

**Pal Ahluwalia.** *Politics and Post-Colonial Theory: African Inflections.* London: Routledge, 2001. viii + 164 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-24750-4.



**Reviewed by** Chimuka T. Andrea

**Published on** H-SAfrica (January, 2002)

This book deals with the core issues in the discourse on post-colonial theory and grapples with serious issues pertaining to the African situation. African post-colonial developments and the relationships between Africa and the wider world are very important and readers will be attracted to this topicality. The book is clear and easy to follow, even for new readers in the field of social and political theory.

Apart from problematizing the notion of 'post-coloniality,' the book is about the real life changes that the post-colonial African landscape has undergone, including changes that have taken place in nation-states and which persist in the present. It looks at how the continent has been introduced to modernity and how the various nation-states have manoeuvred their way out of the multifarious colonial experiences. Through the employment of the term "inflections," the writer, Pal Ahluwalia, would like to investigate "how African societies have constituted and reconstituted themselves by an engagement with modernity" (p. 18). Since Africa is not an island, he seeks to

explain the African experience in relation to Europe and the wider world.

The book begins by noting conceptual constraints to the use of "post-colonial theory." The problematic concept has had external, as well as internal, constraints. The writer recognizes that it is a concept with a very wide application, for he says, "there is very little agreement about its disciplinary boundaries or its political implications" (p.1). However, he believes that the new discourse on globalization has given new hope for the concept when other forms of "post" and "isms" are fading away (ibid p.1).

Post-colonial theory, as the author notes, has been characterized in the past as intricately connected to and conceptually dependent upon post-structuralism and post-modernism, thereby making it vulnerable to whatever criticisms that may have been levelled against the former concepts. However, he attempts to carve a prospective analysis of the concepts, which promises to free it from being dependent on the foresaid duo and any other "post" phenomena (ibid). Ahluwalia links the conception of "post-colonial theory" to

the pioneering work by Edward Said who combined post-structuralism and Marxism (p.2). Admittedly, this has made "post-colonial theory" vulnerable to a barrage of criticisms and the writer gives an account of such criticisms. Parts of the criticisms are associated with problems connected with modernity (*ibid*).

Be that as it may, Ahluwalia holds that post-colonial theory is different from other "posts" in a number of ways, thereby making it stand as a legitimate area for intellectual discourse. Firstly, the Third World, of which Africa is part, must not be presented as standing in binary opposition with the First World. Rather it must be conceded that there are a plethora of boundaries and spheres that exist in the post-colonial experience (p.14). Secondly, post-coloniality must not be used to denote "after independence" but to a whole host of "European incursions into the continent from the fifteenth century onwards" (p.14). Thirdly, the experience must not be construed as monolithic. Fourthly, post-colonial theory is different from, and transcends, literary studies. The author makes an important observation that the relationship between Africa and the so-called "Developed World" needs to be approached carefully, since it is a nexus of factors and processes.

If post-colonial discourse, as the author contends, is diverse, then it would be interesting to see the angle from which it could best be approached as it pertains to Africa. One wonders whether an insider's perspective to the African experience has any advantage over the outsider's. Even if one preferred an insider's perspective, still, there are varied experiences specific to different geographical locations. Yet, reflections on these experiences suggest that colonialism was experienced in more or less similar terms. According to Eze,

"African philosophy labors under this yet-to-end exploitation and denigration of African humanity. It challenges the long-standing exclusion as the negative "other" of reason and of the West-

ern world in the major traditions of Western philosophy. And because this is an ongoing task, as well as in many other factors not unconnected with the colonial and neo-colonial nature of Africa's relationship with the West, the "post" of "post colonial" African philosophy has to be written under erasure, or more conveniently—in brackets ..[B]rackets serves as signal and pointer to the unfulfilled dreams of the independence achievements of the 1960s (Eze, 1997:14).

African struggles appear to be even deeper, such that one cannot simply gloss over the apparent binary opposition between Africa and the West. The opposition is one of the many spikes of the postcolonial discourse. As Tsenay Serequeberhan says, "For us, contemporary Africans, the condition that has resulted from the obliteration of the 'standards of our fathers' . . . and the consequent neo-colonial inertness is the necessary point of departure for any worthwhile and meaningful philosophic engagement." For Serequeberhan, African philosophic reflection is prior to any intellectual discourse about the 'felt and lived experiences' that postcolonial literature concerns itself with (Tsenay Serequeberhan, p.13).

Furthermore, if "postcolonial theory" has its genesis in post-structuralism and other Western conceptual models, then it does not appear to have an authentically African parentage. If it has not been initiated by the "periphery," then it is a game for outsiders. If post colonial theory is about the African experience, then there appears to be a crying need for a postcolonial African philosophical reflections on the experiences in question.

The first chapter focuses on the negritude movement and its concern with issues of identity. Although negritude was wrought with numerous problems, one of which was to reinforce the racial binary, Ahluwalia argues that negritude was the first attempt by the African people to fight against colonization (p.21). The chief proponents of the negritude movement were Senghor and Césaire. The problem, Ahluwalia argues, was that negri-

tude locked Africans into racial essentialism and, more seriously, buttressed the idea of the black man's inferiority complex (p.30). This observation is very important, for negritude allocated reason to the West and feeling to Africans (Serequeberhan: 44-5). However, no matter how badly the negritude movement fared, it was the pioneer of the need for a self-conscious African identity. Fortunately for Africa, the author reassures us, there is a new identity forming. It is yet to be envisaged how this new identity formation will champion the African cause into the future.

Chapter Two considers the relationship between decolonisation and intra-national liberation struggles in which the author observes that the process of decolonisation was characterized by a long and arduous journey. The task of Africans was to offer resistance to the presence of imperialist forces. The argument proffered here is that the process differed from one country to the next, and also that colonial structures survived political independence. Of profound importance is the observation by the author that vestiges of colonization remained locked in the African psyche, hence the intriguing nature of all the processes of decolonization (p.38). He points to the efforts by Fanon and Said to demonstrate this point. All this indicates the need for a fuller and more integrative liberation. Since decolonization is a dynamic process which impacts on all, Ahluwalia observes that the possibility of retrieving the romantic past is irredeemably lost. Part of the problem is that Africans, apparently, are working along national frameworks, yet the wider (international) trends are succumbing to globalization. The African postcolonial experience, so it appears, will remain fated to this cultural hybridity.

In Chapter Three, the author deals with nationalism, colonial resistance, and how postcolonial theory engages in discussion with the two. He observes that although nationalism was propped up and was actively involved in struggles against colonialism, postcolonial theory has not done

enough to understand the postcolonial state. As a matter of fact, the African state is in serious trouble. It no longer functions properly. "The notion of the collapsed state hinges on the argument that states collapse when they can no longer perform the basic functions of the political community. In a more fundamental sense, the state has failed to maintain law and order. In addition, the state can no longer maintain its legitimacy as a symbol of identity. Neither can it conduct public affairs" (p. 53). As such, the African state has been severely compromised as a vehicle of development. This can be attributed to the intervention of the large international financial bodies such as the World Bank and the international Monetary Fund. These bodies have designed programmes for economic progress for the African states. They also have exerted immense pressures on African governments (p. 55). New organizations from the grassroots called Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have also formed and continue to exert pressure on the state from below (ibid).

When one carefully analyses the African state, one can discern two principal factors: absolutism and arbitrariness. Such power was inherited from the colonial state as well as the desire to maintain a patrimonial social order in line with African traditions. This might explain the drive towards one-party state regimes. In addition, this power was handed over to the African nations at independence when they were least prepared to handle such immense powers (p. 60). The situation is so bad that pessimists have pointed at the "return to darkness." It must never be forgotten that the African state is a product of trans-culturation. The idea of the nation-state has its roots in Europe and was only introduced in Africa (p.66).

What is intriguing, however, is the fact that African nationalism has been responsible for anti-colonial struggles. There is every need, according to most scholars, for the African state to transcend this role and do much more. However, in the face of globalization and new imperialistic advances,

the African state must consider the cost of "a modernist project that celebrates economic prosperity above all else" (p.72).

The chapter entitled, "Striving for Democratisation" looks at the role of civil society and human rights in environments marked by "authoritarian rule." In an era where there is little faith in the viability of the African state, Ahluwalia contends that there is need for a vibrant civil society. Such faith is pegged on the potential of civil society to bring about democracy. Ahluwalia argues that civil society has received scant attention in scholarship. However, he recognizes the danger of focusing only on one facet of society. The same is true of human rights. Sub-Saharan Africa has a very bad human rights record. This must not be left like that since Africa is also part of global politics.

Chapter Five deals with citizenship, subjectivity and modernity. Ahluwalia notes that the processes of modernization have been diverse and produced diverse effects on African people. The settlers in the colonies set themselves apart and distinguished themselves from the indigenous people. They placed themselves into the position of citizen and relegated the others into that of subject. This has been the central claim of Mahmood Mamdani. Ahluwalia submits that this is too simple a picture. In fact, post colonial subjects have multifarious identities shaped by everyday life experiences such that to describe them only in terms of subject/citizen dichotomy would be grossly inadequate.

The last chapter discusses globalization and post-colonialism. The author contends that although Africa was at the centre of economic forces that brought about modernity, it does not appear to have profited from the whole transaction. Even now, with talk of globalization, there does not appear to be anything new in this regard. Globalization appears to be simply the Americanization of every facet of life. But it need not be feared. Africa must make use of the opportunities

presented to break away from tyrannical snares. Maybe globalization is an escape route for Africa--a liberating perspective (p.131).

The book ends with an afterword, where the author underlines the gains of postcolonial theory. The fact that Africa is in deep crisis is not new. What is frightening is that the crisis feeds into the presentations of the continent as "dark," but almost all that is happening is an invention of external forces (p. 133). Yet all these happenings do not absolve Africans from responsibility.

Pal Ahluwalia contends that Western models of analysis have all failed to do justice to a proper and fertile analysis of the African problem. Hence the need to adopt post-colonial inflections--an engagement with the manner in which Africans have dealt with the institutions and practices which it inherited from its past, both pre-colonial and colonial (p. 134). These institutions have become hybridised and have evolved particular meanings attached to specific locations.

If I have any misgivings to make on the work of Pal Ahluwalia, then it has to be his omission of serious treatment of the philosophical dimension to the post-colonial debate, which Tsenay Serequeberhan considers primary to any discussion of postcoloniality. For Serequeberhan, philosophy "is a situated critical and systematic interpretative exploration of our lived historico-cultural actuality" (p. 3). Tsenay Serequeberhan has dealt with similar topics in *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse* (1994). This omission, deliberate or otherwise, has impacted on the work as a whole since Tsenay Serequeberhan's book is one of the few that deals with Africa and post-colonial theory.

Furthermore, Ahluwalia hopes that the new identity formations (i.e. hybridisation) in Africa can transform the situation for the better, but does this not threaten Africa with death? Why should Africa embrace globalization when, by the same stroke, it brings the demise of the other? It is

such questions that dampen the inspired hope of the author.

The few critical remarks I have made are meant to stimulate further debate. The author has made significant contributions to postcolonial thought. The strength of the work is in wrestling with issues of such magnitude and topicality. He also offers hope for Africa to surmount obstacles. He hails the new identity formations as well as the possibilities of a vibrant civil society in Africa. Lastly, he takes globalization as an opportunity for Africa to break out of the multifarious quagmire.

#### Notes

Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed. *Postcolonial African Philosophy*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997.

Tseney Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse*. New York and London: Routledge, 1994.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

**Citation:** Chimuka T. Andrea. Review of Ahluwalia, Pal. *Politics and Post-Colonial Theory: African Inflections*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. January, 2002.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5841>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.