Benjamin Zachariah
(UK)

On not Understanding the Stranger:
Histories, Collective Victimhood and the Futility of Postcolonialism

1.   The Argument

The impetus for this set of reflections on 'understanding the stranger' comes from a sense that the political and academic directions of the last twenty-five or so years have led to the reification of subjectivities, the celebration of 'difference', the insistence on the importance of 'affect' and therefore on 'memory', collective or otherwise. Such trends are epitomised by what this essay refers to as 'postcolonialism'. Postcolonial theorists cannot be held responsible for them, but they often voice the trends in academically respectable language. And since 'postcolonialism' has in recent times been presented as a breakthrough in understanding Otherness and in achieving cultural understanding, this is a commentary on that claim. This essay is therefore an analysis of indirections not conducive to the (proclaimed) goal.

If one has, as I have, been in Germany for the last few years, one is struck by the return of the 'postcolonial'. The postcolonial moment has passed in the Anglo-American world, but this return in Germany has led to an Indian summer in the careers of the stars of postcolonial studies, who dutifully make their way to Berlin in the warm weather, flying first class to the evocatively titled 'Haus der Kulturen der Welt', in an academic version of the film *Sunset Boulevard.*

Postcolonial studies, though its origins are more diverse, and although many of its practitioners dispute its meaning and scope, disclaim many of these origins and even the name itself, can be said to have come into its own in the context of 1980s and 1990s Anglo-American, and initially mainly American, anxieties about race, difference and multicultural societies.[1] In Germany, these anxieties have now come to the fore, and the argument is whether the old debates from postcolonial studies are now relevant in Germany, and therefore that this 'rediscovery' is important, even though it seems to some academics that it is an unnecessary repetition.

The argument I am making is this: postcolonialism is attuned to an agenda of recognising the subjectivities of subject peoples. It also requires the *inheritance* of that subjecthood by succeeding generations, a perpetuation of the role of victim

---

[1] See for example Ahmad 1992; Shohat 1992; Dirlik 1994.

and a perpetuation in collective memory of that understanding of victimhood, for its operation. This makes it unsuited to 'understanding the other' without stereotyping the 'other' either as perpetual victim or perpetual perpetrator, often with oneself in the role of the opposite in the binary. It often reifies and isolates 'cultures' in terms of *a priori* collectivities, gives voice to those who claim a continuity with 'communities' (and therefore 'cultures') that have been historically victims of persecution, and delegitimises those from 'perpetrator communities' (heterosexual, white, male, middle class etc) unless they choose to claim a voice by identifying with the victim communities (while at the same time acknowledging their own – inherited – historic complicity in the victimhood of the victim communities).

How does one identify 'victimhood' in this sense? The claim to victimhood has to be made collectively, and most often nationally, even when gestures of solidarity with other groups, oppressed by definition, are made.[2] This is connected with another question: who is to give voice to victimhood? Once it is, for instance, agreed that the voiceless need to have a voice, and this has to be given to them by a representative, what qualifies one person as opposed to another to provide that voice?[3] Most often it is the myth of common national origins that implicitly provides that voice, making non-nationals vicarious nationalists who choose to identify with the victims, or reducing them to illegitimacy, for the legitimacy to speak comes not from any quality intrinsic to the argument but from the legitimacy of a *vicarious victimhood of identification*.

This leads to what I call the *politics of comparative victimhood*: a politics that is contested in terms of history, memory and (compulsory?) belonging. This is particularly important in my own academic discipline: as historians are increasingly asked to serve the function of endorsing or at least respecting (and therefore being reticent about challenging) collective memory, the question as to what political and social roles they are to play, or indeed to seek to avoid playing, comes to the forefront. This is especially the case when historians are confronted with questions of victimhood and suffering, and are forced to negotiate a role or space between the subjectivities of various lived experiences of suffering, and the multiple appropriations, sometimes instrumental, of such suffering. Although much work has been done on the importance of collective memory and of memorialisation in the construction of lives and of communities, it is apparently collective memory narrated *as history* that has a greater legitimating function than mere collective memory; and the historian is therefore a 'site of memory' that is particularly legitimating.[4]

There is also an *asymmetry of recognition* that is shaped by this. Only victims and their inheritors, it would seem, have subjectivities that are relevant; perpetrators and their inheritors do not. So the way of gaining recognition of a subjectiv-

---

2 Bhabha 1995 [1994].
3 Spivak 1988.
4 Nora 1989; Nora's comment about historians as custodians of, and consequently sites of, collective memory, appears on p. 7.

ity is to be able to claim, at least partially, a form of victimhood. Without this – although it is perfectly possible to imagine a perpetrator subjectivity that claims to be relevant because of its subjectivity – the subjectivity is illegitimate. Meanwhile, a worldview composed of separate and reified subjectivities are not conducive to 'understanding the stranger' – at best, uneasy toleration can be achieved.

No small surprise, then, that the route to legitimation for other groups seeking recognition of their subjectivities is the claiming of victimhood – for example, *die Vertriebenen*, or the 'German' inheritors of the Dresden bombings, and so on – for whom the idea of Germans as a perpetrator *Volk* responsible for the atrocities of the Third Reich has to be tempered by the idea that Germans were also, at least sometimes, victims. Both a 'traditional' left, which sees these issues as ones for right wing fringe movements and neo-Nazis, and the new identitarian precon-scious-postcolonial-left has no good rebuttal for these arguments. They seek instead to return these claims to sectional and partial ('German') victimhood to their larger ('German') framework of collective guilt: *'Oma, halt's Maul'*, as the poster reads, also reminding us of the fact that this German guilt is now in the third and perhaps fourth generation. The fact that this implicitly reifies a *negative-nationalism-in-German-collective-guilt* – imprisoning the argument in a frame-work of competing subjectivities that cannot be resolved – is ignored, and often deliberately so. This example problematises one of the central assumptions of post-colonial argument in that it is about contestations within an already-reified-and-unified subjectivity: 'German' (and this is not problematised as a category).

It is usually taken for granted in all of this that the 'stranger' is the disem-powered rather than the empowered, which of course is politically accurate but discursively inaccurate. As the spokespersons for the 'stranger' demand, and achieve, recognition for the strangers' subjectivities, their 'cultures' can be treated with respect even as it is *a condition of this cultural recognition that the strangers remain politically disempowered*. Otherwise the legitimation through victimhood ceases to function. It is, however, important that the *spokespersons* for these sub-jectivities remain empowered – and they remain empowered only insofar as those they speak for remain disempowered.

But at the same time, attempts to break up the collectivity either of victim-hood or perpetrator, are met by a structure of argument that has incorporated indi-viduals and sub-collectivities (defined from the perspective of an already-reified collectivity) into that wider collectivity. Who has the right not to belong to 'their' culture? How does one identify 'one's own' culture? If I, as a 'Muslim woman', swim naked, am I abandoning 'my' culture, and if you, as a person *von den neuen Bundesländern,* also do so, are you asserting 'your' cultural rights, in the face of (for instance) West German cultural imperialism?

2.   States and Values

It is of course easy to forget that these debates are staged by, and in, actually existing states that assume the right to adjudicate on these matters, at the same time as they pretend not to have cultural or values-based assumptions of their own. The state allegedly is forced to tolerate (others') intolerance in the name of a liberalism or pluralism phrased in universalist terms of cultural rights for all, and to s urrender allegedly progressive principles in the name of diversity and (others') 'culture', rather than imposing a supposed *Leitkultur*; states are reluctant to make explicit their implicit assumptions about belonging and non-belonging in a world of increasingly diverse populations. Cultural claims are also made upon the state and via the state; it is states' recognitions of claims to 'culture' that make cultures effectively exist. For without that recognition, and its concomitant reification, it is unclear what constitutes a 'culture' and its practitioners (in the example just quoted, without the pre-existing categories in which the two individuals are placed, we would just have two people swimming naked).

Groups with particularist and communitarian values might make (their own) culturalist claims to being more progressive and more inclusive than their competitors', thereby justifying (their own) intolerance in the name of liberalism, tolerance, secularism, etc, and seeking to have these adopted by the state. In some cases, then, the case for defending pluralism allegedly *becomes* a case for defending a community of faith or 'values', whether this faith is called 'tolerance' or 'culture' or 'liberalism', or the 'Hindu way of life', allegedly more tolerant and 'secular' than other available ideologies.[5]

Examples that come readily to mind include, for instance, the allegedly tolerant Dutch state's ability to justify stigmatising 'Muslims' on the grounds of Islam's alleged intolerance of homosexuality or its mistreatment of women. The pattern is of course discernible in several public debates about the necessity of anti-terrorist legislation in 'democracies': 'our values' include respect for the due process of law, but anything from preventive detention to torture has been discussed in terms of the exceptional threat posed by those who threaten 'our values'. Opponents point out how these values are also under threat if they can be seen not to apply to potential 'terrorists' or outsiders, who in a circular argument are the one because they are the other. Such arguments have been so all-pervasive in recent times that it is useless to pretend that current discussions are untouched by them.

Inclusion, then, and the (often merely apparent) absence of markers of 'values'-based qualification to belonging within a state, can themselves be (presented as) 'values'. Such a state can define its exclusions in terms of *excluding those who would otherwise do the excluding:* even apparently unobjectionable principles such as 'freedom of speech' (most often defended in principle even as they are

---

[5] The dilemma I have outlined here is also central to Phillips 2007: see especially pp. 1-9. Her solutions are different from mine. She also distinguishes between 'culture' on the one hand, and 'religion', 'race', 'ethnicity' etc. on the other, which categories are often collapsed into the category 'culture'. This work also suffers from the assumption that it is states who should adjudicate amongst cultures by attempting to create a 'multiculturalism' without 'culture', in which model states do not themselves have, or ought not to have (dominant or implicit) cultures.

constrained or mutilated by states) are 'values'. It is *also* perfectly possible to imagine an *exclusionary and secular democratic* state: a 'confessional state', in an extended sense of the term, where the right to be a full member of that state requires conformity with a set of values that are often merely implicit.

The allegedly inclusive state (which is what most states try to claim they are), then, prefers to operate without claiming an explicit 'culture'; groups within it, almost by definition 'minorities', are allowed to have them, and indeed, have 'culture' thrust upon them, in a paradoxical move of inclusion that marks them in that act of inclusion as exceptional.

3.   Definitions, Descriptions

What, then, is 'postcolonialism', that which I have claimed epitomises these trends? Broadly speaking, no one can agree whether it is a chronological or an epistemological position. It seeks to 'deconstruct' Eurocentric modes of reading and writing history, whether explicit or implicit.[6] Its engagements tend to be 'cultural', related to the sensibilities and subjectivities of the colonised in their encounter with colonialism; 'identity' and 'difference' are thus central themes to be studied.[7] It refers also to 'going beyond' colonial modes of power/knowledge relations, in which 'the tension between the epistemological and the chronological is not disabling but productive'.[8] But it tends to reify and freeze, rather antihistorically, the allegedly 'colonial'.

Postcolonialism draws upon an eclectic series of theoretical interventions in the social sciences and in philosophy, and it often does so unsystematically, in an allusive and elusive manner. At its best, it engages politically where it discerns a need, using theory to legitimately claim an academic space from which to make a political intervention. Here, postcolonialism needs to distinguish itself from postmodernism, which is generally seen as being in favour of a multiplicity of readings of 'texts', and is often agnostic about truth-claims.[9] Postcolonialism, as it uses many of the tools of postmodernism to expose the complicity of dominant dis-

---

[6] 'Deconstruction' came into postcolonial theory from Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, translated into English by Gayatri Spivak, considered one of the main theorists of 'the postcolonial'. Derrida 1976.

[7] Some commentators nevertheless claim, standing against the 'cultural turn', that the term 'postcolonial' grew out of an engagement with the problems of conceptualising the economic and political aftermath of formal colonialism that nonetheless saw a continuation of imperial control by other means. This is part of a longer debate within postcolonial history of the place of Marxist and materialist readings of history within the concerns of postcolonialism. See Ahmad, 1995.

[8] Hall 1996: 254.

[9] Thus, the contention, provided by Michel Foucault, that there are always contending regimes of truth, is inadequate for the purposes of postcolonialism – Foucault 1980. Again, there is no consensus on what 'postmodernism' really is, and the label is disavowed by most of the thinkers associated with it. There is by now a readily recognised set of characteristics attributed to it by outsiders who know they are outside.

courses with oppressive (power/knowledge or political) regimes, but being interested in making interventions with political implications, cannot afford quite the same level of agnosticism.

Postcolonialism, thus, is an indisciplined interdisciplinarity; its borrowings are eclectic, sometimes playful: it uses poststructuralism, anthropology, critical theory, literary criticism, heterodox Marxism (somewhat guiltily), psychoanalysis, semiotics, feminist theory... It is often difficult to ground the theoretical basis of a particular intervention in specific statements by any particular thinkers. The *mood* is what counts, and the theory is often a kind of received common sense, for which the sources are by now forgotten.

Critiques of postcolonialism are inherent in the field of postcolonialism, and critics who engage with the field are, whether they like it or not, incorporated into the field. Postcolonialism is therefore to some extent the victim of its own success: if we are all postcolonial now, a counter-hegemonic project has succeeded, at least within academia (outside academia is quite another matter).[10] Thus, sceptics or opponents find themselves implicated in the terminological constellations of the 'postcolonial', of 'subalternity', and so on, with the consequence that they are part of the legitimating frameworks they seek to problematise. One could argue that the successes of postcolonialism in public arenas outside the academic world are based on a partial and formulaic engagement with the more academic debates, and make their appearance mainly as various politically correct formulations – which is still an improvement, as it has discredited certain forms of racism, sexism and cultural discrimination as forms of publicly acceptable behaviour.

Having said that – and the impetus for this essay comes at least in part from the similarities of the academic and non-academic versions – there are certain characteristics of the academic debates that have found their way into public debates on inclusion, representation, and 'culture' more generally. Central debates often hinge not so much upon the nature of the speaker's or writer's political engagements, but of the speaker's or writer's identitarian markers, with the result that positioning oneself in an identitarian manner sometimes becomes central to an argument: are you a Jew or a woman, or are you able to say 'shoah' and 'nakba' in the same breath? This of course can be seen as a logical and legitimate consequence of the death of 'objectivity': we are all interested parties, the personal is political, and our emotional cathexes are integral to our utterances;[11] but there is a tendency for the structure of arguments to reduce speakers or writers to their origins, in a manner reminiscent of forms of stereotyping and essentialisation that, it has been argued, are a feature of colonial thought.

It must also be said that postcolonial theorists are very keen on writing their own histories and their own genealogies, in a kind of self-monumentalisation as

---

[10] On the potential divergences, see Said 1997 [1981], still quite relevant today.

[11] The phrase 'emotional cathexes' is the phrase used in the English translation of Freud (1974) [1915-17].

sites of memory for the downtrodden.[12] In such writings, the arguments put forward in this essay are often strenuously opposed. Since no one person holds any of the positions that can be attributed to a *mood*, the denials and rejoinders are welcome, although in most cases what they do is retreat from some of the corollaries of their theories with which they are not entirely comfortable. It is necessary, therefore, to attempt historically to situate the trajectories of some of these theories.

4.   A Case Study: The Fate of *Subaltern Studies*

It is now so ingrained in hearts and minds that *Subaltern Studies* (*SS* for short) was at the vanguard of the postcolonialism wave that it comes as a surprise for those who came in late to learn that *SS* in its origins was actually a late wave of the 'history from below' movement of the 1960s and '70s. Its models were the British Marxist historians, notably EP Thompson, a man quite hostile to 'theory'.[13] *SS*'s main theoretical engagement was with a heterodox Marxism, in particular following Antonio Gramsci.[14] What follows is a study of an intellectual current that started off attempting to 'recover the voices' of the 'subaltern', a term that loosely meant 'non-elite' and therefore was the acknowledged Other or stranger to the historian's alleged Self, to a reduction of the 'subaltern' to a cultural symbol that legitimated the historian as its cultural spokesman even as it ceased to be considered by its self-appointed representatives as a real person.

The most important work to come out of the early period of *SS* was a set of critiques of the colonial archive, notably on how subsequent historians of divergent ideological persuasion were in danger of reproducing the assumptions of the colonial state.[15] There was also a strong intervention on the allegedly incomplete development of the Indian working class[16] – emerging from the 'mode of production debate' of the 1970s: was there an incomplete transition to capitalism in a colony or an ex-colony, contrary to Karl Marx's formulation that colonial rule would inadvertently be progressive, because it would destroy the 'Asiatic mode of production', static and village-based; was there indeed an 'Asiatic mode of production' that survived?[17] These concerns were also part of a cluster of concerns with peasant societies, the potential of peasants to become the social basis for revolutionary or socialist regimes, that emerged around and during the Vietnam War and the Chinese

---

[12] Prakash 1990; Prakash 1994; Chakrabarty 2002; etc. Morris 2010 is among the latest monumentalising efforts.

[13] See Thompson (1995) [1978], his long polemic against Louis Althusser. On Thompson's importance to *SS*, see Sumit Sarkar, 'The Relevance of EP Thompson', and 'The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies', for his understanding of the changes – for the worse – in the *SS* project – both in Sarkar 1997, pp. 50-81 and 82-108 respectively.

[14] Arnold 1984, pp.155-177; Gramsci 1971.

[15] Guha 1983; Amin 1987; Pandey 1990.

[16] Chakrabarty 1989.

[17] Dunn 1982.

Cultural Revolution, with which left wing intellectuals engaged closely in the 1960s and 1970s;[18] they thus amounted to a sort of radical-developmentalism-and-its-alternatives approach. Dipesh Chakrabarty postulated an 'incomplete transition' to capitalism because the Indian worker's 'mentality' was still pre-capitalist; rural loyalties and 'communal' (religious) consciousness remained central to his being.[19] Chakrabarty was then very much a part of what he would later criticise as the theory of the not-yet, of India and the 'non-west' more generally being seen by the standards of 'western' history as incomplete, as in the 'waiting room of history'.[20]

One of the points of continuity from this early phase to the later phases of *SS* can be said to be an investment in the 'national' – although *SS* claimed to be challenging elite and top-down views of a national elite directing the masses, and of most communist narratives similarly showing the party leading the people. It also challenged what it saw as neo-imperialist readings of imperial rule providing progress and modernity, leading to a modern nation-state. Allegedly following Gramsci, *SS* sought to understand peasant consciousness; it also set out to find popular versions of the 'nation', and popular contributions to 'nationalism' – expecting to find this.[21] That there was no popular version of the nation was discomforting. Gramsci's idea of a 'passive revolution', however, proved important in that it seemed to explain the top-down nature of the Indian state and the inadequate development of a national-popular consciousness, in which the limited participation of the 'masses' in revolutionary activity led to the continuation of pre-independence institutions and elites rather than their displacement in the new, non-revolutionary order.[22] As we shall see, this concern with nationalism among *SS* scholars who never quite succeeded in abandoning national frameworks of analysis, provided something of a justification for the subalternists' claim to the right to speak for the subaltern.[23]

Early *SS* was often criticised for not being adequately theoretically oriented – a charge that in retrospect seems strange indeed. Gayatri Spivak entered the project in Volumes IV and V, published in 1985 and 1987.[24] The following year, she published the now iconic 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', addressing the problem of representation as a problem of the historian appropriating the experience of someone else and rendering it in the language of history. Thus the subaltern could not speak – in the language of history – except when spoken for, which mediation

---

[18] Guha 1983; Shanin 1971; the *Journal of Peasant Studies;* see Bernstein and Byres 2001.

[19] Chakrabarty 1989, where he sought a model of a working class in Marx's theoretical writing, in *Capital* rather than in his historical writings, say the *18th Brumaire*. (A surprising absence from these debates were the writings of Mao Zedong, especially as some of the *SS* collective were practising Maoists before they were academics).

[20] Chakrabarty 1992, pp. 1-26; recycled eight years later as Chapter One of Chakrabarty (2000) pp. 27-46, when the argument proposed had few, if any, opponents.

[21] Guha 1982.

[22] Chatterjee 1986.

[23] I have made this argument in more detail elsewhere: see Zachariah 2008.

[24] Spivak 1985; Spivak 1987.

made the project of the 'recovery' of subaltern voices impossible. Subalternity, in Spivak's reading, was a pure state of voicelessness, and her idealtypical subaltern was a woman. Her statement that the speaking for colonised women was a way in which the coloniser legitimated his role was also central to one of her central lines of argument – 'white man saves brown woman from brown man' was her pithy summary of the claim.[25] Which of course left open the question why 'brown elite woman' speaking for 'brown subaltern woman' was a more legitimate form of representation.

In Partha Chatterjee's coinage of the possibility of the 'subalternity of an elite', a relational rather than an absolute subalternity was established.[26] The (dis)advantage of this turn of phrase was that it potentially enabled the rendering of elites as victims of colonialism, obscuring their own role as oppressors (although this is not necessarily the way he meant the phrase). This is a non-problem if one insists on the *relationality* of the category 'subaltern'; but gradually, 'subaltern' as a term seemed to lose anything like a stable meaning as programmatic statement followed programmatic statement among the protagonists of the movement that were prone to programmatic statements, in all of which the 'subaltern' took different shapes.[27] Some critics pointed out that 'subaltern' was Gramsci's term used to avoid the Fascist censors, and it made no sense that *SS* used it without the need to hide their politics. But the term served them well after their Marxism had been underplayed, disavowed or forgotten. 'Subaltern' became a shorthand for all the oppressed , for peasants, for non-westerners, and thus was blurred, imprecise, a literary device, a metaphor or metonymy, etc.

The peasant acts here as a shorthand for all the seemingly nonmodern, rural, nonsecular relationships and life practices that constantly leave their imprint on the lives of even the elites in India and on their institutions of government. The peasant stands for all that is not bourgeois (in a European sense) in Indian capitalism and modernity.[28]

It is unnecessary, for the purposes of this essay, to map the journey of 'subaltern' from peasant to symbol;[29] nor is it necessary to try and trace exactly when the decentring of elite narratives gave way to the centring of the subalternist as spokesman for the subaltern (variously construed), with the subalternist-symbolic-subaltern combination taking on the 'Western'. It might also be noted in passing that History itself, in some readings, was abandoned as a sort of Western, post-

---

[25] Spivak 1988.

[26] Chatterjee 1993, p. 37.

[27] Reviewers have pointed out that despite *SS'*s claims to being a movement or a school of thought, many writers who have published under its banner have made no programmatic claims.

[28] Chakrabarty 2000, p. 11.

[29] For a recent non-subalternist narrative of this kind, see Ludden 2001.

enlightenment form of discrimination,[30] and other forms of reading the past had been anointed as co-equal ways of seeing: 'I take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human, and think from the assumption that the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits.'[31] It might instead be noted that a project of understanding 'subaltern consciousness' – understanding the subaltern who was, initially, the stranger, the Other – gave way to a self-evident appropriation of the right to represent that Other as a sort of extension of the Self, against a new Other. The implicit subjecthood and nationalisation of that new Self against an increasingly 'Western' Other – whether that 'West' lay in 'discourse' or elsewhere – needs to be noted here.

SS's coupling with 'postcolonialism' was announced in a monumentalising publishing venture a mere six years into the *SS* project: *Selected Subaltern Studies* in 1988, with an introduction by Spivak that had initially been a part of *SS IV*, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography',[32] and a foreword by Edward W Said attesting to the importance of the project.[33] Ranajit Guha edited a *Subaltern Studies Reader* in 1997,[34] and subsequent publications by members of the collective have kept the brand-name alive. In many ways, *SS* and 'postcolonialism' were separate developments that moved closer in mutual recognition. *SS* had Gramsci; Said himself used Gramsci and Foucault in his similarly iconic *Orientalism* (1978);[35] *SS* followed.

Said's *Orientalism* described a strategy of representation: the Orient did not exist as such, but was a creation of the 'west' that was in need of a strong Other to define itself; the orient, passive, decadent, feminine, was what the occident, active, vigorous, virile, was not. Thus, Orientalism was a form of power/knowledge that enabled the imperial endeavour to succeed.[36] Said chose to use the term despite the fact that it referred already to a set of scholarly endeavours as well as to a political position among colonial administrators in colonial India (i.e. those who opposed the imposition of European principles of governance and society on India and preferred to govern in an 'Oriental' manner); he therefore used the term in an extended way.[37] Said could, as later debates in which he participated confirm, be accused of 'occidentalism' in that he flattened the 'west' into an unproblematic and relatively monolithic set of discourses (it is not really a place).[38] This is nowhere more evident than in his tracing 'western' discourses about the 'east' back to ancient Greece, which is only possible by accepting European myths of its own origins that make

---

[30] Chakrabarty 1992.
[31] Chakrabarty 2000, p. 16.
[32] Spivak 1988a.
[33] Said 1988.
[34] Guha 1997.
[35] Said 1978.
[36] Said 1978.
[37] See e.g. Mukherjee 1987; Moir and Zastoupil 1999.
[38] Ahmad 1992 summarises some of these debates.

Greece 'western' and 'European' – as the *Black Athena* debates soon afterwards were to underline.[39]

But Said is symptomatic of a quest for a voice that decentres – 'provincialis-es' in currently fashionable terms – Europe, or at least the Eurocentric imagination. This Eurocentric imagination is not peculiar to Europeans, the argument goes, but could be internalised by the colonised. Said's own work is in many ways a rebellion against his colonial education – his *Culture and Imperialism* seeks to demonstrate how the classic texts of the European canon are complicit in imperialism.[40] Said's doctoral student, Gauri Vishwanathan, showed how English literature as a discipline that glorified the English and Englishness developed in the colonies rather than the metropole.[41] The importance of the rediscovery of earlier anticolonial voices that wrestled with the internal coloniser needs to be pointed out in this context: Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, Steve Biko, or Ngugi wa Thiongo, the artiste formerly known as James Ngugi.[42] The reference to a period of self-strengthening, of the acquisition of cultural self-confidence among the dispossessed before they can *regard themselves* as equals, is common to these texts. Among the dangers that attend this process is the risk of seeking the authentically 'indigenous'. And as with many stage-ist arguments – another one being the Marxist argument that 'national liberation' must precede 'socialism' for the colonies – we all seem to be stuck in the immediate stage and never succeed in proceeding to the next one. The discursive contest continues; 'we' wrest the right to write 'our' 'histories' (or to tell our pasts differently) from 'them'; 'they' are no longer the possessors of Universal truths.[43] What next?

5.   The Potential Cultural Subjectivity of Occidental Civilisation

No single intellectual or academic would accept the charge that their writing has produced a valorisation of 'authenticity', a freezing and reification of identities, an imprisonment of the individual in a pre-defined collectivity and her surrender to the authority of self-proclaimed custodians of 'culture' and 'tradition', recognised as such by states and governments. But indeed, this is what appears to have happened. The theorist identified with a new postcolonial canon who has consistently resisted the search for the 'indigenous' has been Homi Bhabha; his insistence on the 'hybridity', the 'in-between-ness' and 'fluidity' of human experiences, and his search

---

[39] Bernal 1991; the debate thereafter is too long to summarise, but see for instance Berlinerblau 1999; Bernal 2001.

[40] Said 1994 [1993].

[41] Vishwanathan 1990.

[42] See e.g. Fanon 1967 [1952]; Fanon 1967a [1961]; Cesaire 1972 [1955]; Senghor 1970, pp. 179-92 [1964]; Ngugi 1967; Biko 1979 [1969-78].

[43] See Guha 1997, pp. 152-214; and Guha 2002, for a remarkable continuity of concerns.

for comparable examples in other contexts, however, have not led him or his readers out of the framework of seeking the subjective experiences of fellow victims.[44]

But the claiming of a privileged position as (post)colonised to (re)present the subjectivities of one's fellow downtrodden subjects (and how downtrodden do you have to be to become a professor at a leading university?) requires an identification that is as uncertain as that mentioned above of the inheritor of the perpetrator community identifying with the victim community and writing from that perspective.

It has of course not escaped the notice of the representatives that this project of representation, and at times only this, is in danger of becoming the 'project' of postcolonial historiography or postcolonial theory: '… a certain postcolonial subject had … been recoding the colonial subject and appropriating the Native Informant's position.'[45] 'We cannot fight imperialism by perpetuating a "new orientalism".[46] However, a trend set in motion is difficult to arrest – the notoriously autonomous text, perhaps? And is it possible to draw back from the implications of the project without surrendering the cultural authority that has been won for oneself, and is sustained, by that project?

There is also the question of whom one is addressing. If the point of the non-universality of 'Western' thought and the disarming of its claim to being universal has to be made, the question of audience is central: such battles belong in newspaper offices, in schools, in first-year teaching and in public fora rather than in scholarly journals and monographs, or recycled essays from scholarly monographs in scholarly books; and accessibility and communicative skills are very important. It is also important not to have to rely centrally on the authority, say, as an 'Indian', to speak for 'Indian' pasts to the listener. And increasingly, it appears that some speakers claim that authority by virtue of their own alleged authenticity, ultimately derived from their privileged access to the 'indigenous'. This is myth-making; and it is obscurantist.

Moreover, the acknowledgement of diversity, plurality, and a multiplicity of voices is now considered common sense; it is 'difference' rather than similarity that is assumed when two people (visually?) not of the same 'culture' come face to face. This is differently problematic; it is a semi-coercive assumption of alterity that produces conversations in which one assumes that the 'stranger' does not speak one's language.

And as to the dangers of universalistic claims that yield an oppressive cultural imperialism when left unquestioned: it is not by continuing to assert the universality of 'Western' thought and therefore the right of the 'West' to export its values by force to a reluctant world that must be administered the painful cure to an illness it is ignorant of that a new right wing operates; it is by *acknowledging* diversity and difference and by fighting that diversity in the name of the *right* of

---

[44] Bhabha 1995 [1994]; Bhabha 1995a [1994].
[45] Spivak 1999, p. ix.
[46] Spivak 1993, p. 277.

the 'West', self-proclaimedly *particular* rather than universal, to *impose* itself on its Others – as a matter of *survival*. Samuel Huntington's notorious 'clash of civilisations' argument identifies several 'cultures', among them the 'western', whose contending subjectivities must battle for survival, and he therefore argues that the 'west' must defend itself or be destroyed.[47] So the decentring of the 'Western' claim to universalism and to a monopoly of standards of 'progress', 'modernity', 'rationality', etc. has arguably created a new situation in which, shorn of such universalist pretensions, 'Western man' must defend his subjectivity – and his potential loss of power and therefore his own (potential) victimhood – in the same way as the Native American (or the First Nations), or the Chinese, or the 'Islamic', civilisations, have to. In another book, which incidentally was extremely well-received in India, entitled *Who Are We?*, Huntington argued that 'western' culture did not require being born 'western', merely an acceptance of 'western' values.[48] But he did argue that this culture would have to be defended resolutely against the cultural relativism of our times – other cultures would similarly defend themselves in their own territories. (Huntington expects 'civilisations' to behave like states, and consequently to make war on other civilisations that presumably would also organise themselves like or as states.) It may be assumed that many Indian readers were less than concerned with the contours or boundaries of Huntington's 'Western' culture, but were enthusiastic about the justification of defending a 'culture' in its 'place': was this to be read as a theory providing the opportunity, allegedly long denied to an Indian 'majority' by a 'secular' and 'pro-minorities' Constitution, to legitimise a *völkisch* nationalism of the kind that ideologues of a Hindu state had begun to conceptualise from the 1920s? Huntington's is a nearly-classical postcolonial argument, in many senses; he has only to establish the victimhood, actual or impending, of the 'west', to perfect it. This he tries to do.

6.   By Way of Conclusion

Those among the readers of this essay who have been watching the footnotes will have noticed that the bulk of the debates I have referred to as significant or formative occurred in the early 1990s, which makes them nearing their twentieth anniversary. To my mind, the debates have not changed much over the years, although the *terminology* of the postcolonial interventions have acquired a certain currency and legitimacy, in particular, the term 'subaltern'.

    And although there is now a tendency to think of them as conducive to enabling an understanding the (post)colonial Other by the (post)colonising Self, or by analogous victims by perpetrators – hence the eager eavesdropping on these past debates in the (for instance German) present – postcolonialism was in the first instance a model of *conflict*, a challenge to the right of the (post)coloniser to contin-

---

[47] Huntington 1996.
[48] Huntington 2004.

ue to represent the (post)colonial subject as if s/he did not have a voice. (In fact, we may note in parentheses that many of the challenges posed to postcolonial theory and theorists came from a position that claimed a *different axis of confrontation* – the argument was that internal conflicts among the (post)colonised, for instance on 'class' lines, were being brushed under the carpet, and a form of unproblematic and unified 'identity' of the postcolonial was being celebrated instead.)

The way out of this conflict between (post)coloniser and (post)colonised, in what we have already described as an *asymmetrical* model for 'understanding the stranger', was for the (post)coloniser to shed some of the burden of her inheritance of historic-guilt-as-perpetrator by *accepting the subjectivities of the (post)colonised.* This was a sort of vicarious redressal of grievances, an academic versions of state apologies and reparations for alleged or actual historic wrongs; but it was *not* a model for reciprocal understanding. At best, it could be a model of tolerance, in the Roman sense of 'sufferance'. Spheres of mutual incomprehension were, and are, not incompatible with this.

Reference List

Ahmad, Aijaz. 'Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said', in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures,* London: Verso, 1992, pp. 159-220.

Ahmad, Aijaz. 'Postcolonialism: What's In a Name?' in Roman de la Campa, E Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (ed), *Late Imperial Culture,* London: Verso, 1995, pp. 11-32.

Amin, Shahid. 'Approver's Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura', in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies V,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 166-202.

Arnold, David. 'Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India', *Journal of Peasant Studies* Vol. 11, No. 4 (1984), pp.155-177.

Berlinerblau, Jacques. *Heresy in the University: the* Black Athena *Controversy and the Responsibilities of American Intellectuals*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999.

Bernal, Martin. *Black Athena writes back: Martin Bernal responds to his critics,* ed. David Chioni Moore, Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.

Bernal, Martin. *Black Athena,* 2 vols, London: Vintage, 1991.

Bernstein, Henry and Byres, Terence J. 'From Peasant Studies to Agrarian Change', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 2001), pp. 1-56.

Bhabha, Homi K. 'Introduction: Locations of Culture', in *The Location of Culture,* London: Routledge, 1995 [1994], pp. 1-18.

Bhabha, Homi K. 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', in *The Location of Culture,* London: Routledge, 1995a [1994], pp. 85-92.

Biko, Steve. *I Write What I Like: a Selection of his Writings*, London: Heinemann, 1979 [1969-78].

Cesaire, Aime. *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972 [1955].

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 'A Small History of Subaltern Studies', in *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp. 3-19.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 'Postcolonialism and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?' *Representations* 37, *Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories* (Winter 1992), pp. 1-26.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* London: Zed Books, 1986.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology,* transl. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Dirlik, Arif. 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Winter, 1994), pp. 328-356.

Dunn, Stephen P. *The Fall and Rise of the Asiatic Mode of Production,* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Press, 1967 [1952].

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth,* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967(a) [1961].

Foucault, Michel. 'Truth and Power', in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977,* ed. Colin Gordon, New York: Pantheon, 1980, pp. 109-133.

Freud, Sigmund. *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Strachey, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1974 [1915-17].

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and transl. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.

Guha, Ranajit (ed). *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Guha, Ranajit. *An Indian Historiography of India: a Nineteenth-Century Agenda and its Implications,* Calcutta: KP Bagchi, 1988, reprinted with revisions in Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 152-214.

Guha, Ranajit. 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India', in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies I,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 1-8.

Guha, Ranajit. 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency', in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies II,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 45-88.

Guha, Ranajit. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Guha, Ranajit. *History at the Limit of World History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Hall, Stuart. 'When Was "the Post-Colonial"? Thinking at the Limit', in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (ed), *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons,* London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 242-260.

Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

Huntington, Samuel P. *Who are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

Ludden, David. 'Introduction: A Brief History of Subalternity', in David Ludden (ed), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical history, contested meaning, and the globalisation of South Asia,* London: Anthem Press, 2001, pp. 1-27.

Moir, Martin and Zastoupil, Lynn (ed), *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781-1843*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999.

Morris, Rosalind C (ed). *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Mukherjee, S.N. *Sir William Jones: a study in eighteenth-century British attitudes to India*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1987.

Ngugi, James. *A Grain of Wheat*, London: Heinemann, 1967.

Nora, Pierre. 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*', *Representations 26* (Spring 1989), pp. 7-24.

Pandey, Gyanendra, 'The Bigoted Julaha', in *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 66-108.

Phillips, Anne. *Multiculturalism Without Culture,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Prakash, Gyan. 'Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism', *American Historical Review* Vol. 99, No. 5 (December 1994), pp. 1475-1490.

Prakash, Gyan. 'Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (April 1990), pp. 383-408.

Said, Edward W. 'Foreword', to Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak (ed), *Selected Subaltern Studies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. V-x.

Said, Edward W. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World,* revised edition, London: Vintage, 1997 [1981].

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 1994 [1993].

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon, 1978.

Sarkar, Sumit. *Writing Social History,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Senghor, Leopold Sedar. 'Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century', in Wilfred Carty and Martin Kilson (ed), *The African Reader: Independent Africa*, New York: Vintage, 1970, pp. 179-92 [1964].

Shanin, Teodor (ed). *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.

Shohat, Ella. 'Notes on the "Post-Colonial"', *Social Text*, No. 31/32 (1992), pp. 99-113.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakraborty. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (ed), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988, pp. 271-313.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarty. 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini*', in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies V*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 91-134.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarty. 'Discussion: Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies IV,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 330-363.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarty. 'Introduction: Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak (ed), *Selected Subaltern Studies,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1988(a), pp. 3-24.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarty. 'The Question of Cultural Studies', *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 277.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. ix.

Thompson, E.P. *The Poverty of Theory,* London: Merlin Press, 1995 [1978].

Vishwanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Studies and British Rule in India*, London: Faber, 1990.

Zachariah, Benjamin. 'Residual nationalism and the Indian (radical?) intellectual: On indigenism, authenticity and the coloniser's presents', in Debraj Bhattacharya (ed), *Of Matters Modern,* Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2008, pp. 330-359.