



The
Postcolonial
Biblical
Reader

Edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah



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INTRODUCTION

R. S. Sugirtharajah

This Reader is a natural development from my earlier volume, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (1991). It is complementary to and in some respects engages with, while going beyond, the concerns of the minority hermeneutics introduced there. I hope to bring out at a later date a study of the changes that have occurred in methodological issues, in reading practices, and in the profile of the contributors, between these two publications. This present volume is designed to introduce postcolonialism and its application to biblical studies. While there is a considerable scholarly literature which deals with how other academic disciplines have appropriated postcolonialism into their theoretical universe, there has been a reluctance within theology to embrace the methodological maneuvers of postcolonialism except in the field of biblical studies. Here, there has been a vigorous engagement with postcolonial criticism. This has been in part because of the mobilization of the Bible for modern imperialism, but also because of the pervasive presence of various empires from the Persian to the Roman within the biblical writings. What Adolf Deissmann said of the New Testament, that it is the “book of the imperial age,” could be reworded to include both testaments. This Reader is a sampling of the attempts by biblical scholars to incorporate insights from postcolonial criticism and so take biblical studies beyond their Eurocentric tutelage.

The Reader is coming out at a time when, ominously, there is a rapid rise of colonialism with biblical accompaniments. What we are witnessing now is not only a replay of the nineteenth century and the return of sometimes latent, sometimes patent imperialism, but also the return of the Bible as the textual motor behind the empire, and once again underpinning the imperial vision. We have entered a world with a single superpower in the form of the American administration. Like the colonialism of old, it is not only fueled by a sense of moral virtue, but is also sustained by a biblical vision for the re-ordering of the world’s power-relations. It is here that postcolonialism proves significant. The past entanglements of the Bible with imperialism enable postcolonialism to point out the deeply problematic and pliable nature of biblical texts, and a tainted colonial legacy. At the same time, past

anti-colonial strategies of defiance and struggle with their biblical legitimations offer tools to engage with the new colonizing forces.

This volume brings together both some well-established practitioners of postcolonial criticism and a few scholars who may not call themselves postcolonial but whose work resonates with the preoccupations of postcolonialism. All of them have been affected by one form of empire or another – British, Russian, or American. Some of them have been exiled, or are diasporic, living on and between borders. A few are part of the current empire but sensitive to its predatory nature. Hence their articulations presented here offer a complex of interactions and negotiations. As the reader will note, although these essays were written on different occasions and for different publishing needs, there is a conversation going on among them. This dialogical aspect provides a compelling overview of the nuanced applications of postcolonial criticism to biblical studies. Naturally, there is a certain amount of repetition and overlapping within these essays, and inevitably it is a partial and uneven collection.

The volume is organized and unified around four themes, each of which has its own brief introductory preface. It opens with a selection of essays which deal with the transformative energies of postcolonialism, and how its theoretical maneuvers impinge on biblical studies and on cognate disciplines such as feminist biblical interpretation. The second section, “Empires: Old and New,” addresses the menacing presence of empires both ancient and current, how subject peoples defied it in the past, and how they seek to mobilize against today’s domination. The third section, “Empire and Exegesis,” offers practical examples of how postcolonial criticism is applied to biblical studies and how in the process such an exegesis not only disrupts the nicely finessed Western readings and undermines their claim to universality, but also uncovers the tacit colonial biases within such readings. The last section, “Postcolonial Concerns,” deals with such issues generated by postcoloniality as the importance of translation in the colonial civilizing mission, mistaken recognitions of the other, and the dislocation of people. These four sections are not tightly sealed off compartments, and an essay which is located in one segment might well find itself at home in another.

This volume does not aim to bring resolution to ongoing debates surrounding the profitability or pointlessness of postcolonialism. These debates are so enmeshed in theoretical jargon that it is a daunting task for the uninitiated to decipher them. If the volume succeeds, it will not be in championing or contradicting the theory, but in fostering whatever response is possible in the field of political action. Ultimately, as the late Edward Said made abundantly clear in his writings, political responsibility must take priority over theoretical engagement.

PART I

Theoretical
Practices





INTRODUCTION:

Theoretical Practices

R. S. Sugirtharajah

Biblical studies have often used external sources to illuminate biblical texts. Even historical criticism, allegedly bias-free, has made use of nineteenth-century European cultural traditions. Using its own external sources, postcolonial criticism is a new critical ally in helping to unravel biblical texts.

This section opens with Sugirtharajah's "Charting the Aftermath: A Review of Postcolonial Criticism." His essay offers a conspectus of postcolonialism, with an explanation of the leading concepts encountered in the discourse. This is followed by his account of the emergence of this category in the discussion of theory. In its earlier appearances it was essentially an expression of a moral rejection of imperialism, taking the form of resistant creative writing, following which it entered the academy, becoming an analytic instrument not least among diasporan scholars. His essay also discusses postcolonialism's relation to two significant critical movements of our time – feminism and globalization. The essay more crucially examines the vexed status of the United States of America and its current international standing as it is emerging as a sole superpower.

Fernando Segovia's essay "Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic" interweaves the author's complicated personal history at the receiving end of four distinct forms of imperialism and colonialism, and his own work as a biblical critic, constructive theologian, and cultural critic. In the light of his experience, Segovia concludes that postcolonialism proves to be the "most appropriate, most enlightening and most fruitful" tool. He identifies three postcolonial "optics" – the inescapable and omnipresent reality of the empires which shaped the construction of the texts of Judaism and early Christianity; the colonial impulses which fuel Western interpretation of Jewish and Christian writings, and the emergence of biblical critics from the former empires who are trying to destabilize received readings. The essay concludes with a summary of the advantages of applying postcolonialism to biblical studies.

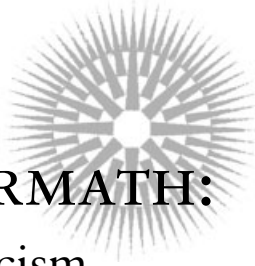
The essay by Kwok Pui-lan, "Making the Connections: Postcolonial Studies and Feminist Biblical Interpretation" focuses on postcolonialism and feminist biblical scholarship. After a brief narration of the emergence of postcolonialism in

biblical studies, she examines the writings of Musa Dube and Gale Yee. She then goes on to show how postcolonialism can open up new avenues for studying gender relations in early Christianity, especially in the Gospels and Pauline writings. Her contention is that by studying how gender, class, and race functioned in the Roman empire one gets a clearer picture of these early Christian texts. The essay ends with a call for cooperation between practitioners of postcolonial feminist criticism and Jewish feminist criticism, in order to avoid the deeply entrenched anti-Semitic elements prevalent in some Christian discourse. These not only dehumanize Jewish people but also lend themselves to a form of colonial ideology. Such a cooperative reading would, in Pui-lan's view, challenge one's bias and "investment in a particular method."

These three essays reinforce the value of using theories and criticism forged outside the biblical field. These enable biblical scholars to ask questions which the traditional discipline failed or was reluctant to address, relating to issues such as sexism, racism, and colonialism, and to engage with wider debates outside the discipline of biblical scholarship.

1

CHARTING THE AFTERMATH: A Review of Postcolonial Criticism



R. S. Sugirtharajah

The colonialist likes neither theory nor theorists.

(Albert Memmi 1990: 136)

We are surrounded by theories. They grow as thick as trees around us, everyday new saplings sprout up among the hoary old veterans.

(*In the Garden Secretly and Other Stories*, Arasanayagam 2000: 87)

Postcolonial studies emerged as a way of engaging with the textual, historical, and cultural articulations of societies disturbed and transformed by the historical reality of colonial presence.¹ In this respect, in its earlier incarnation, postcolonialism was never conceived as a grand theory, but as creative literature and as a resistance discourse emerging in the former colonies of the Western empires. Postcolonialism as a methodological category and as a critical practice followed later. There were two aspects: first, to analyze the diverse strategies by which the colonizers constructed images of the colonized; and second, to study how the colonized themselves made use of and went beyond many of those strategies in order to articulate their identity, self-worth, and empowerment. Postcolonialism has been taking a long historical look at both old and new forms of domination. Its insight lies in understanding how the past informs the present.

As a field of inquiry, postcolonialism is not monolithic but rather a field which provides and caters to a variety of concerns, oppositional stances, and even contradictory positions. Nonetheless, it generates a noticeable theoretical strength. It provides valuable resources for thinking about those social, cultural, political, and historical contexts in which domestication takes place. As a style of inquiry, it emerged more or less simultaneously in a variety of disciplines including Anthropology, Geography, International Studies, History, English, Music, and Medieval Studies. When



used in conjunction with “theory” or “criticism,” the term “postcolonialism” signifies a distinct methodological category and acts as a discursive force. In its reconsideration of colonialism and its aftermath, it draws on poststructuralism, Marxism, cultural studies, linguistics, and literary studies. In its application, postcolonial criticism differs not only from location to location but also from discipline to discipline. In his essay “The Scramble for Post-Colonialism” Stephen Slemon remarks:

“Postcolonialism”, as it is now used in its various fields, describes a remarkably heterogenous set of subject positions, professional fields, and critical enterprises. It has been used as a way of ordering a critique of totalising forms of Western historicism; as a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of “class”; as a subset of both postmodernism and post-structuralism (and conversely, as the condition from which those two structures of cultural logic and cultural critique themselves are seen to emerge); as the name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; as a cultural marker of non-residency for a Third World intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power; as an oppositional form of “reading practice”; and...as the name for a category of “literary” activity which sprang from a new and welcome political energy going on within what used to be called “Commonwealth” literary studies. (Slemon 1994: 16–17)

Postcolonialism is a discipline in which everything is contested, everything is contestable, from the use of terms to the defining of chronological boundaries. Postcolonialism, as one would expect, is a much disputed term. Inevitably it has chronological dimensions attached to it. In popular perception, postcolonialism is seen as a period which began in the 1960s after the demise of formal European colonialism following the struggle for independence waged by the colonized people. The term as used at present is ineluctably tied to modern European imperialism. It does not allow an understanding of colonialism outside modern European colonialism. It is seen as a condition of no longer being what one was, a colony, but as finding a space in the world as a newly independent nation state, and its citizens referred to as postcolonials. In postcolonial discursive practice, several critics contend and recognize that, when it is used with a hyphen, “post-colonial,” the term is seen as indicating the historical period aftermath of colonialism, and without the hyphen, “postcolonial,” as signifying a reactive resistance discourse of the colonized who critically interrogate dominant knowledge systems in order to recover the past from the Western slander and misinformation of the colonial period, and who also continue to interrogate neo-colonizing tendencies after the declaration of independence. It is in this latter sense that the term will be employed in this volume. Homi Bhabha sums up what postcolonial criticism is about:

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries, and the discourses of “minorities” within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories, of nations, races, communities, people. (Bhabha 1994: 171)

As with the case of the other critical category, postmodernism, which is no longer seen as implying a linear progression from modernism, but as a continuum, post-colonialism too is no longer perceived as a chronological progression from colonialism but as a perpetual set of critical possibilities which were already available with the formal advent of modern colonialism. It is an instrument or method of analyzing situations where one social group dominated another.

One of the vexing questions which bedevils the debate is whether to treat post-colonialism as theory or as criticism. If one applies the Foucaultian parameter that theory is “the deduction, on the basis of a number of axioms, of an abstract model applicable to an indefinite number of empirical descriptions,”² then postcolonialism will not fit. Postcolonialism is essentially a style of inquiry, an insight or a perspective, a catalyst, a new way of life. As an inquiry, it instigates and creates possibilities, and provides a platform for the widest possible convergence of critical forces, of multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multicultural voices, to assert their denied rights and rattle the center. It is an assemblage of interests and attitudes and is remarkably productive because it offers a perspective complementing and in some ways transcending the Enlightenment’s modernizing project. As postcolonialism is not a theory in the strict sense of the term, but a collection of critical and conceptual attitudes, an apt description would be to term it criticism. Criticism is not an exact science, but an undertaking of social and political commitment which should not be reduced to or solidified into a dogma. It is always oppositional. Edward Said sees criticism “as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse, its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom” (Said 1991: 29). Put at its simplest, criticism is always contextual; it is paradoxical, secular, and always open to its own contradictions and shortcomings. And, to cite Said again: “I take criticism so seriously as to believe that, even in the very midst of a battle in which one is unmistakably on one side against another, there should be criticism, because there must be critical consciousness if there are to be issues, problems, values, even lives to be fought for” (Said 1991: 28). It is in this sense that “postcolonial” is used in this volume.

The Arrival of Postcolonial Criticism

Theorizing, contrary to popular perception, is not necessarily a Western phenomenon. Writers from the Third World have used abstract logic in narrative forms to intellectualize and analyze art, literature, and theatre. Indians and Chinese have evolved sophisticated and sustained analyses of how meaning is constructed in texts. For instance, Indians have a well-developed system of *śāstra paddhati*, “which employs different interpretative instruments, including philosophy, grammar, etymology, logical reasoning, theory of meaning, and metarules” (Kapoor 1998: 15).³ Similarly, Barbara Christian has noted, people of color have developed their own theorizing, using their experiences of the struggle of everyday life, distinct from the abstract theoretical fashion practiced in the West. Her implication is that theories can arise not only in intellectual and academic institutions: “I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with

language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (Christian 1995: 457). The crucial question is not where theories originate or who owns them but whether they have diagnostic capabilities to promote the cause of the marginalized.

The considerable presence and recognition of postcolonial thinking in Western academia is due to the favorable intellectual environment for the rise of resistance theories in the 1980s. The arrival and acceptance of postcolonialism, especially in the United States, is noticeably different from that of any other minority discourse such as African-American, Chicano, gender, even though these interventionary disciplines share some common political preoccupations and theoretical presuppositions. Ethnic-minority studies were introduced into the US academy as a result of student demonstrations against white institutions which excluded minority cultures from college syllabi and racial minorities from the faculty and student bodies. Postcolonialism, on the other hand, according to Jenny Sharpe, “constitutes an institutional reform from ‘within’” (Sharpe 2000: 108). The text which paved the way was Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, published in 1978. Said defined “Orientalism” as a Western way of “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1985: 3). What was noticeably different about Said’s work was that it was able to establish the connection between the production of academic knowledge and colonialism, which earlier interpreters of the history of ideas failed to acknowledge and expose. The key to power is knowledge, and true power is held with the conviction that the ruler knows better than the ruled, and must convince the ruled that whatever the colonial master does is for the benefit of the ruled. The assumption undergirding this thinking is the belief that “knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control” (Said 1985: 36).

There are other factors, too, that promoted the arrival of postcolonialism. The 1980s saw the emergence of theorizing and literary analysis gaining a fresh lease in the academy. At a time when the socialist experiment advocated by the Soviet bureaucracy failed to produce the expected results, the fortunes of Marxist criticism took a deep dive, and, with the arrival of Reaganism and Thatcherism, a new form of literary analysis arrived on the scene. Reflecting the multicultural mood of the period, these literary analyses and theorizings were irredeemably eclectic, hybridized, and cross-disciplinary in character and in execution. They borrowed critically and fused imaginatively from a variety of disciplines ranging from philosophy, psychology, politics, anthropology, to linguistics (McLeod 2000: 23–4).

Though postcolonial criticism was not minted in the academy, the imprimatur accorded by the guild raised its status and authority. In the current theoretical foundry, the names of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, occupy an important place, and they are generally spoken of as being influential in fomenting the theory. The trouble with such a notion is that none of these writers, however indispensable they are to the theoretical cause, ever set out to be postcolonial in their writings. It was only after postcolonial analysis had reached its momentum that Said, Spivak, and Bhabha were identified and hailed as instigators. The other difficulty with such a narrowing of the list of personalities is that it overlooks anti-colonial liberationist writings which emerged outside the academy long before

they were accorded academic appreciation. They were considered lacking in academic pedigree. These discourses were spearheaded by Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, and Ananda Coomarswamy, who were openly anti-colonial in their writings and praxis. Each in his own way tried to articulate the psychological, cultural, and political damage that European colonialism had inflicted on millions of people. Recently, there is a move to bring others into the postcolonial framework, figures like the African-American W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Cuban José Martí, both intellectuals with socialist leanings, who in their literary and political activities engaged in national emancipation for African-Americans and Cubans, and denounced the global imperial policies of the United States (Cooppan 2000: 1–35).

The articulations of these earlier writers are too extensive to be dealt with here in a way that would do justice to their work. More importantly, they have been analyzed perceptively elsewhere.⁴ But to give a flavor, let me briefly look at the works of two writers, one pre-eminent, the other less so. Frantz Fanon was born in Martinique. He was a psychiatrist and activist who involved himself in the Algerian War of Independence. In his writings, Fanon argued that colonialism instilled deep in the minds of the native population that before its advent their history was dominated by savagery and internecine tribal warfare, and that if the colonialists were to leave they would fall back into “barbarism, degradation and bestiality” (Fanon 1990: 169).⁵ The trick of colonialism, according to Fanon, was to project itself as a mother, but not as a gentle and loving mother who sheltered and steered her child from situations surrounded with hostility, but rather as a mother who reigned over and restrained her wayward child from practicing evil deeds. To put it bluntly, what the colonial mother did was to “protect the child from itself, from its ego, and from its physiology, its biology and its own unhappiness which is its very essence” (Fanon 1990: 170). In other words, for colonialism, it was not merely sufficient for the colonizer to manage the present and the future of the native population, their past also must be rewritten, creating a cultural vacuum:

[C]olonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of a perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (Fanon 1990: 169)

For colonialism the vast continent of Africa was a “haunt of savages”, replete with “superstitions and fanaticisms”, and was held in contempt and cursed by God. Fanon’s answer was to urge Africans to recover their history and reassert their identity and culture. Fanon advocated the reclamation of aspects of the past culture conscious of the fact that an idealized past can be problematic. For him there was no point in reviving “mummified fragments” of the past because, when people are involved in a struggle against colonialism, the significance of the past changes. The aim was not to replace colonial European culture with an uncomplicated, celebratory, and uncritical negro culture (his word). For Fanon, culture and nation are not isolated entities but are at the core of every national and cultural consciousness which develops into an international cosmopolitan consciousness. His work provides

tools for the former colonized to conceptualize and take control of their identities and rectify the falsification and harm done by colonial misrepresentation.

In a list riddled with African personalities, the work that is often overlooked in postcolonial critical thinking is that of a Sri Lankan, Ananda Coomaraswamy. His essays on nationalism were published in 1909, at the height of classical colonialism. He recognized that what was needed more than political and economic freedom was cultural liberation. Anticipating Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Coomaraswamy called for an active decolonizing of the mind:

For this struggle is much more than a political conflict. It is a struggle for spiritual and mental freedom from the domination of an alien ideal. In such a conflict, political and economic victory are but half the battle; for an India, “free in name, but subdued by Europe in her inmost soul” would ill justify the price of freedom. It is not so much the material, as the moral and spiritual subjugation of Indian civilisation that in the end impoverishes humanity. (Coomaraswamy 1909: p.i)

For Coomaraswamy, the regeneration of India had to be expressed in art and spirituality. He spoke about nationalism too, but he saw it as a service and a duty to be undertaken by the subjugated people.

These brief descriptions of Fanon and Coomaraswamy are little more than caricatures, but they point to the significant contribution of their work.

Creative Literature

Unlike metropolitan practitioners of theory who concentrate on representation of the other in colonial history and literature, the liberationist writings of Fanon, Memmi, C. L. R. James, and others like them, were concerned with studying how decolonization destabilized the exotic images fixed within the Western imagination. It is crucial to acknowledge these writers as intellectual antecedents of postcolonial studies, though they cannot be pressed into the service of a simple and single reading of colonialism because, before academic institutions became infatuated with their work and bestowed recognition, their concerns and constituencies were varied and specific.

Along with resistant discourse, creative literature also, which emerged from Commonwealth countries, played a critical role as a precursor to the current postcolonial thinking. Current studies of postcolonial work focus largely on the writings of Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Wole Soyinka, and V.S. Naipaul. One novel which has been overlooked in postcolonial discussion and is relevant to our purpose, is Akiki Nyabongo’s *Africa Answers Back* (Nyabongo 1936).⁶ Its importance lies in the fact that it contains a heady mixture of colonialism and the Bible. The author, a descendant of the Toro kings, was born in Uganda. The novel is autobiographical, and mixes both fact and fabrication, chronicle and memoirs. The story is set in Buganda at the turn of the nineteenth century and spans 50 years. As the title indicates, it is a subversive African tale which talks back to colonial discourse by rupturing and remolding it. The novel reverses a seemingly successful missionary story into a narrative of the empowerment and emancipation of the missionized. The

novel is about the hero, Abala Stanley Mujungu, and his journey of self-discovery as he tries to straddle both the ancient culture his parents want to maintain, and the modern Western culture introduced by the missionary, Hubert, and how the latter transformed Mujungu from being an exemplary mission-school student into an African rebel.

The interesting aspect of the novel, for us, takes place in part III, where the text introduced by the missionary – the Bible, which symbolizes and legitimizes Western culture – comes under a heavy hermeneutical bombardment. Curiously, the Bible, the Englishman's book, loses its authority at the beginning of the novel, when Stanley, the first missionary to Buganda, reads the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea to the King. The King's response is, "Hm, that's just like our story, because when the Gods came from the north they reached the River Kira and the waters stopped flowing, so that they could get across. Isn't it strange that his story and ours should be the same" (Nyabongo 1936: 10). Instead of confronting and dislodging the heathen world, now the "White man's mythology" as the King called it, has a parallel story, to vie with the "heathen" version, for attention and authority. At school, besides the Bible, Mujungu is introduced to other monumental texts of Western literary supremacy, Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* and the works of William Shakespeare. But it is over the Bible that hermeneutical contestations take place. Mujungu, who has acquired the modernist habit of writing and reading, and, more importantly, rational thinking, at a school run by the missionary Hubert, refuses to succumb to interpretations imposed by him, thereby challenging monopoly of the interpretative authority enjoyed by the missionary. The Bible's legitimizing power melts away on two particular occasions.

One such is when Hubert tries to introduce biblical stories to the class, with the condescending attitude that his students will not "grasp the full significance of the White Man's Bible" (Nyabongo 1936: 223). Whatever the story, Jonah, Adam and Eve, or the Virgin Birth, Mujungu continues to question it. He disputes the Jonah story by asking "how could a whale swallow a man whole?" And wonders "how could a man go through so small a throat unharmed?" (Nyabongo 1936: 224). He questions the story of the Creation in Genesis by pointing out that "no woman came from a man's rib". His biggest suspicion is reserved for the story of the Virgin Birth. For him it is a fairy-tale, since it was recorded only by two of the evangelists and in any case it was a biologically impossible feat: "Sir, how could the seed of a man get into the womb of a woman without intercourse?" (Nyabongo 1936: 226). When Hubert tries to get out of the difficulty by saying that Mary had two husbands, God and Joseph, Mujungu's immediate riposte is: "You won't baptize the children of men with two wives, yet John baptized Jesus" (Nyabongo 1936: 226), an obvious reference to the missionary practice of not baptizing Africans engaged in polygamous relationships.

The second occasion is when Mujungu is on holiday, and he reads aloud from the Hebrew Scripture about King Solomon and his 700 wives and 300 concubines, in order to prove to his parents that he has acquired the new skill of reading. Ati, his father and his wives are astonished to find that the practice of polygamy, the very practice condemned elsewhere in the Englishman's book, is approved of here. The book and the missionary are as they see it now exposed for their double standards. After hearing the story read, one of the wives of Ati exclaims: "Ha, ha, your son will

find him out. He can read his books, too! The Reverend Mr. Hubert can't tell us lies any more" (Nyabongo 1936: 207).

The final straw is when Mujungu, deprived of his holidays as a punishment for asking impertinent questions, accompanies the missionary as his interpreter on his visits to different churches. Mujungu uses his experience in the mission school and his knowledge of the Bible to warn his listeners that Hubert's intentions to teach people "the new ways" will result in disrespect to their elders and their culture. Handicapped by not being able to speak the native language, the missionary accepted defeat and announces that further evangelizing mission activities are over (Nyabongo 1936: 234).⁷

Arguing from what he regarded as a commonsensical and rational point of view, Mujungu undermines, if only temporarily, God's word, the English book. Hubert, instead of engaging in dialogue with Mujungu, dismisses him as jeopardizing evangelization and retreats into the safety of authoritative dogma and the missionary homiletical practice of denunciation: "There is no hope for you. You are dangerous to the faith of the rest of the class. I shall pray for you" (Nyabongo 1936: 228). Hubert found that Mujungu had read "too much" and the only way to stop him from further "misreadings" is to ask him to withdraw from the class. It was only by refusing to dialogue with Mujungu, that Hubert managed to maintain his own authority and preempted any further question: "I will not tolerate your talking back to me, as you have just done. I am the master of the school" (Nyabongo 1936: 218–19). The superiority of the Christian text is established through Hubert's assertion of his power as headmaster of the school rather than by cogently presenting its case. Hubert's desire to produce spiritually Christian Africans, even though, as he saw it, they looked like heathens, ends with his decision to make no further converts.

It was the resistant discourse of political activists and imaginative literature by novelists such as Nyabongo which sowed the seeds of the current postcolonial thinking.

The Contours of Postcolonial Criticism

What postcolonialism did was to introduce power and politics into the world of literary criticism in such a way as to expose how some literature, art, and drama were implicitly linked to European colonialism. As indicated earlier, the text which initiated this kind of thinking was Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said 1985).⁸ Though not always consistent, the core proposal of the book was to expose the connection between imperial power and the production of literary and historical traditions. According to John McLeod, this literary analysis manifested itself in three ways (McLeod 2000: 17–29).

First, there was a rereading of Western canonical texts to detect conscious or dormant colonial elements in them. This involved scouring texts, some of which were set in a colonial context, as in the case of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or which, as in the case of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, apparently had nothing to do with colonialism but unwittingly espoused colonialist intentions.

Secondly, literary analysis encouraged critics to search not just literary but other texts such as historical discourses, official documents, missionary reports, to see

how the colonized were represented and how they resisted or accepted colonial values. It was the post-structuralist thought of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan which provided the theoretical impulse here. The critics who were at the forefront were Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and the historians who belonged to the “Subaltern studies” group. Bhabha argued that hybridity and mimicry were strategies forged by the colonized as ways of responding to colonial rule. Hybridity is an “in-between space” in which the colonized translate or undo the binaries imposed by the colonial project: “From the perspective of the ‘in-between’, claims to cultural authenticity and sovereignty – supremacy, autonomy, hierarchy – are less significant ‘values’ than an awareness of the hybrid conditions of inter-cultural exchange” (Bhabha 2000: 139). For Bhabha, the significant characters in Naipaul’s novels are those who, in spite of their defeat and degradation, transgress the conformity enforced by colonialism through mimicry and fusion. Spivak, in her oft-quoted essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” problematizes the difficulties of recovering the voices constructed in colonial texts, especially those of the women, and reads them as potentially insurrectionary (Spivak 1993: 66–111). This unnecessarily complicated essay has to be read in conjunction with the interview with the author in *The Spivak Reader* to get a fuller picture. Her concern is that speaking should not be taken literally as talk. Women did speak, but the problem was with the constrictions placed on translating their speech through the accepted conceptual mindset: “The actual fact of giving utterance is not what I was concerned about. What I was concerned about was that even when one uttered, one was constructed, by a certain kind of psychobiography, so that the utterance itself – this is another side of the argument – would have to be interpreted in the way in which we historically interpret anything” (Landry and Maclean 1996: 291). In other words, the marginalized can make themselves known only in relation to metropolitan conceptual practices. The central aim of those scholars who are involved in the Subaltern Studies project is to rectify the disproportionate space accorded to the interests of the elite in the writings of South Asian history. They redefine subaltern as the non-elite, rural section of Indian society, ranging from destitutes to the upper ranks of the peasantry, and see their task as amplifying the contribution made by “the people *on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite* to the making and development of this nationalism” (Guha 1988: 39; italics in original).

Thirdly, there was literary analysis of literature which emerged from the colonies, as a way of writing back to the center, questioning and challenging colonialist discourses, and in the process producing a new form of representation. The work which pioneered such an analysis was *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989). It opened up the debate surrounding the explosion of powerful and diverse writings especially those emerging from the former Commonwealth countries, their interrelatedness, their politicization, and their use of language as subversion. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin identify four modes of “writing back” – national or regional (reflecting and emphasizing the country’s culture), black writing (by Africans in diaspora), comparative (literatures of the past and present Commonwealth countries which emerge out of shared history), and hybridized or syncretic (eclectic use of theories, histories, forms, and concepts) (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989: 15–37). Despite their different emphases, and variant needs, what binds

these literatures together is their recognition and challenge of the notion of the ruler and the ruled, and the dominating and dominated.⁹

The advent of postcolonial theory in the late 1980s, nearly two decades after the formal ending of territorial colonialism, is indicative of the fact that postcolonial thinking was not a direct critique of colonial devastation. The delay suggests that postcolonialism was an “intellectual symptom” a reaction against the failure of the newly independent nation states to initiate pluralistic democratic structures and environmentally balanced development, to bridge the gap between rich and poor, and meet the needs of indigenous peoples. Postcolonial studies are not simply about what went wrong during colonial days and what went wrong in the anticolonial struggle where gender and class went unnoticed or were subsumed under the nationalist cause, but has also to do with the non-materialization after the euphoria of freedom of greater democracy, justice for indigenous people, and minorities like Dalits and *burakumins*, gender equality and the end of poverty and hunger. The Subaltern Studies initiative is a salient example of this newer approach.

To conclude this section: postcolonial criticism, like the hybridity it celebrates, is itself a product of hybridity. It is an inevitable growth of an interaction between colonizing countries and the colonized. It owes its origin neither to the First nor the Third World, but is a product of the contentious reciprocation between the two.

Clarification of the Lexicon

In postcolonial writing, terms such as “imperialism” and “colonialism” are often lumped together, and tend to be used interchangeably. Edward Said has returned to the standard distinction between the two. In this usage, “the term ‘imperialism’ means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; ‘colonialism’, which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory” (Said 1993: 8). Put differently, imperialism is often taken to mean literally “of empire” and indicates the control exercised by one nation state over another and its inhabitants to exploit and develop the resources of the land, for the benefit of the imperial government. It is often accompanied by an imperial propaganda in the form of ceremonies, coronations, parades, pageants, and military supremacy. Colonialism, on the other hand, implies settlement, but also necessitates controlling and “civilizing” indigenous people. The predatory nature of imperialism, namely acquiring distant territories for economic and political reasons only became unambiguous in the later nineteenth century. Prior to that, empire was seen as a humanitarian enterprise where an amiable form of civilization was pressed upon the hapless and ignoble races. The revival of the Roman empire as a model helped to provide an articulation of the aims of high imperialism. The ideology of the Roman empire consolidated the notion that superior races are entitled to power over savage races because the natives are unruly and incapable of ruling themselves.

The other term which has a high purchase in postcolonial discourse is neo-colonialism. Its first usage was attributed to the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah. “The essence of neo-colonialism”, he wrote, “is that the state which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of inter-

national sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside” (Nkrumah 1965: p.ix). In his view, this was a new form of economic hegemony exercised by former colonizers through international banks and multinational corporations, after territorial freedom had been gained by newly independent countries. Unlike the earlier colonialism, which was visible, the new form of indirect control was much more subtle and less visible. Recently, with the former colonial European countries losing their hold on the international political scene, the term has been transferred to indicate principally the influence and intervention of the United States in the economic and political affairs of the world. In essence, what neo-colonialism means is the inability of the Third World countries to work out an economic policy and strategy without the interference of Western powers, although Nkrumah went on to warn that neo-colonialism was injurious not only to the dominated but also to the dominating countries: “Neo-colonialism is a mill-stone around the necks of the developed countries which practise it. Unless they can rid themselves of it, it will drown them” (Nkrumah 1965: xvi).

Postcolonialism and Biblical Studies

The greatest single aim of postcolonial biblical criticism is to situate colonialism at the center of the Bible and biblical interpretation. What we find in both the historical and the hermeneutical literature of biblical scholarship over the last 400 years is the impact of the Reformation or the Counter-reformation, or the effects of the Enlightenment in defining and shaping the discipline by rationalistic thinking or its offshoot, historical criticism. But there has been a remarkable unwillingness to mention imperialism as shaping the contours of biblical scholarship. What postcolonial biblical criticism does is to focus on the whole issue of expansion, domination, and imperialism as central forces in defining both the biblical narratives and biblical interpretation.

Postcolonial criticism opens up potential areas for biblical studies to work in tandem with other disciplines. Biblical scholars have in other ways been open to trends from elsewhere and have used insights from other disciplines with profit. Postcolonialism’s ongoing battle for emancipation, and continuing attempt to dismantle imperial institutions and dominating structures offers a valuable field for collaboration. The overlapping areas in which biblical scholars can cooperate with the postcolonial agenda include: race, nation, translation, mission, textuality, spirituality, representation. It can also explore plurality, hybridity, and postnationalism, the hallmarks of the postcolonial condition. Related identity categories are undergoing vigorous rethinking, including: slaves, sex-workers, the homosexual/heterosexual divide, people of mixed race. Each of these topics deserves attention, although in this volume, we will confine ourselves to a few of the issues which are critical to biblical interpretation, such as textuality, translation, and diasporic hermeneutics.

Another area where biblical studies could benefit from postcolonial discourse is the place and function of criticism in the contemporary world. What Said says of the American literary scene is equally true of biblical studies. Biblical studies, as in the case of literary studies, is enmeshed in the labyrinth of textuality, and obsessed with

professionalism and specialization: “As it is practised in the American academy today, literary theory has for the most part isolated textuality from the circumstances, the events, the physical senses, that made it possible and render it intelligible as the result of human work” (Said 1991: 4). There are two greater dangers within the field. One is an uncritical acceptance of the principal tenets of the discipline, and the other, its failure to relate it to the society in which its work is done. Biblical studies is still seduced by the modernistic notion of using the rational as a key to open up texts and fails to accept intuition, sentiment, and emotion as a way into the text. By and large, the world of biblical interpretation is detached from the problems of the contemporary world and has become ineffectual because it has failed to challenge the status quo or work for any sort of social change. Recently, feminist and liberation hermeneutics have reacted with increasing impatience to the way mainstream biblical scholarship has detached itself from real social and political issues.

Empire and Theological Reflections

Scholars of biblical studies, or, for that matter, scholars working in the field of theological studies have yet to address the relation between European expansionism and the rise of their own discipline. More importantly, there is yet to be a theological critique of the empire, especially among English theologians. Precisely in the 1960s when the process of decolonization was taking place, Western theologians spent their creative energies addressing issues such as secularization and its impact on Christian faith. They were eloquent in their silence when it came to assessing the role of the West in the colonial domination, the one exception being the British theologian and missiologist, M. A. C. Warren. In his 1955 Reinecker Lectures at the Virginia Theological Seminary, *Caesar the Beloved Enemy*, he acknowledged the link between colonialism and mission, at that time an unusual admission: “Christianity in Asia and Africa is associated with the past political, economic and cultural ‘aggression’ of the West” (Warren 1995: 12). Warren’s contention in the lectures was that the attack on imperialism had been largely misconceived, and one “cannot just dismiss it as ‘an organized selfishness’ or ‘something minted in hell’ ” (Warren 1955: 28). His thesis was that to gain a true knowledge about colonialism one had to look at and appreciate the concrete examples of benefits it brought to the natives, rather than treat imperialism as an abstract notion, which Warren thought was an illegitimate way to study the subject. For him imperialism had to be evaluated theologically, in terms of God’s purpose in history, which, among other things was “to bring mankind to a true knowledge of Himself who is Love, Power and Justice” (Warren 1955: 24).¹⁰ In his view, imperialism could “be the vehicle of great good to a subject people” (Warren 1955: 36), and functioned as a “diffusion of good life” (Warren 1955: 21), and more importantly as “a *preparatio* for God’s good will for the world” (Warren 1955: 28). The imperium was set as the providence of God to establish law and order and to forge unity among people driven by anarchy, by enlarging the idea of neighborhood for all those who came under the wings of the empire. Instead of being a citizen of a tribe, what colonial rule offered was a chance to be a citizen of the world and share in a common culture. He reminded his audience that African culture with its practice of witchcraft, ritual murder, and tribal warfare would not have prepared Africans to

face the modern world. To justify his claim biblically, Warren cited examples from the Hebrew Scripture as evidence of God operating in and through the great concentrations of power exercised by the empires of the ancient world. He also summoned the exegetical comments of Edward Selwyn on 1 Peter 2: 14 about the authority of the emperor and the state. But this concentration of power, in Warren's view, was positively a better alternative than the unruliness which prevailed in the colonies before the introduction of the Roman orderliness. The control and consolidation of power was an instrument to do justice. The role of the empire was teleological. Warren claimed: "It can, I think, be fairly argued that successive imperialisms have made a significant contribution to the realization of the vision of the time when 'the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God as the water covers the sea'" (Warren 1955: 27). Under colonial rule, "love, power and justice have been seen to take shape redeeming some tragic situation" (Warren 1955: 31). Then he went on to claim that "at least, up till today, no other method has been devised for so successfully keeping the peace and making progress possible" (Warren 1955: 28). If there were any fault in the imperial enterprise it was because "imperialism is an activity of fallen humanity" (Warren 1955: 40). Quoting Paul Tillich, Warren also went on to remind the American audience of America's "vocational consciousness," the American dream, "namely to establish the earthly form of the kingdom of God by a new beginning" which was meant first for America alone but now "is meant explicitly for one-half of the world and implicitly for the whole world" (Warren 1955: 30).

Warren echoes the views of those who saw the empire with touching fondness, as the personification of grandeur and as the instigator of civilizing values. It is these facets of imperial glory that Warren wanted to rescue from the clutches of post-colonial revisionism. I have taken time over the work of Warren to reiterate two points. One, that in spite of all atrocities, which he calls aberrations, the empire was a good thing and the other, the notable absence of the empire in English theological reflections. Warren's main thesis is that, despite the involvement of Christian mission with colonialism, its praiseworthy achievements speak for themselves. This view is still prevalent among many who look at missionary activities with nostalgia (Coote 2000: 100). I will come back to this point and try to offer a response in the concluding section. Western theologians have yet to offer a sustained theological analysis of the impact of colonialism. Colonialism has not received anything like as much attention as the Holocaust in recent theological reflection in the West. There is no admission of the place of colonialism in the shaping of English theology.¹¹

Postcolonial Criticism and Cognate Disciplines – Feminism

Some of the critical undertakings pursued by postcolonialism coincide with such liberative movements as feminism. What unites feminist and postcolonial critique is their mutual resistance to any form of oppression – be it patriarchy or colonialism. In their strategies of resistance, both feminist and postcolonial critics are of one accord. They seek to uncover the subjugation of both men and women in colonial texts, and the modes of resistance of the subjugated, and expose the use of gender in both colonial discourse and social reality. In spite of their cordial collaboration, however, there is an in-house debate within the field, which manifests itself in three