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Postcolonial Writing and Terror

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Let us go to another country
Not yours or mine
And start again.
To another country? Which?
One without fires, where fever
Lurks under leaves, and waters
Is sold to those who thirst?
And carry dope or papers
In our shoes to save us starving?
Hope would be our passport
The rest is understood
Just say the word.

(Sorry, don't remember how it ends.)

(William Plomer, 'Let us go', quoted as epigraph, Gordimer, *The Pickup* np and 88-9)

Where will it end? Like most of our leaders, he creates a problem, then creates another problem to deal with the first one — on and on, endlessly fertile, always creatively spiralling to greater chaos ... It was around that time that I learnt of the Rastafarian's survival.

(Ben Okri, *Stars of the New Curfew* 49)

We live within an international situation which is, it seems, in accelerated flux, marked by convulsive periods of crisis, impasse and conflict, now almost automatically described as 'terror', 'War on Terror' or in terms of some mode of terroristic response. In this situation it might be helpful to consider how the theoretical and textual approach called postcolonialism, which deals in cross-cultural contacts and transaction, as well as, importantly, with breakdowns in contact – which, in short, foregrounds a commitment to *life*, the continuation of life – confronts such crises and challenges.

In what follows I aim to bring into critical relationship these primary terms:

postcolonialism; *terror*, that word used to denote the crises or the dark reverse of the global; but also, residually, *globalisation*, the standard shorthand for describing the interconnected, deregulated state of the world today. The question I will have in front of me throughout will be whether the postcolonial, rather than merely repeating and confirming the structures of the global, is able diagnostically to explicate and interrogate, even narrativise, those resistances and reversals within the processes of empire which express as terror. Both the critical and the creative contributions to this special issue, 'Cultures of Terror', draw attention to the shaping force of narrative and poetry as an alternative response to situations of terror. It is with an eye to such eventual narrativisation and formal organisation that I include the two epigraphs from contemporary texts above.

Capitalist globalisation is seen by many critics and theorists, those of the well-off north in particular (those powers that set the globalisation agenda), as the definitive condition of

twenty-first-century humanity. The 'borderless global economy' appears increasingly to undermine the former centrality of national structures and institutions, and to demand a re-figuration of the languages of everyday life (Featherstone, Lash and Robertson 2-3). Indeed, global interconnection has ramified to the extent that both postcolonial theory and postcolonial literatures, conventionally seen as concerned with cross-border exchange, and as privileging creolised, 'de-regulated', Rushdiesque writing, are now widely regarded as in some way matching that globalised world, as articulated with and within that cross-planet re-figuration. Postcolonial theory in this view is associated with migrant spaces for which the colony as a situation of violent repression, and the nation as a horizon of expectation, have retreated, to be replaced with a concept of cultural exchange and contestation as primary. Indeed, in some situations we hear postcolonialism used synonymously with transnationalism, as having exclusively to do with transgressive trans-border movement and multi-cultural exchange. According to this view, the postcolonial text (literary, theoretical) is believed not only to reflect the contemporary world – becoming made-to-measure hybrid and predictably magic realist – but also, via transnational processes of publishing and marketing, is seen willingly to collude in its market-driven systems. As Benita Parry comments, in postcolonial discussion 'the intrinsically antagonistic colonial encounter [has been] configured as one of dialogue, complicity and transculturation' (4).

At the same time the postcolonial has also (if not equally) come to be accepted in academic circles and institutions as a critical term signifying a theoretical and writerly force field preoccupied with *resistance to empire* and its post-imperial aftermath. This is perhaps especially the case since the publication of key studies earlier this decade reminding us of the theory's historical roots in anti-colonial opposition: amongst others, Robert Young's *Postcolonialism* (2001), Nick Harrison's *Postcolonial Criticism* (2003); new work on Frantz

Fanon as 'post-colonial' theorist; and Benita Parry's repeated reminders of precisely these forms of revolutionary provenance (2004). Postcolonialism under this heading correlates with struggle, subversion, resistance to the global *status quo*, whether that be capitalist-driven colonialism or contemporary neo-imperial globalisation (the contemporary incarnation of capitalism, according to Parry and others). From this perspective, unnervingly to some, *postcolonialism* aligns more closely with some of the theories and significations of 'terror' (as in anti-colonial violence, for example) than it does with *globalisation*.

So we have before us two dominant inflections of the postcolonial: a globalised and hybridising inflection and a 'resistance' inflection. The inflections are, however, connected in their acknowledgement, even if at times implicit, even if differently angled, of the still-lingering colonial past. Both interpretations of the postcolonial are interested in imperial after-effects which remain latent, like jiggers buried in the callus of feet, until they manifest, apparently suddenly, in a variety of economic, political, social, and religious forms: outbreaks of poly-culturalism; unpredicted genocides (Rwanda, Darfur), multinational support for factional interests (De Beers and diamond trading in Central Africa), terroristic incidents.

'Postcolonialism', as Ali Behdad, and Derek Gregory following him, compellingly suggest, 'reveals the *continuing* impositions' of colonialism [emphasis added]. It does so, however, 'in order to subvert them' (Gregory 9).

The shared preoccupation with belatedness aside, it is postcolonialism under the heading of resistance that is first and foremost, even definitively, I would venture to say, interested in subversion, what might also be called the practice of decentring the centre or, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's phrase, provincialising Europe. This complicated practice of relentlessly interrogating and revising the global map of contemporary modernity is to be distinguished from, though it also relates to, the end-directed activity of 'writing back' which Rushdie first

isolated as the primary task of a postcolonial writer in English such as he. As this implies, what is often elided in discussions of globalisation is that the global world is no undifferentiated neo-liberal network but retains significant centres or concentrations of power and many closed borders, most of them located in or at points proximate to the West (hence, once again, belatedness). The postcolonialism that has to do with resistance is concerned to keep watch on these hegemonic centres and borders, to sabotage, subvert and balk them if necessary, and also to explore alternative yet co-existent locations and lineages of meaning and survival.

To turn now to terror, the west's current self-consolidating enemy *par excellence*, in an attempt to place it within the historical perspective of belated or continuing empire. At a time when terrorism is simultaneously vilified and homogenised as a common enemy, it is widely assumed that we know what terror means (we are, it is said, all implicated in this 'War on Terror'). Yet in point of fact terror has been emptied of meaning as never before. To cite the observation of none other than Simon Jenkins, in a review of David Runciman's book *The Politics of Good Intentions*, the 'War on Terror' has become an ideal post-Cold War tool. It allows western states to reinstate the condition, presumably taken from colonial times, of wielding sovereignty through war-without-end. In both situations, colonial and contemporary, terror becomes all-pervasive and completely non-specific, as well as deeply contradictory (Jenkins 11). The 'War on Terror' is at one and the same time unwinnable, as it has no distinct enemy and is without limit and without restraint; *and yet* it is waged, we are told, in order to be won; in order for a limit to be achieved. Interestingly, the unlocalised phrase 'War on Terror' is a hostage to its own imperialising fortunes, in so far as it implies that terror is everywhere, and hence it must constitute the primary mode of sovereignty of the counter-terroristic state itself. If we are to believe western political rhetoric, terror has become the

contemporary state of being to which, for the west, there is no exception (using the word in the conventional sense), and to which there have been few exceptions for some considerable time. Its state power and the enemy's power are both terroristic. Which is to say, its hegemony imposes itself through terroristic means, as does resistance to it.

The assumption that subtends these contradictory understandings is that the modern and imperialist state in fact solicits the terror through which it constitutes its authority. Terror according to this logic can be defined, in terms taken from Achille Mbembe's exposition of the *necropolitical*, as a politics exercised through the imposition of death and near-death. For Mbembe, whose work in this respect is interestingly informed by Frantz Fanon, imperial and post-imperial sovereignty depends on the right to kill or, more precisely, to hold the subject in a state of continual confrontation with death.

The colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law ... and where 'peace' is more likely to take on the face of a 'war without end'. (23)

Although their views on the ethics of terror differ, Mbembe cites Fanon's vivid spatialisation of necropower in the colony to make his case: all is regulated by 'the language of pure force' and 'the principle of reciprocal exclusivity' (26). In such conditions of 'war without end', a public sphere, if it exists at all, can only be imposed through violent exclusion, while resistance almost inevitably takes some 'terroristic' form. In his short study *Terrorism* Jonathan Barker too, though in a different register, draws attention to these crucial colonial legacies of state violence, which many post-2001 studies evade or ignore: 'The colonial powers ... [used] violence to maintain their domination, to recruit labour and soldiers ... to

seize additional territory' (61-2). By contrast with Anglo-American novelists like Don De Lillo (or indeed Martin Amis, discussed by Bob Eaglestone in this issue) who regard terror as a force that cannot be incorporated within civic society, I would suggest that in the globalised world terror is a force that has been *incorporated everywhere*. As Walter Benjamin presciently observed: 'The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule' (257). Without wanting to mount a justification for terroristic modes of resistance, this article would therefore submit that, in as much as terror has been the medium of the modern state and the modern imperium, terror has equally been the site for the critique of the modern state and imperium. To an extent it has *had to be* the site of the critique of the modern state. Under prevailing conditions of sovereignty other sites and other techniques have been rendered either unavailable or ineffective.

With its commitment to cross-border interaction, postcolonial writing can be said to expand and complicate, as well as to question, the shared languages and common frames of reference, legacies of a colonial history, which make globalisation possible. By the same token such writing seeks to define, or redefine, home as against world, the particular and the local as distinct from, even though intricately bound up in, the global. Postcolonial writers, in other words, through the medium of different modes of dialogue, find ways of continuing and prolonging the lineages of life. And they see such conversation and prolongation as practices that must be continually renewed and repeated.

Intricate and deathly forms of terror and counter-terror, as I have suggested, interpenetrate the global order. Although it cannot deny its fascination with the necropolitical act (even if this is critically reflective), postcolonial writing also has the power to draw attention to places

outside of the terror-stricken state, to supply a fuller understanding of the painful losses as well as strategic gains of such acts. So it might, for example, explore the human inwardness that inheres to situations of extreme decimation, carnage and grief. It might show, in the words of Kader Asmal *et al*, that 'humanism [travels] always with ... resistance' (50). By narrating historical division and pain, but also recovery and endurance, postcolonial writing posits futurity in relation to the futureless (that is: terror, necropolitics). It does so precisely because it reminds us of colonial 'pasts', of the 'regeneration of colonialism through other means', and hence of the need to remain vigilant about and to survive such regeneration (Frankenburg and Mani 322-34). Zimbabwean Yvonne Vera's 2002 novella *The Stone Virgins*, for instance, tells in disturbingly poetic terms not only of a horrifying terroristic act perpetrated upon village-dweller Nonceba and her sister during the post-independence civil war, but also of the restorative processes of mourning and healing which, for Nonceba, eventually follow. Moreover, the narrative casts a coldly penetrating eye into the frozen mind of the terroristic (and terrorised) soldier and attacker himself, representing him, by contrast with survivor Nonceba, as suspended in a place outside of history. Relatedly, Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2004) is concerned more with a family's attempts to come to terms with the 'ordinariness' of life in the post-apartheid city and with one another, than it is with the state-inflicted act of violent rape that, years before, first distanced them from one another. In these ways postcolonial narrative maps a chronology on to the 'moment of danger', the moment-in-and-out-of time, of terror, registering not only the past history but also the future consequences and repercussions of necropolitical acts for human subjects.

Then again, if we angle the concept of terror somewhat differently, through what I have called a 'resistance' rather than a 'global' inflection, postcolonial writing may be seen to play more of an interested than a restorative role in relation to it. This becomes especially apparent

where terror is viewed not only as the manifestation of the imperial state, but also as the expression of an anti-colonial modernity. 'Terror' here denotes the attempt by the colonised to *seize hold* of technical mastery and control in a situation, that of colonialism, where modernity is routinely introduced in violent forms (through land seizures, labour laws and the like). Once again, however, this apparently alternative reading of terror allows us to examine its occurrence in the reciprocally violent historical contexts of colonialism and global neo-colonialism rather than of the ahistorical 'war on terror' in which terror is viewed simply as savage and irrational, an irruption of the primitive.

Terrorism is, to be sure, more often than not described as the revolutionary expression of a counter-modernity rather than of modernity. As recent studies confirm, modern terror takes many forms and the final assessment of terror's relationship to modernity may well produce a both/and rather than an either/or verdict. Allen Feldman encapsulates it: 'most contemporary acts of political terror have taken on both a decidedly ante-modern and post-modern shape', embracing sacrificial spectacles of pre-modernity, as in televised assassinations, as well as sophisticated postmodern technologies of mediatised warfare and surveillance (347). In colonised contexts, however, I would add, that shape also exhibits distinctly modern dimensions. It involves the intercutting, even the collision, of different temporalities, modes of production and frameworks of thought in ways that are often disjointed, spasmodic, jagged, convulsive, fracturing. Understood from the position of a totalising historicism, such violence could well appear as a throwback to the pre-modern, the pre-political. But understood in relation to plural, incommensurable genealogies of time or categories of knowledge, such violence rather expresses as points of friction or even of synapse between different spheres of activity and consciousness.

Although he is as concentrated on non-violent as violent responses, Dipesh Chakrabarty evocatively describes this 'seizing hold' of modernity by colonised nationalists as their urgent insistence on the 'now' of their political demands, as against the 'not yet' which they occupy on the time-line of European progress (8-9). Any number of anti-colonial resistance struggles, 1905 in Bengal, 1929 in Nigeria, Kenya in the 1950s, labelled terrorist and atavistic at the time, involved such a violent grasping of the conditions of modernity and political life by those who felt they been made its victims rather than its beneficiaries. Bursting out of 'the waiting room of history' they insisted, *right now*, on a full participation in the political life of the nation. It is controversial to say this at present, yet it is worth speculating whether even terrorist events such as 11 March 2004 in Madrid, usually attributed to anti-western fundamentalism, might not be seen in a longer *durée* as attempts, from particular nationalist contexts, to resist the violations of imposed modernity. In this respect it is worth recalling that a terrorist may be broadly defined as one who believes that their case is exceptional (they have been unconscionably denied), and that the odds stacked against them are so high that desperate action alone will suffice.

In relation to this somewhat attenuated reading of colonised 'terror', the postcolonial novel, play or poem might be understood as itself an alternative mode of seizing hold upon the now, upon the right to define *this moment*, although a seizing-hold that, importantly, does not involve a negation of the future. Novels which dramatise such attempts by the (once)colonised to propel themselves into the temporality of the modern, or forcibly to modify that temporality, include, amongst many others: Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* and Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*. Speaking schematically, in these different novels the bourgeois native individual, excluded from the

experience of moving into modernity according to need, instead projects him/herself decisively, uncompromisingly, into previously exclusive strata of temporality, so claiming agency and bringing his/her synchronous time-lines into a new configuration. Rather differently from postmodern characterisations of terror in literature, evoked in terms that suggest a cancellation of temporality, the acts of projection represented in these texts are concerned to restore temporal depth, a sense of the deep layering of history. And the texts do so, it is clear, by narrating simply yet powerfully what it is to project and seize hold in these ways. Viewed from this perspective postcolonial writing undoes the compression of time that is represented by a sudden death or bomb-blast, by looking at processes: the slow process of successfully supplanting an elder brother, as in *Nervous Conditions*, or of subverting orientalist desire, as in *Season of Migration to the North*.

Postcolonial writing, whether defined under the heading of resistance or of hybrid cosmopolitanism, does not however provide justifications of terror or sidestep the pain and wrong that it is the objective of a terrorist act to inflict. This is important to acknowledge. What it can provide is an understanding of what is at stake subjectively and sequentially for the different parties involved when terrorism takes place. In this sense, I want to suggest, it supplies ways of thinking through and beyond terror, and of developing workable political responses to it.

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