POLITICS, POWER, DISCOURSE AND REPRESENTATION: A CRITICAL LOOK AT SAID AND SOME OF HIS CHILDREN

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In his wonderful, award-winning novel entitled Midnight's Children, Salman Rushdie's main character named Saleem Sinai opens the narrative by reflecting on the moment of his birth. He tells the reader that he was born in the city of Bombay at midnight on August 15, 1947 at the precise instant of India's independence. Outside the nursing home of his birth, there are large crowds celebrating the momentous moment as fire works explode in the sky. Saleem humorously confesses:

Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicos ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter. I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate—at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement. And I couldn’t even wipe my own nose at the time (1980: 7).

In a sense Rushdie’s character is calling attention to the moment of transition between the colonial period and the postcolonial era in India.

According to some scholars, colonialism was a time of subjugation by western political powers, whereas postcolonialism is a period during which those formerly subjugated critically respond to their trials. According to Homi K. Bhabha, postcolonial criticism emerges from the former colonial context and testimony of Third World countries. They interrupt and interact with modern ideological discourses that attempt to make the hegemonic interrelations the norm. Moreover, postcolonialists “formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the ‘rationalization’ of modernity” (1994: 171). In addition, postcolonialists examine issues like loss of meaning, hopelessness, and other kinds of social pathology. Finally, postcolonial theory reminds us of the persistent neo-colonial relations with the present (Bhabha 1994: 6).

Adding to points made by Homi, Spivak draws a useful distinction between internal and external colonization. If the latter represents the colonization of other space, internal colonization refers to patterns of exploitation and domination of disenfranchised groups within a country.
like the United States or Britain. Spivak draws another distinction between colonialism and neocolonialism. The former is a European creation stretching from the mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, whereas neocolonialism represents a dominant economic, political, and cultural development in the twentieth century in the aftermath of the disparate dissolution of the territorial empires. Finally, postcolonialism describes the present global condition (Spivak 1994: 172).

If economic interests motivate colonialism, postcolonialism is a result of reaction to and resistance to colonialism and imperialism, which is a deliberately state sponsored policy. By intermingling the past (colonialism) and the present (imperialism), postcolonial theory focuses on the active transformation of the present from the domination of the past (Nandy: 1983; 1987). Besides acts of historical retrieval, postcolonial theory also attempts to dislocate, undermine, and displace western knowledge about the Oriental other. According to Robert Young, the basic presupposition about the operation of postcolonial theory is that “intellectual and cultural traditions developed outside the west constitute a body of knowledge that can be deployed to great effect against the political and cultural hegemony of the west” (2001: 65) In addition to replacing the heritage of colonialism, postcolonial theorists want to also decolonize the West.

In this essay I want to adopt a critical attitude toward the notion of Orientalism as defined by Edward W. Said and two writers of postcolonialism that he inspired. In the first instance, I will briefly review the contribution of Edward W. Said. With regards to postcolonialism, I will review the contributions of Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In addition to the political nature of their work, this paper will focus on problems associated with their methods and especially the issue of representational thinking.

1. Said and Orientalism

As part of his method, Said empties the term “Orientalism” of its previous content and revises it to suggest scholarly work that is unsympathetic and hostile toward Oriental people. If we examine the historical meaning of the term, we find that it represented a school of painting in mostly western Europe, and it was later a branch of scholarship composed mostly of philologist focusing on the recovery, examination, interpretation and publication of original texts. During the summer of 1973, the term was discarded at the Twenty-ninth International Congress of Orientalists