



Leela Gandhi. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction: Second Edition.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. xv + 275 pp. \$26.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-17839-6.

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The first edition of Leela Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, published in 1998, was an indispensable guide to a field that, while relatively recently coalescing into a definable approach and discipline, was also engaged in self-reflexive critiques. Now released in a second edition, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (2019) includes a short new preface and an epilogue titled "If This Were a Manifesto for Postcolonial Thinking." The latter is a substantial meditation on developments in the field that asks "what is enduring in postcolonial thinking" (p. xi)—capturing not only a backward look on postcolonial thinking's new interlocutors since the first edition, but also a forward look to what might persist. Given that twenty years has elapsed between the first and second editions, we might turn Gandhi's question back on her introduction to postcolonial theory itself: what endures, and what persists? If the updates to the text consist of a second preface and a new epilogue that bookend the text, to what extent do the original chapters still capture the landscape of the field?

If the goal of the first edition was "'name' postcolonialism," describing its emergence in the academy and "major preoccupations" (p. xiii), the need to name and to situate the field is one that endures—especially for the students and scholars who come to field now, and who might not have

the historical consciousness of the culture wars and debates that animated critical theory in the 1990s. Chapter 1, "After Colonialism," usefully traces the interventions of postcolonial theory to understanding the aftermath of colonialism, and to refusing "the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath" (p. 4). Gandhi reminds us of the psychological and historical dimensions of the aftermath of European colonization, detailing the contributions of Gayatri Spivak, Albert Memmi, Edward Said, Ashis Nandy, Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon, and Homi Bhabha among others.

If this terrain is well trod in other accounts of postcolonialism, Gandhi's second chapter, "Thinking Otherwise: A Brief Intellectual History," contextualizes postcolonial theory's emergence as both an extension of and departure from Marxism, poststructuralism, and Enlightenment philosophies. The chapter begins with the tensions between poststructuralism and postmodernism and Marxism. Gandhi situates this divide in a larger intellectual history, moving us further backward in time: from Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault to Immanuel Kant to René Descartes, concluding with the immense influence of Friedrich Nietzsche in decrying the limits of Western humanism. The importance of sketching the emergence of postcolonial theory from this larger philosophical tradition—and specifically

the critique of the Cartesian theory of epistemological subjectivity—is succinctly summarized by Gandhi: these critiques “hold out the possibility of theorizing a non-coercive relationship or dialogue with the excluded ‘Other’ of Western humanism” (p. 39).

The third chapter, “Postcolonialism and the New Humanities,” traces postcolonialism’s contemporary “oppositional stance against the traditional humanities,” locating its opposition in two related projects: “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). Readers interested in the gap between postcolonial theorizing and social realities will find the second half of the chapter particularly useful its critique of the postcolonial academic, who embodies “the incommensurability between the oppositional stance of postcolonial intellectuals and their co-optation within the very institutions they allegedly critique” (p. 59).

Given Edward Said’s towering role in the development of postcolonial studies, it is not surprising that an entire chapter is devoted to “Edward Said and His Critics.” In chapter 4, Gandhi is less interested in explicating the nuances of his argument than in analyzing *Orientalism*’s canonization, impact, influence, and limitations. Throughout this chapter, Gandhi offers elegant glosses of Said’s work—including and beyond *Orientalism*—and suggests that the limitations of *Orientalism* inhere in its inability “to accommodate the possibility of difference within Oriental discourse” (p. 79). Specifically, Said’s analysis overlooks the way that “Orientalist discourse was strategically available not only to empire but also to its antagonists” and mobilized by writers and others to “critique ... the aggressive capitalism and territorialism of the modern West” (p. 78).

Chapter 5 discusses the relationship between postcolonialism and feminism, noting the “collision and collusion” of the two around “the contentious figure of the ‘third-world woman’” (p. 83). From Sara Suleri to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gandhi’s account in this chapter adequately captures the important critiques of postcolonial feminism in the 1990s; it is in this chapter that the refusal to update the chapters for the second edition is most evident. We learn about Jenny Sharpe’s “recent” book *Allegories of Empire* (1993) and the arguments of “recent critics and historians” like Rosemary Marangoly George (also 1993) (p. 91). Perhaps the War on Terror rehearses rather than complicates many of the insights Gandhi reviews, but an updated version of this chapter might consider the enduring appeal of Spivak’s provocative assessment, quoted also by Gandhi, that “‘White men are saving brown women from brown men’” (p. 94). Finally, the chapter ends with a reference to Mohandas Gandhi’s “radical self-fashioning” that “complicates the authoritative signature of colonial masculinity” (pp. 100-01). Though occupying a small portion of this chapter, the book largely takes an uncomplicated view of Gandhi’s legacy; an updated chapter would profit from the inclusion of the robust debates on Gandhi’s gender and racial politics that have gained traction since the first edition.[1]

On the other hand, in a time of ethno-nationalist resurgence, chapter 6, “Imagining Community: The Question of Nationalism,” remains exceedingly relevant for theorizing both postcolonialism’s account of cultural nationalism and our contemporary moment. From Fanon’s prescient anticipation of the pitfalls of national consciousness to Benedict Anderson’s well-known account of imagined communities, the chapter also historicizes Western antagonism to Third World nationalisms. Chapter 7, “One World: The Vision of Postnationalism,” expands the concerns of the previous chapter to consider “the postcolonial desire for extra- or post-national solidarities” (p. 123). The appeal of postnationalism, Gandhi offers, might

reside in oppositional fatigue, or “the pervasive postcolonial exhaustion with the mantric iteration of the embattled past” (p. 128). It is in this postnationalist setting that the terms “hybridity” and “diaspora” become popular in postcolonial theory, and Gandhi describes the terms’ appeal and limitations alike. The chapter ends on a cautionary note: while a “postnational/postcolonial ethics of hybridity” might offer “a non-violent reading of the colonial past through an emphasis on the mutual transformation of colonizer and colonized,” we ought not to let “the euphoric utopianism of this discourse ... degenerate into a premature political amnesia” (p. 140).

Chapter 8, “Postcolonial Literatures,” describes the centrality of textuality and textual analysis to postcolonial theory, beginning with the important role of literature in the consolidation and expression of colonial power. This chapter addresses several issues that postcolonial studies still grapples with: the language of postcolonial literature, the privileging of the migrant novel, the expectation that postcolonial literatures are necessarily subversive, and the reification of the metropolitan center as the “privileged addressee ... of the romantic postcolonial text” (p. 162). Here again, an update that takes stock of the contemporary conversation in postcolonial theory would be useful. Gandhi concludes the chapter with the assessment that “what postcolonial literature needs is a properly romantic modality; a willingness to critique, ameliorate and build upon the compositions of the colonial aftermath” in order to “envision a transformed and improved future for the postcolonial nation” (p. 166). How would Gandhi, in 2019, respond to David Scott’s more recent account of the utility of tragedy and the temporality of postcolonial aftermath?[2]

Chapter 9, “The Limits of Postcolonial Theory,” is a short chapter that describes postcolonial theory’s tendency to straddle “the politics of structure and totality on the one hand, and the politics of the fragment on the other” (p. 167). Gandhi of-

fers that, in the end, postcolonial theory’s enduring contributions to a more just world include “hold[ing] out the possibility of thinking our way through, and therefore, out of the historical imbalances and cultural inequalities produced by the colonial encounter” (p. 176).

The new epilogue is a departure in form from the rest of the book. Here, in what Gandhi describes as a “Manifesto for Postcolonial Thinking,” she describes postcolonial theory’s critical perspective, which lends itself to “a contemporary philosophy of renunciation, with a unique proposal for uninjured life and noninjurious community” (p. 177). Each subsection ends with a provocative proposal for what postcolonial thinking can offer, ranging from “Postcolonial thinking can present as an ethics of departure” (p. 192) to “Postcolonial thinking is best as an imperfect outlook that remains indefinite, unfinished, and peripatetic” (p. 205). For readers looking for a concise and specific account of the developments in postcolonial theory since 1998, the epilogue demurs to deliver. Instead, Gandhi focuses her account on seven themes that characterize postcolonial thinking: assemblage, injury, exit, ontology, renunciation, ethics, and advice to kings. In the end, each proposal reads intriguingly like a Nietzschean aphorism. If taken in that spirit, the epilogue offers much to debate and to decipher in contemporary arguments about the utility of postcolonial thinking.

To a large extent, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* endures as an important book for contextualizing and historicizing postcolonial theory. Early chapters are especially suitable for the undergraduate classroom for their clear summaries of complex postcolonial concepts, and for the long view of Western philosophy and humanism out of and against which postcolonial theory emerges. Later chapters on postnationalism and postcolonial literatures should appeal to readers with an already firm grasp of postcolonial theory’s history, and the bibliography is indispensable

as a compendium of important theorists not only from the first edition's 1998 moment, but updated to include those writing in the second edition's 2019 present.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Vinay Lal's "Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality" in *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, nos. 1/2 (2000): 105-36. On Gandhi's racial politics, see the 2015 book *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* by Aswin Desai, and in particular chapter 2, "Brown over Black," (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[2]. Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

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