An Interdisciplinary Journal
<http://www.netsoljournal.net/>

Volume 6, Issue 2, pp.26-29, Fall 2021

<https://doi.org/10.24819/netsol2021.13>

Date Submitted: December 4, 2021

Date Accepted: December 8, 2021

Book Review

Leela Gandhi. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Second Edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

Key Words: Postcolonial Theory, Colonialism, Europe, India, Orientalism

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The second edition of Leela Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (2019) updates the 1998 first edition. Routledge Publishers hailed the first edition as "a ground-breaking critical introduction to the burgeoning field of postcolonial studies". John Hawkes Professor of Humanities and English at Brown University since 2014, Leela Gandhi has been researching the cultural history of the Indo-British colonial encounter. As a renowned scholar on transnational literatures, postcolonial theory and ethics, she is the founding co-editor of the journal *Postcolonial Studies* and editorial board member of *Postcolonial Text*. Her position as director of the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women and her research on intellectual history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are part of her varied and important contributions.

In her introduction to the second edition, Gandhi highlights the transition postcolonial theory has experienced from an emergent field of research in the late 1990s when she started focusing on it to a well-established area in which various scholars and academics continue to study and examine impact and transformation. She explains how postcolonial theory evolved from being Eurocentric to including research from all over the world. She notes the link between postcolonialism and philosophical scepticism in some European and American scholarly systems. As such, the first edition made visible the various connections between postcolonial theory and other philosophical and intellectual theories, such as poststructuralism, postmodernism, Marxism, and feminism. Her assessment of the contribution of important postcolonial theorists, such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. Referring to Paul Ricoeur and Michel Foucault, Gandhi explains how scepticism equates incredulity and how such incredulity was directed against a whole set of

elements, including “grand narratives, the figures of the subject and of identity, disciplinary objects, such as literature, text, history, archive, philosophy, canons of all description, nationalisms (both colonial and postcolonial), class (as the only unit of collective action), reason and rationality, progress and modernity, gender, and the human, to name a few.” (x-xi).

Still in her introduction, Gandhi, based on her desire to understand the further evolution of postcolonial theory, details her wish to see whether, from the initial quarrels between scholars on issues relating to grand narratives and canons listed above, scepticism became critique (in the sense of Foucault’s definition as critique being “the disposition to question governing values from the perspective of the present” (x). To fulfil that wish, Gandhi added two important sections to her second edition, namely an epilogue essay and an extended bibliography. The essay offers Gandhi an opportunity to revisit old disciplinary quarrels while also looking at more recent contributions stemming from diverse directions, such as political and social theory as well as postsecular, postcritical, ontological, environmental, ethical, and affective critical theory perspectives. Additionally, she felt it useful to widen the postcolonial frame with aspects of non-Marxist socialisms and civil rights movements in view of attaining her general aim which is “to describe what is enduring in postcolonial thinking—as a critical perspective within the academy and as an attitude to the world that extends beyond the discipline of postcolonial studies” (xi).

The inclusion of Gandhi’s introduction to the first edition is useful as reading this together with the introduction to the second edition helps to clarify the essential changes made. Notably, the first edition contained two parts, one on the background of postcolonialism and one on essential postcolonial themes and issues as identified by scholars in the field. This order is kept in the second edition, as are the different chapters.

Let us briefly look at the chapters now. There are nine chapters, entitled After Colonialism, Thinking Otherwise: A Brief Intellectual History, Postcolonialism and the New Humanities, Edward Said and His Critics, Postcolonialism and Feminism, Imagining Community: The Question of Nationalism, One World: The Vision of Postnationalism, Postcolonial Literatures and The Limits of Postcolonial Theory. The addition to the second edition, the essay at the end of the volume carries the following title: Epilogue: If This Were a Manifesto for Postcolonial Thinking.

The chapter titles are indicative, of course, of the content of the chapters. Thus, Chapter one links postcolonial theory to what preceded it historically—colonialism—and the psychological and societal aftermath of European colonization. Major scholars of the earliest developments of postcolonial theory as are Gayatri Spivak, Albert Memmi, Edward Said, Ashis Nandy, Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha and their various contributions to the domain are discussed in this first chapter.

Chapter two further develops the emergence of postcolonial theory through existing historical tensions between other theories and philosophies like Marxism, poststructuralism, postmodernism and Enlightenment. To situate postcolonialism in a larger intellectual tradition, Gandhi includes philosophers, such as René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. She summarizes and critiques the limits of Western humanism and epistemological subjectivity to conclude that theorizing a valuable and free conversation “with the excluded ‘Other’ of Western humanism” (p. 39) cannot be possible within the Western humanism paradigm.

This is why another direction was necessary. Gandhi's third chapter, "Postcolonialism and the New Humanities," looks at the reasons and ways marginalized knowledge systems were silenced all along and notes the lack of interest from postcolonial scholars in social realities. Only a new form of humanities scholarship will bring intellectuals to abandon the "oppositional stance" (p. 59) between canonical knowledge systems and the excluded 'Others'. It is Gandhi's intention "to foreground the exclusions and elisions which confirm the privileges and authority of canonical knowledge systems" and "to recover those marginalized knowledges which have been occluded and silenced by the entrenched humanist curriculum" (p. 43). One of the major figures of postcolonial theory is Edward Said. Gandhi's fourth chapter analyzes how Said's *Orientalism* came to be one of postcolonialism's main influential works but also why that particular text was able to mobilize readers against Western capitalism and territorialism.

The next chapter is of particular interest to postcolonial feminists as it examines the relationship between postcolonialism and feminism. Gandhi includes the main critiques of postcolonial feminisms, such as those of Sara Suleri, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Jenny Sharpe, Rosemary Marangoly George, and Mohandas Gandhi, but does not go beyond discussion from the post-1990s period, which is regrettable.

Chapter six, entitled "Imagining Community: The Question of Nationalism," used Franz Fanon's critique of national consciousness and Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities to underscore the opposition between the Western and the Third World views on nationalisms. This is then expanded in Chapter 7, "One World: The Vision of Postnationalism". As Gandhi notes in this seventh chapter postcolonialism wishes to leave behind the "embattled past" (p. 128) to try and envision "post-national solidarities" (p. 123). The chapter also contains an interesting discussion of the content and limitations of the often-used terms of hybridity and diaspora.

Literary scholars will find Chapter eight, "Postcolonial Literatures," highly appealing. Gandhi aptly shows how textuality and textual analysis are central to postcolonial theory. Literature played and continues to play an important role when it comes to expressing and consolidating colonial power. Essential issues in postcolonial literatures are those of language use (who writes what in which language), the place of the migrant novel, the role postcolonial texts are supposed to take on and the weight of urban-set narratives.

Finally, the book's shortest chapter, entitled "The Limits of Postcolonial Theory," constitutes the conclusion as Gandhi talks about the contestation by postcolonial theory of a possible meta-narrative of colonialism. She positions herself as opposed to the postcolonial theory of Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffiths because, in her opinion, a theory of postcolonialism which suppresses differences of subjectivity "is ultimately flawed as an ethical and political intervention into conditions of power and inequality" (p. 170). She then moves to the important question whether postcolonialism can be equated to the end of colonialism and how accepting such a proposal leads to binary oppositions between the West and the Other, between the First and the Third World, and does nothing to improve our understanding of cultural diversity. History and historical thought lead to "falsely utopian or prematurely celebratory" (p. 174) comprehension of complex situations and events.

A common thread exists in all chapters, namely Gandhi's desire to use postcolonial theory as a model for living with understanding cultural differences in a non-violent manner. While her volume remains an authoritative voice on postcolonial theory, it is highly regretted that Gandhi did not take the opportunity to revisit certain chapters, concepts and discussions

when it was time to prepare the second edition. This is also observed by Amanda Lagji in her review: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/5293/reviews/5352526/lagji-gandhi-postcolonial-theory-critical-introduction-second-edition>.

Nevertheless, the volume is well edited, has a lengthy updated bibliography (pp. 215-253), an index, comments and additional readings provided in the end-of-chapter notes, which all together render it a work of reference. The epilogue is a gem as it provides a link between earlier knowledge on and comprehension of postcolonial theory, and contemporary ideas and examples of postcolonialism. In this “Manifesto for Postcolonial Thinking,” Gandhi ends each subsection with a provocative proposal; according to her postcolonial thinking has much to offer: an opportunity for “Western Self-Critique” (p. 178), “anticolonial liberation” (p. 180), “planetarity” (p. 183), “a reckoning with injured life and communities of suffering and a template for noninjuriousness as a way of life and basis for community” (p. 189), “an ethics of departure” (p. 192), “displacement [as] a means to devise non-generic connections with the world” (p. 196), “receiving and providing refuge is a corollary of renunciation in postcolonial thinking” (p. 202), “Anarchism [as] the hidden component of postcolonial thinking” (p. 203), “an imperfect outlook that remains indefinite, unfinished, and peripatetic” (p. 205). As Gandhi explains: “Planetary perspectives conceive the world as an integral whole rather than a sphere to be divided up for resource extraction and by the profit calculus of modern capitalist globalization” (p. 183). She further focuses her epilogue on seven themes that characterize postcolonial thinking: assemblage, injury, exit, ontology, renunciation, ethics, and “advice to kings” so that these do not turn out to be despots. The chapters are balanced in length and in depth, which makes for easy of reading and reference. This second edition will surely be appreciated by students in search of summaries of difficult concepts and academics as it provides both general and in-depth analyses of different aspects of postcolonial theory.