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The politics of Caribbean postcoloniality

RAPHAEL DALLEO

Shalini Puri

The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004

304 pp. ISBN 1-40-396182-4 (pb) US\$24.95

Applying the adjective ‘postcolonial’ to the Caribbean can be an invitation to controversy. In a region where political status ranges from Castro’s Cuba to French and US possessions such as Martinique, Guadeloupe and Puerto Rico, it comes as no surprise that most Caribbean critics and writers tend to be sceptical of any vision of the contemporary period that sees it as a break from colonialism. For that reason, while postcolonial theory has readily claimed the Caribbean as its domain, eagerly incorporating concepts such as Wilson Harris’s cross-cultural imagination or Kamau Brathwaite’s creolisation, during the 1980s and 1990s as the field was becoming a dominant force in the US academy the Caribbean produced no major theorist of postcoloniality. Even Edouard Glissant and Antonio Benítez-Rojo, two of the Caribbean theorists who have been most easily assimilated by the field of postcolonial studies, locate their work in a narrative of modern/postmodern rather than colonial/postcolonial.

Nevertheless, since the end of the 1990s, especially with the emergence of journals such as *Small Axe*, research and writing about Caribbean postcoloniality has become more and more central to understandings of the region’s present and future. Shalini Puri’s *The Caribbean Postcolonial*, as the first full-length study of the subject, is thus a considerable intervention. In her title, ‘postcolonial’ is not an adjective describing a place (postcolonial Africa) or a thing (postcolonial literature), but a noun modified by Caribbean. The suggestion is that she will be talking about a specifically *Caribbean* way of thinking about the postcolonial. Along with that novel use of ‘postcolonial’, Puri identifies ‘postcoloniality’ (1) as the reality of a transnational (but not postnational), global set of relationships and experiences: she notes two specific responses to that condition, ‘Postcolonial Studies’ (2) and ‘the postmodern academy’ (19). Although one of the book’s weaknesses is an inability to delineate between the two (the chapter on Erna Brodber’s marvellous realism only begins to point to distinctions), the overall thrust of her argument is to criticise both responses for over-emphasising ‘the critique of totalising knowledges and totalitarian nationalisms [...] unaccompanied by any comparable critique of a totalising capitalism’ (26). Rather than the typical attack on postcolonial and postmodern theories for being ideological

reflections of global capitalism, *The Caribbean Postcolonial* figures these theories as important but incomplete, limited by an inadequate engagement with the potential political horizons of postcoloniality.

In order to offer a way out of this theoretical impasse, Puri argues that an ethically engaged Caribbean response to postcoloniality would attend to difference but also to equality, a remedy to postcolonialism's generally unhistoricised valorisation of cultural hybridity as a solution to racist discourses of purity. In framing the Caribbean postcolonial in terms of equality as well as difference, Puri thus offers postcolonialism a means of re-affirming its commitment to the anti-colonial project's utopian dream of creating a truly free and democratic society, while still acknowledging the limitations of nationalist movements rooted in modernist master narratives and streamlined constructions of 'the people' or 'the folk' as a political subject. *The Caribbean Postcolonial* inhabits this ambivalent space between renewal and critique of anti-colonialism. In Puri's formulation, postcolonialism's failure has been its inability to develop a notion of politics beyond the seizure of nation-state sovereignty. Even contemporary theories of cultural imperialism as distinct from colonial control emphasise local economic and social determination as ultimate goal. One of postcolonialism's greatest successes has been to deconstruct this 'us/them' opposition by forcing 'the West' to acknowledge its constructedness and its inextricability from the rest of the world. As a result of emphasising this mutual implication, though, postcoloniality can appear to be an era where the outside space of absolute difference which anti-colonialism claimed to occupy has been exhausted. Without this outside, academic postcolonialism and postmodernism are left to focus on sites of cultural resistance and transgression within the system.

Puri maintains that there is no reason to abandon the possibility of political opposition, even if it is not based on absolute exteriority: as she shows in an excellent analysis of Derek Walcott's *Pantomime*, resistance and transgression can be understood as valuable tools in setting the stage for political opposition, rather than reified as ends unto themselves. Readings of *Pantomime* which figure the play as an anti-colonial allegory of national liberation give Jackson's contingent and tentative victories too much grandeur and finality; by the same token, emphasising 'the functioning of mimicry, improvisation and transgression' (118) ignores the ways that the roles of master and servant are reinscribed at the end of the play. Puri offers an alternative to these two poles; the play becomes for her an ongoing negotiation *about* power relations, centred around questions of cultural and economic exploitation and aimed at winning concessions towards a more humane 'redistribution of material wealth' (132). She shows how the play can be read as depicting the struggles between employer and employee, not master and slave, which lead up to the promise laid out in the final line, that the two sides will sit down together at the bargaining table and 'talk 'bout a raise'.

The key to locating this political promise in the postcolonial lies, according to Puri, in an interrogation of one of postcolonialism's favoured epistemes, hybridity. Hybridity has emerged as a major tool in dismantling the essentialisms of colonial discourse as well as the postcolonial governments that came to power during the 1950s and 1960s. Yet Puri suggests that anti-colonial movements may not be as guilty of reductionary adherence to racial purity as what she calls 'hybridity

discourse' might have us believe; in fact, the nationalist governments which took up the anti-colonial banner, with metaphors for the nation such as the callaloo, have had no choice but to acknowledge the multicultural composition of their people. Hybridity actually becomes for them 'the rhetorical *glue* to a nation-state that threatens to fall apart' (49): in one speech by Eric Williams that Puri cites, the former prime minister refers to the hybrid African and Asian roots of his people, only to assert that 'a nation, like an individual, can only have one mother' and that 'the only Mother we recognise is Trinidad and Tobago' (48). If anything, then, these nationalist governments have drawn on the discourse of liberal pluralism in order to cover over growing inequalities based on class and gender: Puri suggests that 'creolisation as a figure for hybridity has exhausted its radicalism in contemporary Trinidad [...] now serving status quoist class agendas and perhaps racially exclusive ones' (220). In this context, academic theorisations of hybridity can be complicit with the postcolonial consolidation of economic and political power in the hands of local elites.

The answer, Puri insists, is not a return to essentialism or purity, but to devise a more radical understanding of hybridity. To that end, she offers a notion of hybridity based on 'dougl'a poetics', the dougl'a being a particularly Trinidadian term for a person of mixed African and East Indian descent. The last two chapters, which begin a preliminary exploration of this 'dougl'a' concept, are suggestive if not yet thoroughly theorised. While this section focuses more narrowly on Trinidad than the previous sections, Puri suggests that the dougl'a might inspire other conceptions of 'egalitarian hybrid identities delegitimised or disallowed by dominant cultural nationalist discourses' (15). Puri hopes that 'dougl'a poetics' can offer a way of potentially maintaining a critique of the exploitative socio-economic aspects of globalisation, without capitulating to the local nationalist consolidation of power in the name of opposing foreign domination. The intricacies of this move are not always clear: for example, even while Puri 'dougl'arises' her approach to hybridity, she insists on the theoretical purchase of 'cultural imperialism' (38) as an analytical concept. As important as this concept may be for keeping sight of the persistent material inequality of postcoloniality, it is difficult to discern how her notion of cultural imperialism is more than nostalgia for the forms of critique made possible by anti-colonial binaries.

Tentative and speculative as they may be, these musings on 'dougl'arisation' open up productive spaces in nationalist as well as hybridity discourses, especially as feminist and anti-racist contributions to postcolonial theory. In these final chapters, *The Caribbean Postcolonial* develops its cultural materialist methodology by supplementing literary texts as primary vehicle for understanding the social with readings of musical texts and public performances such as Carnival and Hosay. These chapters focus especially on the ways that Trinidadian public space is racially coded, and how the actual or symbolic dougl'a is able to move between different public spheres. Puri begins this section by noting that when colonial authorities brought East Indians to the Caribbean as indentured servants, they carefully policed racial boundaries between blacks and East Indians for fear that any sense of solidarity between these two exploited groups could easily threaten the white establishment. East Indians were thus initially encouraged to keep their attachment to India alive, in hopes that they would not grow to think of themselves

as Trinidadians. As a result, while Carnival developed as a Trinidadian public space transcending race (although dominated by Afro-Trinidadians), Hosay was banned in 1884 just as it appeared to be achieving a similar national stature. Puri sees Indo-Trinidadian ‘conservatives’ today continuing to propagate this notion of ‘separate but equal’ (197) cultures in the name of tradition but in the interests of protecting their economic and gender privileges.

The book concludes with a discussion of how Indo-Trinidadian calypsonian Drupatee Ramgoonai puts dougla theory into practice with her ability to break free of the dictates of the cultural conservatives and enter the public space of the calypso tent. Her transgression, as an Indo-Trinidadian and as a woman, deflates both black nationalist discourse that excludes East Indians from their vision of Trinidadian national identity and Indo-Trinidadian purism that venerates women as standard-bearers of traditional values while lamenting their abuse and corruption by Afro-Trinidadian men. Puri reminds us that ‘the original meaning of the word “dougla” was “bastard”, or “illegitimate”’ (221), and that ‘one might think of a dougla poetics as a means for articulating potentially progressive cultural projects de-legitimised by both Afro-Creole dominant culture and the Indian “Mother Culture”’ (221). In other words, Puri conceives of her strategy as first deconstructive, occupying the margins of dominant discourses in order to find and create new spaces from which to launch a critique.

Yet Puri refuses to see this deconstructive position as precluding the construction of new, contingent identities. *The Caribbean Postcolonial* continually emphasises the coupling of critique with creativity; artists like Drupatee are not only dismantling the political and social status quo, but making a claim for a recognition of alternative public spaces and identities. Drupatee’s deconstructive transgression allows her to uncover ‘how purist racial identities and constructions of the Mother Culture repress the problem of gender and class inequalities within the Indo-Trinidadian community and de-legitimise many identities and cultural possibilities as “un-Indian”’ (216). Her transgression enables a political move: the assertion that she can be an East Indian woman and a modern, sexual Trinidadian subject at the same time. Drupatee’s dougla discourse allows an Indo-Trinidadian identity to be imagined, and at the same time, intervenes in imaginings of the broader Trinidadian nation as well.

In this move from transgression to opposition, ‘dougla poetics’ thus offers the potential for locating a political promise in the Caribbean postcolonial. As Puri insists, a douglarised approach is not to be elevated to the level of dogma: ‘I am emphatically not suggesting a dougla poetics as somehow paradigmatic of postcolonial, West Indian, or even Trinidadian aesthetics’ (218). At the same time, *The Caribbean Postcolonial* does offer perhaps the most important sustenance for a Caribbean postcoloniality increasingly in need: hope. Puri renews our faith that a progressive politics is possible, that the social projects of the region’s anti-colonial struggles have not been exhausted or rendered obsolete. Her reminder, that in its critique of the concepts of nationalism and of race, postcolonialism must not lose sight of inequalities based on place and background, becomes a valuable invitation to further dialogue on the Caribbean postcolonial.