

Are We “Post” Colonial?

A Conversation with Ania Loomba

Interview by Samantha Cohen

I was first introduced to Ania Loomba through her book, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2005). After reading most of it, I thought that she would be a perfect fit for *The Humanities Review*. This issue, as well as the last, works (as the publication's title suggests) toward locating the relevance of the humanities in today's world. Loomba's book takes on this project too, specifically in the realm of postcolonial theory—and reminds us that we may not be as “post” colonial as we would like to think. Our conversation focused a great deal on the remnants, and new strains, of colonization that are so pervasive—and yet so naturalized—in our world. This is a topic that is addressed by several other pieces in this journal, directly and indirectly. Here, Loomba asks us to be more conscious of the political ramifications of our actions in the world, of the pitfalls of what we consider to be “progress.”

SC Your book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* provides an encyclopedic overview of the field. Can you discuss the process of putting together such an extensive study?

AL Well, I wrote the book in New Delhi, India while I was teaching at Jawaharlal Nehru University. I read as many things as I could lay my hands on, but I had limited library resources there, and those were days before the Internet could be used as a resource in the way it

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now can. At the same time, reading and working in India made other readings and perspectives available to me which I might have been less aware of had I written the book in the U.S. So in some ways, I proceeded by thinking about what I had, rather than attempting to get everything, and plugging all possible loopholes. I worked outwards from areas I knew well, and followed the chain of thought where my materials led me.

In this book, you write that the term "postcolonialism" is one that "is useful only if we use it with caution and qualifications." Can you expand on this a bit?

Well, the term becomes a bit pointless if it is used as an umbrella term to describe all once-colonized societies as if there is nothing else to those societies, or as if colonialism is simply a by-gone thing, or to demarcate the so-called "third world" from the rest of the world. So for example, countries like India or Egypt or Kenya have much more to their history than just colonialism—the world "postcolonial" obscures that. There are neocolonial aspects to the current world order—the word postcolonial obscures that also. And often by calling only some parts of the world postcolonial, we obscure the fact that colonialism was a global system.

Are we actually "post" colonialism in our modern day? To what extent are imperialist ideologies being rehashed

and recapitulated in our globalized post-9/11 moment?

Well, in the day of the new American empire, I don't think many people would claim that we are simply "post"-colonial. The advocates of the new empire like Niall Ferguson or Robert Kaplan openly invoke earlier empires, especially the British Empire, as a model for the U.S. to emulate. There is also a widespread attempt to whitewash earlier colonial history, and to obscure its genocidal, exploitative and racist features in order to then make colonialism a respectable idea all over again. Thus, for example, many recent histories of empire speak about the affectionate, intimate, or equal relations that are supposed to have once existed at some point between colonial masters and colonized subjects. Other recent writers reiterate the imperialist view that empires allowed good governance, spread enlightenment and progress, or encouraged an exchange of ideas. So we are seeing an open recirculation of once discredited ideologies of empire on the part of policy makers or politicians, and an accompanying academic or intellectual attempt to make empire respectable.

At the same time, it seems that contemporary supporters of empire are looking to discredit postcolonial scholarship. For example, you cite Dinesh D'Souza, who "claims that 'apologists for terrorism' and other 'justifications for violence' rely on a large body of

scholarship which goes by the names of 'anti-colonial studies,' 'postcolonial studies,' or 'subaltern studies.'" Despite the seeming absurdity of this statement, it seems that many might take up this view. How do you respond to such a dangerous oversimplification?

I've written about this in the new edition of *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* and with several colleagues in the introduction to an edited collection, *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (2005). D'Souza, or the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, who accuse "postcolonial scholars" of being complicit with terrorists, are not very far off from George Bush's wild assertions about global alignments where everyone opposed to him is imagined to be in the pay of global terrorism.

You are right that many others can take this view of postcolonial studies, but what is at stake is not that they will discredit postcolonial scholarship but rather that we are now seeing an open and unashamed embrace of imperialism, one that requires a whole series of oversimplifications and distortions. That is what we must criticize.

D'Souza also dangerously oversimplifies and distorts scholarship to make problematic claims about race and minority cultures in the U.S.. Scholars who are committed to fighting racism or sexism or imperialism routinely face the problem of having their work distorted, as well as charges of political correctness,

or of being too complex, and hence out of touch with ordinary people. When a culture of sound bites meets a dangerously right-wing philosophy, this is not surprising, and one can only fight it by not letting such oversimplifications slide, and also by trying to put one's own position forward even more forcefully and clearly.

WE ARE NOW SEEING AN OPEN AND UNASHAMED EMBRACE OF IMPERIALISM

You have published a great deal on the intersections between feminist theory and postcolonial studies. How is the fight against imperialism inextricably linked to women's struggle for equality—despite the fact that these movements have often been quite separate?

Well, to the extent that imperialism cannot be fought by ignoring half the world's population, or to the extent that women can't be free under imperial or neocolonial conditions, the connections are obvious. But they are not automatic, or inevitable but have

to be carefully forged, if for no other reason than the fact that women exist on all sides of the political spectrum. Historically, anti-imperialist struggles have often relegated feminist questions to the back burner. Today, in many parts of the world, including the University, feminism seems to be regarded as an agenda of the past. Often, for first world women in particular, feminism is understood to pertain only to questions of their individual and personal freedom. At the other end of the spectrum, the global division of labor is increasingly gendered, with poor women bearing the burden of the inequities of the new world order. Movements that seek to organize them often regard questions of personal freedom as luxuries. Thus, feminist struggles today, as always, have to deal with an incredible range of issues, and part of the challenge is how to articulate them together, in a complex way, without resurrecting the old binaries that have dogged women's movements as well as anti-imperialist struggles of the past. But if we consider the extent to which the imperial wars, or global inequities, work by exploiting gender asymmetries, and worsening them, we can see that there is really no choice but to see these two agendas as actually one and the same.

How does teaching inform your own scholarship? And, in turn, how is your pedagogical style influenced by postcolonial theory?

Teaching has been absolutely fundamental to my research agendas. Teaching depends so much on where one is—the classroom space in India is quite different from the classroom space here in the U.S. So I have found myself asking quite different questions about the world, about the academy, about ideas, in these two countries. My first book was born out of the experience of trying to teach Shakespeare in an undergraduate college in India, as well as out of the experience of trying to research Renaissance history in the West. The next book was born out of the experience of teaching in a graduate university in India while “postcolonial theory” became fashionable and institutionalized in the Western academy. And so on.

And I try to teach in a style that is accessible and jargon-free. So to that extent postcolonial theory is the last thing I am influenced by—in fact I try to write and teach in a totally different way!

Well, your book certainly makes the field of postcolonial studies more available, in a way that is possibly as jargon-free as could be. Why has the field been made to be so inaccessible, and why do you see it as a valuable resource for those who may not have access to such high academic jargon?

I don't think the field has been deliberately “made to be” inaccessible so much as that in the U.S. and in Britain

particularly, it developed alongside a wave of theorizing—feminist theory, postmodern theory, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and so on. And while lots of good work was produced in its wake, which also made available new vocabularies, there was also a lot of writing and theorizing that seemed to be dazzled by these new vocabularies and began to use it mechanically, or in an overwrought fashion. I don't see the problem as that of a “high academic” jargon, which must be translated for the less sophisticated. When I was eleven, my father tried to explain inflation to me with the help of my pencils and pens. It was many years later that I realized what a brilliant economist he was that he could do this. So it's actually more difficult to be jargon free—one requires a tighter grasp over concepts. Jargon can often circulate within the highest circles of the academy without anyone having the nerve to say that they don't understand!

Some argue that politics have no place in the classroom. The study of colonialism and postcolonialism inherently suggests otherwise. How do you respond to such de-politicizing modes of pedagogy?

All modes of pedagogy are political—the ones that claim to be “balanced” and not political are in fact highly ideological and biased. All colonial education is a wonderful illustration of that. What could be more political than the view that *Othello* is a play about all

men rather than about a black man? That's what white colonial education entrenched as the “humanist”/“apolitical” reading of Shakespeare's great play. What this reading did was to suggest that Othello's blackness and his humanity are counterposed—stress his blackness and you are somehow being partisan, political.

On the other hand, it might be argued that the play is about a black man and his place in society, that Shakespeare was trying to speak about this very human issue, and that both Othello's humanity and Shakespeare's can only be addressed if we attend to questions of blackness in the play. So which view is “political”? What happened in colonial education is still happening today. Those who argue that politics have no place in the classroom tend to be those in power, or those afraid that the status quo will change in ways they don't like.

So, basically, many in power (particularly in education but certainly not exclusively there) avoid taking sides in order to avoid seeming political—and yet this is perhaps the most political stance of all. How do we work against such a contradiction, especially when the media works so hard to keep us complacent?

Well, my point is not that people in power avoid taking sides, but rather that dominant opinions and interests always appear as impartial and balanced and objective. Thus, in order to ensure

equality one appears to be one-sided because it isn't a level playing field.

In the U.S., fighting for universal health care appears partisan, but an existing system, which disenfranchises the majority, appears balanced. In education, arguing for the inclusion of students from all backgrounds should appear more "balanced" but because it requires changing things, taking positions, challenging the status quo, it doesn't. This is an old problem, and one that makes feminists, or any other group invested in social change appear "strident." About the media—yes, well, there is the dominant media, but most people in the academy, most of our students do have access to alternative views, too. It's also part of the problem that so many of us refuse to engage with the alternatives available.

In the last issue of *The Humanities Review*, Gayatri Spivak weighed in on the value of the humanities. What relevance do you feel the humanities have in the world at large?

The crucial question isn't what relevance they have, so much as what funding they have in the world at large. Few people, I think, will openly deny their relevance, but they only pay lip service to this relevance as they pit the humanities against other supposedly more usable forms of knowledge.

How can we defend the humanities against such claims?

See those aren't claims—those are the reality. I am suggesting that while everyone will say that poetry is a good thing, most will argue that it less useful than medical research. In the end, it is more expendable than the latter. We should not pit these two against each other, but the fact is that the poorer the university, or the poorer the country, the less there is the money available for the humanities.

I think we need to defend the humanities not just within the academy, but also in the wider society. If the humanities are the essential lifeblood of any society, then we should have widespread and innovative public projects that make it possible to have reading and drama and poetry and dance and philosophy and ideas in general available to people as widely and as cheaply as possible. Only then can we have the argument that the humanities are necessary within the university. If they are seen as cake, not bread, as an occasional treat, or as something to be indulged in by a select few, then they are doomed no matter how much we defend them within the academy. ■