[Interdisciplinary Studies]

Beyond Deconstruction: Reclaiming History and the Dialectics of National Identity in Postcolonial Theory

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Received: June 26, 2025 Accepted: July 8, 2025 Published: September 30, 2025

To cite this article: LIN Ping. (2025). Beyond Deconstruction: Reclaiming History and the Dialectics of National Identity in Postcolonial Theory. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(3), 151-160, DOI: 10.53789/j.1653-0465.2025.0503.017.p

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653-0465.2025.0503.017.p

This article is one of the research results of the project entitled "A Study of Contemporary African Fiction and Aesthetic Modernity" (Grant No. 23XWW004) supported by the China Social Science Fund.

Abstract: This paper critiques postcolonial theory's deconstruction of national identity and its resulting dehistoricizing tendency. While acknowledging the field's significance, we argue that its over-reliance on poststructuralist methodologies blurs its distinction from postmodernism and leads to the erasure of national identity's historicity and materiality, as well as the historical value of anti-colonial struggles. To counter this, we advocate for employing Marxist historicization to reassess national identity's vital socio-cultural role within specific Third World contexts. Analysis of cases like African nationalism reveals its indispensable function in achieving liberation, forging collective identity, and challenging imperialism. For postcolonial theory to regain critical efficacy and political-ethical relevance in contemporary Third World struggles against neocolonialism, it must transcend its excessive dependency on poststructuralism. Integrating historicization as a core principle and strategically affirming national identity' contextual, practical value—understood as necessary strategic essentialism—is paramount. This approach revitalizes the theory's dialectical relationship with history and liberation praxis.

Keywords: postcolonial theory; national identity; dehistoricization; deconstruction; historicization

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1. Introduction

Emerging in the mid-20th century, postcolonial theory represents a significant body of critical thought

centered on multicultural analysis. It critically examines the cultural-discursive power relations between the colonizing metropole and its colonies, encompassing issues such as racism, cultural imperialism, and the dynamics of national and ethnic cultures. (WANG Yuechuan, 1999: 9) Pioneered by scholars including Edward Said, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha, this theoretical framework functions as a potent form of cultural critique. It calls for sustained attention to the voices of minorities and the subjugated that have been neglected, suppressed, and effaced in history and narrative, thereby affirming their existence and intrinsic value. Consequently, postcolonial theory has garnered widespread recognition within the global academic community. It has been widely applied and yielded substantial results in fields such as English studies, history, anthropology, and cultural studies, demonstrating considerable potential to emerge as a dominant critical paradigm. (Sugirtharajah, 2002: 1)

However, postcolonial theory has faced significant critique since its inception. A central point of contention concerns its failure to clearly demarcate itself from postmodernism. This conceptual ambiguity arguably fosters a form of "issue dependency" within its theoretical framework: postcolonial theory frequently adopts the deconstructive methodologies characteristic of Western modernist discourses—targeting concepts like history, nation, and subjectivity—and applies them to the specific domain of colonial relations to formulate its core propositions. Consequently, the theoretical boundaries between postcolonialism and postmodernism often remain blurred, particularly regarding shared concepts, thereby limiting the former's analytical autonomy.

Focusing on the concept of national identity and its characteristics, this article examines postcolonial theory's deconstructive approach to national identity and the concomitant tendency towards "dehistoricization" that arises from this critique. We argue that for postcolonial theory to retain its critical efficacy and revitalize its political-ethical relevance, the reconstruction of its theoretical framework must transcend an excessive reliance on poststructuralist paradigms. Instead, it requires integrating "historicization" as a core concept and re-establishing a robust dialectical relationship with history itself.

2. The Deconstruction of National Identity in Postcolonial Theory

The term "identity" originates in algebra and logic, denoting "sameness" or "oneness." Its conceptual connotations evolved through integration with Western classical philosophy and Freudian psychology. Following the mid-20th-century rise of postcolonial theory, the concept merged with "nation" to form "national identity"—a term of profound conceptual richness and enduring controversy. As noted by ethnic theory scholar Bhikhu Parekh, defining national identity constitutes an astonishingly difficult exercise, a difficulty arising from divergent scholarly interpretations of the "nation" itself. (Qtd. in Mortimer, 2009)

Lenin (2017: 372) asserted that nowhere in the world have there been peoples without a history; such peoples can only be found among historically constituted nations. This perspective aligns with the Marxist conception of nationhood and epistemology, which posits the nation as both a historical category—possessing its own genesis, development, and dissolution—and an empirical entity with distinct origins and historical trajectories. These trajectories form the basis for national imagination. Consequently, national identity itself constitutes a historical category, inherently defined by its historicity.

Moreover, numerous theories advanced by Western modern ethnologists underscore the materiality and

specificity inherent in the concept of ethnic identity. Anthony D. Smith, a pioneering figure in interdisciplinary nationalism studies and a prominent contemporary theorist on ethnicity and nationalism, posits that "ethnic identity" constitutes the central ideal of nationalist ideology. He defines it as follows: the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the values, symbols, memories, myths, and traditions that form the distinctive heritage of a nation, as well as the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the personal identities of individuals who embody those patterns, heritage, and cultural components. Building on this, Smith (1991: 14) identifies five key characteristics of "ethnic identity": (1) A historically formed territory or homeland; (2) Shared myths and historical memories; (3) A common popular culture; (4) Legal rights and duties shared by all members; (5) A territory-based common economy. These characteristics collectively demonstrate that ethnic identity embodies shared materiality and determinacy.

Scholars sharing perspectives akin to Smith include thinkers such as Philip Spencer, Howard Wollman, and David Miller. Spencer asserts that national identity fundamentally refers to the extent to which a group considers itself, or is regarded, as members of a given nation. It constitutes a sense of self-cohesion forged through explicit rejection and negation—a profound, perennial feeling that, once established, results in differential treatment between compatriots and foreigners, citizens and outsiders. (2012: 96-98) Thus, Spencer conceptualizes the nation as a specific, tangible entity, while national identity denotes this nation's relatively stable sense of cohesion. Differing from Spencer, the American ethnologist David Miller does not prioritize a sense of cohesion as the primary basis. Instead, he grounds national identity in a nation's collective will and conviction to coexist, defining it as a community characterized by five features: fellow-feeling among members, shared beliefs, historical continuity, collective decisions/actions/achievements, a common homeland, and shared public cultural traits. (1995: 21-27) Miller's articulation of these components—shared conviction, historical continuity, collective agency, homeland consciousness, and cultural distinctiveness—further illustrates the tangible, historical, and definite nature of national identity from an alternative perspective.

In contrast to both the Marxist conception of the nation and the aforementioned nationalist theorists, postcolonial critics, by employing poststructuralist methodologies, subject the concept of national identity to rigorous deconstruction. This deconstruction is initially manifested in Benedict Anderson's dissolution of the substantiality of the nation from the perspective of its origins. Anderson rejects the notion of the nation as a substantive entity, arguing instead that it is not a social entity with a determinate historical origin, but rather an imagined community, a product of artificial construction. Anderson's theory reveals the imagined and narrative nature of national identity while simultaneously affirming the validity of its imaginative construction. He contends that nation-building is a positive act of creation, distinguished "by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson, 1991: 6). It is important to note, however, that postcolonial theory is not satisfied merely with Anderson's revelation of the discursive constructedness of the nation; it subjects national identity to a more profound deconstruction.

The most representative figure in this deeper deconstruction of national identity is the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha. Bhabha's approach bears distinct poststructuralist characteristics. In his seminal essay "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation", he elaborates his ideas on deconstructing national identity, commencing from the experience of diaspora. Drawing on Derrida's concept of "dissemination", Bhabha extends it to the category of the "nation." Graphically, "dissemiNation" is split into

two parts, signifying the "internal contradictions" and "cultural liminality" within the nation. (Bhabha, 1990: 299) "DissemiNation" thus represents the differences and fissures permeating the nation across time and space. Within the play of difference, the signified of the nation remains perpetually unfixed, existing in a state of constant play and différance. Bhabha views the heterogeneous elements within the nation as the foundation for deconstructing national identity. His key concepts— "hybridity", the "third space", "mimicry", and "ambivalence"—are all constructed upon this deconstructive foundation.

Similarly, other prominent postcolonial theorists express varying degrees of skepticism towards traditional notions of national identity. Edward Said disavows a singular cultural identity, declaring himself in but always out of place, belonging simultaneously to two worlds without being completely of either. He also imbues "exile" with connotations of cultural resistance, characterizing it as nomadic, decentered, and contrapuntal. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990: 39), a central figure in postcolonial theory, unequivocally rejects the authenticity of her own national cultural identity: India is not a place where she can confirm a national identity.

Another significant manifestation of postcolonial deconstruction is its tendency to erase the historical value of national independence movements. These movements constitute a crucial component of humanity's anti-imperialist and anti-colonial lineage, with national identity as their core value. However, the foundational framework of postcolonial theory largely bypasses Third World national liberation struggles. Firstly, *Orientalism* (1978), the seminal text inaugurating postcolonial studies, effectively marginalizes the national liberation movements of former colonies. Grounded in Michel Foucault's poststructuralist power-discourse theory, *Orientalism* inevitably renders the Orient a silent object within its narrative, sidelining the history of Third World resistance. Even in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), the value of colonial national independence movements remains insufficiently acknowledged. Within this work, Said expresses concern about their perceived negative consequences: "The anti-imperial struggle, as so many Pan-African, Pan-Arab, Pan-Asian congresses testified, was universalized, and the rift between Western (white, European, advanced) and non-Western (colored, native, underdeveloped) cultures and peoples was dramatized." (Said, 1993: 199) Gayatri Spivak extends Said's critical stance, evident in her conceptualization of the "heritage of imperialism." In *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, she equates "postcoloniality" with the "heritage of imperialism," arguing that it encompasses political concepts like nationhood, constitutionalism, citizenship, democracy, and socialism. She further contends that the entities these concepts denote do not emerge organically within the historical context of the postcolonial arena. (Spivak, 1993: 280-281) According to this logic, the political independence, democratic institutions, and citizenship rights of former colonies are characterized as part of the "imperialist heritage". In reality, while these concepts may have originated in Europe, their suitability and meaning within the specific historical contexts of former colonies must be determined through those nations' own historical practices. It was precisely through the struggle against colonialism that these abstract political concepts acquired new signification, forming a new "historicity" and enabling political rights unimaginable under colonial rule. However, due to her persistent deconstruction of nationalism, Spivak overlooks these historical practices of the formerly colonized peoples themselves. The Asian American historian Arif Dirlik offers a trenchant critique of Spivak's view, arguing that "she concedes too much" (qtd. in Ahmad, 1995: 5).

Homi Bhabha undertakes an even more thorough dissolution of the value of national independence movements. National narratives are the primary means through which the value of these movements is manifested

and sustained. But for Bhabha, the national narrative is merely a collective fabrication and an oppressive myth. Consequently, in Bhabha's analyses of colonial discourse, figures central to the Indian national independence movement, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Gandhism, remain conspicuously absent. Furthermore, while Bhabha draws on Frantz Fanon's thought, he strips it of its national revolutionary essence, thereby fragmenting Fanon's revolutionary ideas.

It is evident that postcolonial theorists such as Said, Spivak, and Bhabha, utilizing poststructuralist critical methods, have deconstructed the historicity, materiality, and determinacy of national identity, along with the historical value of national independence movements, from various angles. This has resulted in a pervasive "dehistoricizing tendency" within their theories. Concerning the undermining of the practical value of national revolutions, the Indian Marxist theorist Aijaz Ahmad (1992: 71) wryly remarked: "the age of Marxism is over, 'the age of the enjoyment of goods and services' is here! The world was, in other words, bourgeois." Terry Eagleton (2009: 3-23) adopts a similarly critical stance by terming this phenomenon the "politics of forgetting," and arguing that many contemporary theorists have forgotten that nationalism was, in its day, an incredible anti-colonial force.

3. Intellectual Lineage and Positionality: The Roots of Postcolonial Theory's Deconstruction of National Identity

It must be acknowledged that discourses of national identity have played a profoundly positive role in human history. As Hans Kohn (1962: 12) noted, they once served as a signal to rouse the people to break their chains, catalyzing the transformation from autocratic feudal states to modern nation-states. This transformative power manifested itself in the American Revolutionary War, the French Revolution, and the political emancipation of Third World nations from colonial rule. Yet postcolonial theory—a critical discourse reflecting on colonialism's aftermath—engages in deconstructing and dehistoricizing narratives of national identity. What explains this apparent contradiction? The answer lies in both the intellectual lineage of postcolonial theory and the theoretical standpoints adopted by postcolonial intellectuals.

First, postcolonial theory's deconstruction and "dehistoricization" of national identity stem from its alignment with postmodernism's trajectory of deconstructing the nation. From a genetic epistemology perspective, postcolonial theory emerged within the Western academic system, and its core theoretical propositions are deeply rooted in Western postmodern thought. To a significant extent, postcolonial theory's "dehistoricization" of national identity's value represents an extension of postmodernism's deconstructive approach to the nation. The nation, as a core category within the Western system of modern values, is a product of the transformation of Western traditional societies into modern ones. Within the discourse of Western modernity, the discourse of national identity helped modern Europe dismantle religious hegemony and feudal aristocratic privileges, facilitating the transition of Western states from feudal theocracies to modern capitalist societies. This is evidenced by the emergence of unified, centralized modern nation-states in Western Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries, notably in Britain and France.

However, by the mid-to-late 20th century, Western capitalism entered a postmodern phase, also termed the stage of late capitalism. In this phase, the contradictions inherent in modernity became more pronounced, and

postmodernism emerged as its dominant cultural logic. Postmodernism originates from modernism yet rebels against it; its core lies in critiquing and deconstructing the totality, centrality, identity, rationalism, subjectivism, and essentialism championed during modernization (and within traditional Western philosophy). This deconstructive impulse gave rise to the school of deconstructionism, spearheaded by French poststructuralist theorists such as Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004) and Jean-François Lyotard (1924 – 1998).

Within the cultural logic of late capitalism, the nation, precisely because it emphasizes identity and cohesion, is perceived as possessing essentialist and centralist characteristics, linked to attributes like authoritarianism and violence. Consequently, it became a prime object of deconstruction. As reflected in the works of Homi K. Bhabha (1990: 309-311), traditional narratives of national identity, due to their universalist and rationalist features, are deemed "pedagogical" narratives, while national narratives emphasizing difference and change—termed "performative" national narratives—are highly valorized. Postcolonial theorists, exemplified by Bhabha, follow this postmodernist deconstructive path. By constructing concepts like the nation's imagined and disseminative nature, they deconstruct national identity as representative of essentialism and rationalism. Simultaneously, they negate the historical value of national movements, exhibiting tendencies towards "nihilization" and "dehistoricization."

Furthermore, the "dehistoricization" of national identity within postcolonial theory is intrinsically linked to the speaking positions and perspectives of postcolonial intellectuals. Unlike many members of the postcolonial diaspora, postcolonial intellectuals are predominantly socio-cultural elites who often actively relocate to the metropole seeking opportunity. Upon settling there, these intellectuals become deeply embedded within metropolitan society, dependent on its cultural and academic institutions, and gain access to its various resources. Consequently, their native language, culture, and history may gradually become less familiar, and their cultural identity often exhibits a tendency towards "hybridity". Resonating with this diasporic experience, postcolonial theory reflects upon and critiques essentialist notions of national cultural identity. Spivak, for instance, argues that the nation is a deceptive category, insisting on the "detranscendentalization" and "desacralization" of national discourse. (SHENG Anfeng, 2007: 81) Therefore, postcolonial intellectuals frequently become proponents of cosmopolitan values centered on transcending national identity.

It is evident that postcolonial theory is not a singular, purely "anti-colonial" discourse; it is simultaneously a theory of compromise and negotiation with metropolitan culture. It is precisely through this process of compromise and negotiation that the national identity of the homeland, for these intellectuals, becomes subject to theoretical "dehistoricization".

4. Beyond Postcolonial Critique: Reclaiming the Historical and Cultural Value of National Identity

It must be acknowledged that in Western history, colonial expansion often gained legitimacy under the banner of national interests, and the construction of national myths became integral to the imperial experience. Many modern concepts—such as progress, equality, and freedom—were likewise distorted and instrumentalized in the name of national interests. Nationalism thus exhibits a complicit relationship with colonialism, sharing isomorphic characteristics. Consequently, within contemporary Western academic discourse, national discourse

primarily functions as an object of introspection and critique among Western intellectuals.

However, it is crucial to recognize that although the category of the nation originated in Europe, its value and significance transformed as it "traveled" from West to East, evolving within altered historical contexts. Assessing the value of national identity necessitates a return to specific historical circumstances and an appreciation of its significance through the lens of historicization. The historical methodology of Marxism asserts that the logical deduction of any concept cannot be divorced from its concrete historical context. As Georg Lukács (1971: 9-10) argued, the historical method—as a methodology intrinsically linked to the concept of totality—holds a central position within traditional Marxist methodology. It represents Marxism's most crucial legacy and continues to exert a decisive influence on Western Marxism today. Hence, employing the historical materialist approach to transcend postcolonial theory's deconstructive mystique surrounding national identity, to confront the modern and contemporary histories of the Third World within their authentic historical frameworks, and to formulate a dialectically sound assessment of national identity's sociohistorical value—this constitutes an imperative theoretical undertaking demanding rigorous scholarly engagement.

Firstly, within the modern history of Third World countries, nationalism has predominantly manifested its positive value. It emerged during anti-colonial national independence movements as a creative adaptation and revision of Western nationalism. Its initial form was precisely anti-colonial nationalism. Throughout its development, anti-colonial nationalism forged distinct cultural identities and values (LIN Ping, 2018: 203). The trajectory of African nationalism serves as a compelling case study.

Historically, African nationalism arose in response to colonial expansion. However, distinct from the European model, African nationalist thought was characterized by a potent consciousness of Black racial identity, forming a direct response to European racially discriminatory colonialism. While debates persist regarding the precise definition of African nationalist thought, as noted by African studies expert Li Anshan, it is indisputable that nationalist movements aimed at achieving national independence and establishing nation-states across Africa and other regions. He further identifies anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, and the struggle for political independence as the essential features of African nationalist thought. (LI Anshan, 2004: 37, 170) Following independence, African nationalism encountered significant challenges, and the process of national integration proved arduous. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that within Africa's historical trajectory, the African nationalist movement played a vital positive role:

(1) It facilitated the political independence of over fifty African nation-states.

(2) It fostered the development and construction of an African national identity. Although the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial sentiment within African nationalist thought represented a feeling akin to nationalism rather than being entirely equivalent to a fully formed sense of national identity, it nevertheless contributed significantly to its development.

(3) It undermined the colonialist ideology of white supremacy, contributing to the psychological liberation and cultural confidence of Africans.

(4) It demonstrated a new worldview affirming the equality of nations and the capability of Africans to achieve independence from colonial powers and build their own nations. (LI Anshan, 2004: 170)

Secondly, within the current historical context, Third World nations continue to face the critical mission of opposing imperial hegemony. In this ongoing struggle, national identity retains an indispensable role. After achieving political independence, former colonial nations often failed to attain the anticipated economic development and social stability. Economically, shortly after independence, many became enmeshed in the neocolonial system, specifically the capitalist world-system. Immanuel Wallerstein (2003) pointed out that this system operates through a hierarchical structure comprising core states, semi-peripheral states, and peripheral states. The core states consist predominantly of former colonial metropoles, while the semi-peripheral and peripheral states are largely former colonies. Within this system, former colonies remain economically dependent on the core, supplying raw materials and serving as markets for finished goods, thereby perpetuating a state of underdevelopment. The fundamental logic of this system dictates that accumulated surplus value is unequally distributed to benefit those securing temporary monopolies within the market—an inherently capitalist logic. In essence, surplus value drives the system, and peripheral/semi-peripheral states continue to suffer from unequal exchange imposed by the core.

Politically, many former colonies have experienced social instability and persistent ethnic conflicts. Since the borders of most former colonies, including those in Africa and South Asia, were artificially imposed by colonial powers, they became fertile ground for the emergence and exacerbation of local tribalism. When exploited or supported by external forces, local tribalism can evolve into a highly destructive force, posing significant obstacles to national political unity and economic development (LI Anshan, 2004: 252). Therefore, the construction of a unifying state nationalism and the task of national integration remain profoundly challenging. In this process, national identity plays an indispensable role, because "NATIONAL PRIDE is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement" (Rorty, 1998: 3). Proceeding from the historical imperatives facing the Third World, we should incorporate national identity into the project of cultural politics. We must recognize that postcolonial theory's deconstruction of Third World national identity can inadvertently align with the West's pursuit of global hegemony. If we disregard the specific historical context of Third World nations and persistently deconstruct national identity through anti-essentialism, we risk undermining the cohesion of Third World's cultures. As ZHANG Xudong (2006: 430) contends, vulnerable cultures and institutions often must strategically emphasize an essence—a situational, constructed essence—as a necessary means of survival and assertion. Only by discerning and affirming this strategic essentialism can we correctly and reasonably evaluate the indispensable positive role of national identity within the contemporary Third World context.

5. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the conceptual connotations and characteristics of national identity, critically examined postcolonial theory's deconstruction of this concept, and identified its resulting "dehistoricizing" tendency. We argue that this tendency originates in postcolonial theory's methodological alignment with postmodernist deconstructive approaches and the specific positionality of its diasporic intellectual practitioners. To counter this, we advocate employing the Marxist historical method to transcend the deconstructive mystique surrounding national identity, firmly situating it within the concrete historical context of the Third World. This

historicization enables recognition of national identity's vital historical-cultural value and its ongoing mission within the trajectory of Third World liberation and development.

Crucially, our call to "historicize" the national identity and emphasize its strategic, contextual, and practical value does not equate to endorsing an extreme essentialist view—such as narrow cultural populism. While every nation draws upon its history as a foundation for collective imagination, Stuart Hall (2000: 211) reminds us that the nation is not eternally fixed in some essentialized, archaeological past. Rather, it is constantly being rearticulated within the discourses of history, culture, and power. Postcolonial theory's excessive methodological reliance on Western poststructuralist logic, however, leads it to overemphasize difference, rupture, and fluidity within national discourse while negating its necessary unity, continuity, and stability. Consequently, the theoretical formulations of the nation offered by postcolonial theorists hold limited practical value for Third World nations confronting real-world challenges.

Only by moving beyond this over-reliance on poststructuralism, actively incorporating the Marxist principle of historicization, and reconstructing a dialectical relationship with history, can postcolonial theory reclaim its critical potency and reshape its political and ethical relevance for the contemporary struggles of the Third World.

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(Editors: Derrick MI & Joe ZHANG)