruelty, he felt it was still unwittingly the agent of progress. Thus, Marx's discussion of British rule in India has three dimensions: an account of the progressive character of foreign rule, a critique of the human suffering involved, and a concluding argument that British rule must be temporary if the progressive potential is to be adequately realised.

Lenin developed his analysis of Western economic and political domination in his pamphlet *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917). Unlike Marx, Lenin took a more explicitly critical view of Imperialism. He noted that Imperialism was a technique which allowed European countries to put off the inevitable domestic revolutionary crisis by exporting their own economic burdens onto weaker states. Lenin argued that late-nineteenth-

century Imperialism was driven by the economic logic of late-capitalism. The falling rate of profit caused an economic crisis which could only be resolved through territorial expansion. Capitalist conglomerates were compelled to expand beyond their national borders in pursuit of new markets and resources. In a sense, this analysis is fully consistent with Marx, who saw European colonialism as continuous with the process of internal expansion within states and across Europe. From this perspective, colonialism and Imperialism resulted from the same logic that drove the economic development and modernisation of peripheral areas in Europe.

Orientalism and the Power of Knowledge

The field of postcolonial studies came to be formally propounded by Edward Said through his path-breaking book *Orientalism* (1978), where he tried to apply Michel Foucault's technique of discourse analysis in the production of knowledge about the Middle East. The term 'Orientalism' described a structured set of concepts, assumptions, and discursive practices that were used to produce, interpret, and evaluate knowledge about non-European peoples. Said's analysis made it possible for scholars to deconstruct literary and historical texts in order to understand how they reflected and reinforced the imperialist project. Unlike previous studies that focused on the economic or political logics of colonialism, Said highlighted the relationship between knowledge and power (Said 48). By foregrounding the cultural and epistemological work of Imperialism, Said was able to undermine the ideological assumption of value-free knowledge and show that "knowing the Orient" was part of the project of dominating it. Thus, *Orientalism* can be seen as an attempt to extend the geographical and historical terrain of the poststructuralist critique of Western epistemology.

Said uses the term 'Orientalism' in several different ways. First, Orientalism is a specific field of academic study about the Middle East and Asia, albeit one that Said conceives quite expansively as including history, sociology, literature, anthropology and especially philology.

He also identifies it as a practice that helps define Europe by creating a stable depiction of its other, its constitutive outside. Orientalism is a way of characterising Europe by drawing a contrasting image or idea, based on a series of binary oppositions (rational/irrational, mind/body, order/chaos) that manage and displace European anxieties. Said emphasises that it is also "a mode of exercising authority by organizing and classifying knowledge" about the Orient (Said 18). This discursive approach is distinct both from a vulgar materialist assumption that knowledge is simply a reflection of economic or political interests and from an idealist conviction that scholarship is disinterested and neutral. Following Michael Foucault, Said's concept of discourse identifies a way in which knowledge is not used instrumentally in service of power but rather is itself a form of power.

The Subaltern Perspective

The core problematic of postcolonial theory is an examination of the relationship between power and knowledge in the non-Western world. Some scholars have approached this topic through historical research rather than literary or discursive analysis. The most influential movement is the Subaltern Studies group, which was originally made up of South Asian historians who explored the contribution of non-elites to Indian politics and culture. The term subaltern suggests an interest in social class but more generally it is also a methodological orientation that opens up the study of logics of subordination. Whereas Said raised the broad issue of Orientalism, the Subaltern scholar-critics such as Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak dismantled the hegemonic narratives of Indian colonial history.

According to Spivak, the Subaltern Studies group developed two important challenges to the narrative of Indian colonial history as a change from semi-feudalism to capitalist domination. First, they insisted that historical change did not happen as a single, smooth transition; rather, it occurred through separate moments of conflict between dominant groups and subordinated

people, especially peasants and other marginalised communities. Second, they claimed that such change was not only economic or political but also cultural and linguistic (Spivak 273). Spivak points out that when the dynamics of power relations shifted as a result of the fallout, the ways people spoke, wrote, interpreted events, and gave meaning to their world changed as well. Given the veracity of the argument, subaltern resistance had to be read through signs, rumours, oral traditions, and popular consciousness, and not merely through official records or economic categories.

Edward Said exposed the discursive machinery through which the West produced the Orient as an object of knowledge and domination. The Subaltern Studies scholars turned that critique inward upon the historiography of colonial India, adequately questioning not only who narrated the past but whose agency had been erased from it. Ranajit Guha argued that both colonialist and nationalist histories were "elitist" because they treated the Indian people—the peasants, workers, artisans, and marginal communities—as passive recipients of initiatives launched by colonial administrators or indigenous elites; against this, he insisted that subaltern groups constituted an autonomous political domain whose actions, rebellions, and consciousness must be read on their own terms (Guha 3–4). This move dismantled the familiar grand narrative of Indian colonial history as a linear transition from semi-feudal society to capitalist domination. It revealed that the colonial economy did not simply replace older social forms but worked through uneven, coercive, and hybrid arrangements in which landlords, moneylenders, bureaucrats, and colonial institutions jointly dominated and exploited the labour population.

Partha Chatterjee further complicates the viability of this historiography by showing that anti-colonial nationalism, even as it resisted imperial rule, often accepted the colonial categories of the modern state such as the bourgeois civil society, and a homogeneous national subject.

In his book *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), he distinguishes the "outer" material world governed by colonial power from an "inner" spiritual or cultural domain where the nation sought autonomy, thereby exposing the limits of a nationalist narrative that claimed to speak collectively for all Indians (Chatterjee 6). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further radicalised the critique by asking whether the subaltern could ever be heard within discourses already structured by colonial, patriarchal, and class power; her concept of "epistemic violence" names the way in which systems of knowledge do not merely misrepresent the subaltern but actively construct the conditions under which subaltern speech becomes unintelligible, muted or impossible (Spivak 274). Taken together, Guha, Chatterjee, and Spivak thus developed two decisive challenges to the conventional narrative of colonial modernisation: first, they rejected the categorical assumption that historical change in India could be understood as a smooth transition from semi-feudalism to capitalism, insisting instead on the coexistence and interaction of elite and subaltern domains of politics (Guha 4); second, they showed that both colonial and nationalist accounts reproduced relations of domination by claiming to represent the people while suppressing the heterogeneity, agency, and silences of those very people (Spivak 274). In this sense, Subaltern Studies did not merely add peasants and marginalized groups to an existing historical narrative; it transformed the very meaning of historical agency, making the archive itself an object of critique and demanding that the historian attend to what official records, nationalist memoirs, and developmental narratives had rendered unspeakable.

The Problem of the "Postcolonial"

The term "postcolonial" has enabled scholars to study colonialism's continuing effects across literature, history, politics, language, and culture. Anne McClintock argues that postcolonialism may reproduce a linear historical model in which colonialism belongs to the

past and postcoloniality represents a subsequent stage of liberation (McClintock 84–98). Such a model can obscure the persistence of colonial power in contemporary forms of economic dependency, military intervention, racial hierarchy and cultural authority.

The prefix "post-" may therefore be misleading. It can strategically imply that colonialism has ended, and can also flatten historical differences among regions that experienced different forms of conquest, settlement, slavery, indirect rule, plantation life, capitalism, and cultural assimilation. Leela Gandhi notes that postcolonial theory must remain attentive to the danger of replacing one totalizing narrative with another. Concepts such as hybridity, alterity, multiplicity, and resistance can become "formulaic" if they are detached from specific historical contexts (Gandhi 71). Postcolonial criticism must therefore preserve the tension between shared historicity of the structures of domination and the distinct histories of particular communities.

Aijaz Ahmad in his epochal monograph *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992) has criticised postcolonialist theory from a Marxist perspective, arguing that its infatuation with issues of representation and discourse makes it blind to the material basis and systematic structure of power relations (Ahmed 4-5). He also argued that the influence of Said's Orientalism was due not to its originality but, on the contrary, to its conventionality. According to Ahmad, Orientalism benefited from its affinity with two problematic intellectual fashions: the reaction against Marxism that led to the vogue for post-structuralism and the "Third-worldism" (Ahmed 191) that provided academics with a veneer of radicalism. Said, for his part, also developed a sustained critique of Marxism. In Orientalism, Said argued that Marx's explicit defence of British colonialism was emblematic of his own implication in Orientalist discourse. Furthermore, for Said, Marx's position was not merely a personal

failure but instead reflected a more general problem with totalizing theory that he felt tended to marginalize any signs of difference that undermined Marx's narrative of progress.

Conclusion

The central idea is that postcolonial criticism must not reduce colonialism to economic exploitation alone, because cultural representation and knowledge make exploitation intelligible and administratively possible. Nor should it reduce colonialism to discourse alone, because land, labour, capital, military force, and state institutions give structural credibility to this discourse. Re-contesting the imperial baggage requires a critical practice that joins material history to cultural analysis, recognizes the agency of subordinated peoples, and remains suspicious of every claim to universal authority. It requires a double movement: First, criticism must expose the universal claims through which Europe and other dominant powers have represented their own history as the model of human development. Second, it must avoid treating all non-Western cultures as pure, unified, or automatically emancipatory. Decolonisation, in any form, cannot not be achieved by merely replacing European authority with an uncritical celebration of tradition. It requires a plural, self-reflexive, and historically grounded account of power.

The history of anti-imperial thought is therefore internally contradictory. Diderot challenged European brutality but remained situated within Enlightenment debates about universal reason. Mill criticised the practical failures of colonial government while defending the principle of imperial tutelage. Tocqueville recognised colonial violence but justified it for French national interest. Marx exposed exploitation while interpreting British rule in India as an unwitting vehicle of historical transformation. Said revealed the power of representation, while Ahmad reminded scholars that discourse must remain connected to material structures.

It is worth noting that modern scholars have begun to question the usefulness of the very concept of postcolonial theory. Like the idea of the Scottish four stages theory, a theory with which it would appear to have little in common, the notion of postcolonialism seems to rely on a progressive understanding of history (McClintock 93). It suggests, perhaps unwittingly, that the core concepts of hybridity, alterity, particularly, and multiplicity may lead to a kind of methodological dogmatism or developmental logic. Moreover, the term "colonial" as a marker of this domain of inquiry is also problematic in so far as it suggests historically implausible commonalities across territories that had experienced very different techniques of domination. Thus, the critical impulse behind postcolonial theory has turned on itself, drawing attention to how it may itself be marked by the utopian desire to transcend the trauma of colonialism (Gandhi 88).

Postcolonialism, therefore, does not simply mark the formal end of colonial rule; it names the continuing cultural, political, and economic effects of empire, as well as the critical project of recovering the histories, voices, and agency of colonised peoples. The analysis has shown that European political thought played a decisive role in producing and sustaining imperial power. Categories such as "civilisation," "savagery," "barbarism," "progress," and "self-government" were not neutral descriptions of social difference. They functioned as hierarchical terms that placed Europe at the apex of historical development and represented colonised societies as immature, irrational, or incapable of self-rule. Through this vocabulary, imperial domination could be presented as a benevolent civilising mission rather than as conquest or exploitation.

Postcolonial theory, finally, draws attention to the discursive and cultural mechanisms through which empire naturalized domination, while also emphasising the agency of colonised subjects who resisted, adapted to, and challenged imperial rule. Imperial discourse

transformed domination into duty and exploitation into improvement, but it also generated the contradictions through which anti-colonial and postcolonial critique became possible. The term “postcolonial” and not the hyphenated ‘postcolonial’ therefore remains useful when it names an ongoing struggle rather than a completed historical period. Its task is not to announce the end of colonialism but to investigate the forms in which colonial power persists, mutates, and becomes normalised. Such a project can contribute to a more plural understanding of history—one that does not treat European modernity as the measure of all cultures and societies and does not romanticise any tradition beyond criticism.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were generated or analysed during the course of this study. The research is based on the critical analysis of published literary texts and other publicly available sources.

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Ethical Declaration

This paper is an original work based on publicly available literary and scholarly sources. All sources, quotations, and ideas have been appropriately acknowledged in accordance with academic citation practices. Since the study does not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, or confidential data, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

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