

# ***Ethical Expansion of Provincializing Narrative: The Historical Voice of Non-Human Agents from the Perspective of Postcolonial "Irony"***

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**Abstract.** Since the proposal of the "Anthropocene", the post-humanist view of history has entered a new paradigmatic stage, exerting a profound impact on the traditional progressive narrative and forming a critical tension with dual dimensions. As a core concept, "Irony", on the one hand, reflects the oppressive nature of colonial modernity towards both human and non-human, and on the other hand promotes postcolonial theory to break through the constraints of anthropocentrism. Drawing on the perspective of "Irony" in postcolonial theory, this paper elaborates on the historical evolutionary path of the idea of "Provincializing" from subverting Eurocentric discourse to shaping interspecies ethical relations. While postcolonial perspectives strive to break down universal historical narratives, the derived practice of "provincialized human" incorporates non-human agents into the scope of moral concern, thereby fostering resistance within the discourse of the oppressors. This strategy not only transforms the modern landscape of nation-states and the global ecosystem but also provides symbolic spaces for marginalized groups such as oceans and animals through the multispecies turn, fulfilling the value vision of harmonious coexistence between human and nature in historical writing.

**Keywords:** Historical Narration, "Irony", Postcolonial Theory, Anthropocene, Provincialization

## **1. Introduction**

Emerging in the 1970s, postcolonial theory is an innovative critical perspective on colonialism in Western academic community. Its developmental context exhibits distinct historical characteristics and theoretical openness. The embryonic stage, spanning the 1950s and 1960s, was marked by Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Gandhi's practice of non-violent resistance, focusing on the construction of subjects under colonial rule and cultural resistance. The formative period in the 1970s and 1980s began with the publication of Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*, which deconstructed the binary opposition between the East and the West. Since the 1990s, postcolonial theory has entered a stage of integration: Homi K. Bhabha's "Third Space" theory broke free from static oppositional thinking, and subsequently, the postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty further turned his critical gaze to the writing of global history in his work *Provincializing Europe*. This

research paradigm has consistently rejected essentialist discourses, with its most significant contribution lying in eliminating the binary oppositional structure in colonial discourse through the concepts of "hybridity" and "dialogism". As Gayatri C. Spivak argued, the fundamental purpose of postcolonial criticism is not to overthrow the fixed relationship between the center and the periphery, but to expose the essence of power narratives and provide opportunities for marginalized groups to express themselves.

As an analytical category as important as gender, race, and class, postcolonial theory illustrates how colonial legacies have permeated the fabric of modernity through knowledge production. This experience, similar to the grammatical inflection of feminine nouns, is forced by mainstream narratives to emerge in a transformed form. This perspective coincides with ecofeminism, which criticizes the isomorphism between colonialism and patriarchy, pointing out that "the domestication of nature" and "the subordination of women" share similar power structures. Postcolonial theory brings localized knowledge back from the margins to the center, reshapes the geographical landscape of global knowledge production, and enables intersectional analysis at the methodological level. Therefore, when discussing climate justice, we cannot ignore the developmental inequalities resulting from colonial history, the racialized system of resource allocation, and the gendered division of ecological labor—this constitutes the paradigmatic contribution of postcolonial criticism to contemporary humanities and social sciences.

The concept of "Anthropocene" reveals a brand-new post-humanist view of history. The American scholar Martha Nussbaum pointed out that the term "Anthropocene" contains dual meanings: first, at the descriptive level, it signifies humanity's dominant position in the world; second, at the normative level, it implies a sense of evil and conveys strong negative emotions towards this evil. However, this tends to make people feel a lack of "motivation to move forward" [1]. Within the theoretical framework of the "Anthropocene", history and the humanities and social sciences must break through the limitations of traditional anthropocentrism, expand to a macro research perspective encompassing the entire global ecosystem and all its organisms, reinterpret the process of social development from a holistic perspective, comprehensively evaluate the current situation, and formulate sustainable development strategies for the future.

Dipesh Chakrabarty emphasizes that contemporary society should not only attach importance to the traditional issue of interpersonal equality but also explore the interactive connections between human and other life forms and their inherent balance. When we see people building houses, we often ask how long the house has existed, yet we rarely inquire about the age of mountains. This is because we unconsciously regard mountains as an unchanging part of the Earth for human. However, this constancy is now under challenge: "The problem of planetary history is a crucial part of critical thinking, equally important as the inevitable issue of equality in a world shaped by global capital." [2] The concept of "Anthropocene" breaks through the inherent limitations of the traditional linear development paradigm, creating a new narrative model and emotional expression form full of profound irony. Yi-Fu Tuan named this "romantic spirit", whose essential connotation lies in revealing the deep contradictions in such conceptual oppositions and the inevitable tension between researchers' idealistic pursuits and practical actions. The inherent characteristic of geography lies in exploring the conventional boundaries of human life, and "seeking" is one of the important elements contained in "romanticism" in this field [3]. While geography has traditionally been categorized under the natural sciences, Yi-Fu Tuan focused on its essence as an interactive process between nature and humanity, as well as the emotional drives and idealistic edification that individuals experience in this interaction. He strived to write a history of geography and a scholarly biography that incorporate emotional dimensions. This interaction between subject and object urges us to re-

examine the "silent ones" in history. These "silent ones" include not only oppressed colonized peoples, women, and ethnic minorities but also a broader scope of entities such as animals, oceans, and even microorganisms.

## **2. The historiographical practice of subaltern studies and the construction of "ironical" narration**

Through Dipesh Chakrabarty's early life experiences, we can gain insight into the dilemmas India faced in its development. In his autobiography, Chakrabarty described his growth trajectory as a unique form of "Irony". The business school he attended was one of only two in the world that offered history as a compulsory course. The Nehru government's education policy adopted a dual strategy: requiring mastery of capitalist economic knowledge as the cornerstone of India's capitalist development, while emphasizing an anti-colonial ideological core in the curriculum. The compulsory history course aimed to inherit the anti-colonial tradition. Without this distinctive policy formulated by the Nehru government, he might never have deeply understood the profound significance of history in human affairs. Subsequently, Chakrabarty resolutely chose to become a historian, pursued a PhD in history at The Australian National University, and joined the later renowned Subaltern Studies group.

Chakrabarty argued that from the 1970s to the 1990s, the issue of development in non-Western countries and postcolonial contexts had a far-reaching impact. Scholars, both in European and American academic community and those in the Third World, conducted extensive discussions on modernity, rights, and other related topics [4]. During this period, the awakening of marginalized groups' awareness of rights and the expansion of postcolonial theory promoted each other, giving birth to new paradigms for addressing predicaments. After the 1990s, Chakrabarty focused on the application prospects of the methodology of Subaltern Studies, the cultural and political connotations of the Caste System, and the historical construction of individual identities, gradually deepening his understanding of these issues through subsequent discussions.

He paid special attention to Ranajit Guha's unique insights into the phenomenon of modern Indian peasants, arguing that peasants should not be regarded as traditional symbols destined to disappear in the process of modernization, but as an important component that profoundly reflects the trajectory of colonial history. Colonial rule created a crucial path for Indian society to move towards modernity [5]. In constructing a localized historical narrative for India, Chakrabarty particularly focused on the inherent connections and potential tensions between Western theoretical paradigms and South Asian regional practices. Drawing inspiration from Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and the critical perspective of Mao Zedong Thought, his doctoral dissertation took labor history as an entry point, in-depth analyzed the class differentiation within the early bourgeois social structure in India, and comprehensively discussed the profound impact of this labor model on modern economic forms [6].

The "subaltern" is the embodiment of the concept of "Irony". The relationship between elites and subalterns is not a simple binary opposition but a complex one full of contradictory tensions, presenting multi-level and dynamic interactive characteristics. Chakrabarty has long focused on the differences between India and the West in their understanding of "Europe", as well as the inherent connections between ideas and their places of origin. This study focuses on exploring the unique value of the spirit of irony and its rare manifestation in the Indian cultural context, analyzing its connections with Western ways of thinking. As a cognitive paradigm, this concept focuses on the reconstruction and reflection of historical narratives, aiming to break through the constraints of traditional ideas and systematically elaborate on the complex historical development process. From

the perspective of Gramsci's "hegemony theory", the "subaltern" can be regarded as a discursive practice that challenges the established social order, including major discourses that defend the existing class structure and power configuration. Subaltern Studies is essentially a critical perspective or analytical tool that focuses on marginalized groups' re-understanding of the contradictions behind mainstream discourse. As a rhetorical device, irony has also become an important means to explore hidden ideological conflicts.

Chakrabarty's academic growth trajectory is deeply intertwined with India's unique educational policies and social context. His theoretical construction of "Irony" and practical exploration in Subaltern Studies not only provided a critical analytical tool for postcolonial historiography but also revealed the reconstruction path of historical cognitive paradigms in the discursive practices of marginalized groups, laying a methodological foundation for subsequent discussions on the historical voice of non-human agents.

### 3. Postcolonial "ironical" narration and the expansion of planetary history from the perspective of the anthropocene

Centered on the topic of "the Other", postcolonial theory provides methodological support for empowering non-human agents. The practice of establishing the ethical status of non-human through the concept of human rights from the Western Enlightenment can be seen as a counterpoint to the discourse of the oppressors in postcolonial criticism. Chakrabarty's research focuses on the universal characteristics of human living spaces in the context of climate change, which clearly differs from the emphasis on cultural particularity in postcolonial theory. Some of his former colleagues questioned whether he had betrayed his original stance and was moving closer to the Eurocentric paradigm. However, he never completely abandoned his attention to and in-depth exploration of postcolonial issues, constantly attempting new approaches. Thus, he successfully achieved the integration of postcolonial thought into climate change research, which has greatly expanded the academic boundaries and development potential of this field [7]. In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty pointed out that if the study of Indian history breaks away from the constraints of universal ideas from Britain and Europe, such historiographical construction will lack crucial dimensions. Regarding climate change, he further elaborated that if the writing of human history fails to engage with deep time, it will inevitably lead to severe cognitive limitations.

With the emergence of the "Anthropocene", the traditional progressive narrative model has begun to show inherent flaws and internal contradictions. Chakrabarty creatively introduced the idea of "Irony" into the historiographical research of post-humanist theory. He argued that in historical writing over the past fifty years, especially within the framework of historical narratives formed over the past five hundred years, the concept of freedom has always occupied a central position. However, this form of freedom is a paradoxical one, forming a profound opposition to the process of planetary subjugation based on fossil fuel energy. Since the mid-19th century, population size, average life expectancy, and quality of life have all shown a significant upward trend and have been incorporated into various statistical indicator systems. Nevertheless, these changes can also be regarded as the result of humanity's in-depth transformation and intervention in key ecological processes such as the carbon cycle, nitrogen cycle, and hydrological cycle [4]. Traditional humanists often separate history from nature, but geological research has shown that human have always existed within the specific category of "things". Yi-Fu Tuan argued that when cities break away from an agricultural context, they take on a romantic color—a kind of alienation from real things. Yet agricultural production is precisely one of the essential elements for maintaining human survival, embodying both natural attributes and necessity. In the book *Planet of Desire* published in 2024, the

American environmental historian Donald Worster elaborated on the inseparable inherent connection between human history and the material Earth. He stated that human behavior has been deeply driven by instincts and emotional tendencies throughout the long course of development, continuously promoting the in-depth development of the interactive relationship between human and the natural environment [8].

Chakrabarty's research breaks through traditional historiography, redefines the deep connection between human and nature as well as the essence of freedom, reconstructing "freedom" as an integrated concept involving interactions in ecology, environment, resources, and other fields. The construction of "planetary history" originates from Chakrabarty's re-articulation of Spivak's "planetary theory" and the expanded perspective of Bruno Latour's "Gaia hypothesis", gradually forming a narrative paradigm incorporating postcolonial criticism and post-humanism. He pointed out that while technological progress and industrial development have brought numerous achievements, we often overlook the ecological costs they entail. With the continuous expansion of global spatial cognition, modern civilization has gradually broken away from the inherent order of nature. The popularization of "electricity" marks a significant progress in humanity's conquest of darkness; however, Yi-Fu Tuan argued that this also altered natural time—the "day and night cycle". Early criticisms suggested that the replacement of candle lighting with gas lamps as violating the way God created the world: the night should remain in its original darkness. The modern phenomenon of "nightlife" did not exist before industrialization. Traditional societies were generally constrained by natural rhythms, and few places dared to break the limitations of regular daily schedules. The extensive development and utilization of fossil energy have not only threatened the safety of the human living environment but also posed a great risk to human freedom.

The theory of the "Anthropocene" provides a new historical perspective for understanding contemporary social development and is establishing a core narrative framework guiding the development of the era, organically integrating deep geological changes, the course of biological evolution, and the process of modern civilization. This has become a crucial issue that urgently needs to be addressed in the field of historiographical research. It not only tests scholars' historical thinking abilities but also highlights the importance of re-examining the relationship between human and nature. Within the paradigm of the "Anthropocene", both climate scientists and traditional historians are actively exploring the past to address the uncertainties of the future, jointly participating in the construction of a new historical discourse system. As the impact of human activities on the global ecological pattern intensifies, Chakrabarty endorses Latour's view that the narrative of "emancipation" is trapped in a profound crisis [4].

Since the Industrial Revolution, human civilization has developed rapidly. While achieving economic growth, it has also caused enormous damage to the ecological environment, triggering a series of ecological crises that seriously threaten the development process and survival foundation of contemporary society. Against this backdrop, the historical community has begun to recognize its important responsibility in addressing global challenges. Drawing on Latour's "Gaia hypothesis", Chakrabarty creatively proposed an innovative research approach breaking through traditional historiographical paradigms—"spatialized narration", arguing that historians are obligated to record the evolutionary course of the Earth and envision the direction of future development. Currently, there are numerous international scholars focusing on this theme, providing strong support for in-depth interdisciplinary discussions, with geography serving as one of the important supporting disciplines.

#### 4. The dual tensions of postcolonialism and the practice of "irony"

The essential characteristic of postcolonial theory can be regarded as a narrative practice with inherent tensions—it argues by relying on the colonial discourse system, yet establishes the legitimacy of its own arguments through deconstructing this framework. This contradiction is concentrated in the dual stance of the concept of "provincialization" towards historical narration: on the one hand, it continuously challenges the universalist claims of Eurocentrism; on the other hand, it is difficult to completely break free from the constraints of Eurocentrism as the core representation of modernity. This "internal and external" critical perspective constitutes a key dimension of postcolonial discourse. When re-examining these issues through post-humanist ideas, the concept of "provincialization" transcends the outdated framework of anthropocentrism and reconstructs the old way of thinking in an ironic manner. When reducing Western history from a "universal model" to the experience of a specific region, it exposes the contingent nature of Western modernity and reflects its instrumental significance and application potential in academic research. This theory uses the strategy of irony to break through the traditional model of "Eurocentrism": by conducting a detailed analysis of the binary oppositional construction mechanism such as "civilization/barbarism" in colonial discourse, it concludes that all knowledge systems are inherently local, and adopts a self-referential approach to dissolve the static oppositional relationship between subject and object. As a form of self-expression originating from the non-Western world, its irony is more reflected in the dialectical reflection on Enlightenment rationality—that is, not completely negating the role of rational tools themselves, but attempting to incorporate some local experiences to correct their flaws. This inherent tension of "achieving self-liberation through the discourse of the oppressors" constitutes a key characteristic of postcolonial narration.

The concept of "provincialization" demonstrates unique paradoxical characteristics in reshaping universal values. It neither attempts to create a new "meta-narrative" nor completely denies the possibility of the coexistence of multiple universalisms. The identity of the "Indian subject" possesses dual attributes in the process of political modernization: it exists both as an active participant in historical processes and as constrained by the interaction of various discursive systems. In this context, "Europe" has always existed as a potential core frame of reference in various narrative threads and has become an important supporting element in the process of theoretical construction [5]. From a non-Western perspective, the aspirations for life, resistance, and idealistic pursuits of individuals that have been overlooked or marginalized in mainstream historical documents are fully reflected in research. The idea of "provincialization" seeks to highlight the universal significance contained in abstract concepts and promote their dissemination and diffusion. The dissolution of empires and the process of decolonization not only challenged the traditional framework of historical narration but also sparked interest in rethinking and reconstructing these historical narrative models. Prasenjit Duara echoed Chakrabarty's view, stating that "postcolonialism is not merely a critique of the illusions of modernity and the differences in its practices... but has produced an intellectual model distinct from the logic of modern civilization and the discourse of Enlightenment rationality." [9] The concept of "provincialization" in cultural studies provides a critical analytical perspective for examining power relations, knowledge production, and social inequalities. Re-examining mainstream theoretical frameworks and their practical paths through this "provincialized" way of thinking not only facilitates the construction of a pluralistic cognitive system but also helps to generate a more inclusive academic paradigm. The crucial significance of the idea of "provincialization" lies in urging scholars to break through the limitations of traditional disciplinary boundaries, incorporate the temporal dimension and historical context into the process

of theoretical construction, and thereby form a social science research model that values the interaction of ideas.

The concept of "provincialized human" is highly ironic. Human are part of the natural ecosystem, yet their moral status is constructed based on the human rights discourse system of Western Enlightenment rationality. This perspective breaks through the traditional postcolonial historiographical paradigm and provides a new theoretical approach for exploring the modes of existence of non-human agents. The reflection on "provincialized human" helps to deeply understand the fundamental causes of poverty and promotes the expansion of postcolonial research towards larger-scale social issues. In the future, scholars need to strive to integrate national narrative with global governance practices, systematically examining the transformation of human roles in ecological crises and their complex interconnections. Chakrabarty and Latour jointly constructed the theoretical framework of "spatial philosophy", achieving a crucial breakthrough in the transformation of historical philosophy into this emerging field. This paradigm not only attaches importance to the spatial attributes and evolutionary laws of the natural geographical environment but also conducts in-depth analysis of the operational mechanisms, interaction models, and far-reaching impacts of human practical activities within specific temporal and spatial contexts. They emphasize that space should not be regarded merely as a static entity but as a dynamic and complex system integrating various social and cultural factors [10].

## 5. Conclusion

Einstein once compared physics to the "music of the spheres". Yi-Fu Tuan stated that under the influence of post-romanticism, the positions of contemporary nature conservationists and ecological advocates, while somewhat rational, have deviated from traditional romanticism. From the perspective of the long course of human development, it is imperative to examine this transformation. Yi-Fu Tuan explained that true romantics must be grounded in firm beliefs and do not rely solely on emotions for their existence. In the current academic context, Yi-Fu Tuan has established a geographical research paradigm centered on cosmology. From a historical perspective, traditional views often regarded geography as having a certain "cosmic" attribute, but the inherent characteristics of geography have always been in a dynamic process of continuous change and reshaping.

Fundamentally speaking, natural science is also an important part of humanity's journey of self-exploration. Geography not only focuses on the study of the Earth's surface but also delves into human cognition and exploration of the natural environment. The irony derived from this postcolonial perspective is essentially a profound reflection of human innermost emotions. What it truly reveals is the intense feelings deep within the human heart. Faced with the unknown universe and nature, we experience fear—fear of losing control and of the unexplainable troubles that may arise. On the other hand, however, we are filled with longing for the unknown, eager to explore, to understand, and to acquire more knowledge and power. It is this contradictory psychology that drives humanity to continuously progress, explore courageously, forge ahead, and make constant breakthroughs.

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