

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Colonialism: A Critical Overview

Anindita Mondal

Junior Research fellow (UGC NET), B.U. , India

Abstract:

The Enlightenment had a central role in articulating the superior, civilized nature of modern empires. The 'reformulation' of empire with the Enlightenment and modernity signified an important, if imperfect, change in Western European political and cultural thought (Pagden, 1995). Commerce was now preferred to conquest in expanding European powers. The 'serious business' of bringing the 'far-flung civilizations' they had discovered into the orbit of western trade and commerce, and exploiting their wealth, land and labour and natural resources for European development had become a major enterprise. Europe began to imprint its culture and customs on the new worlds. The colonies became the 'jewels in the crown' of the new European empires (Hall, 1992: 287).

1. Defining the Term

The word 'colonialism', according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), comes from the roman 'colonia' which meant 'farm' or 'settlement', and referred to Romans who settled in other lands but still retained their citizenship. Accordingly, the OED describes it as,

A settlement in a new country.....a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a Community subject to or connected with their parent state; the community so formed, Consisting of the original settlers and their descendants and successors, as long as the Connection with the parent state is kept up.

This definition, quite remarkably avoids any reference to people other than the colonizers, people who might already have been living in those places where colonies were established. Hence it evacuates the word 'colonialism' of any implication of encounters between peoples, or of conquest and domination. Colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history. The process of 'forming a community' in the new land necessarily meant unforming or re-forming the communities that existed there already, and involved a wide range of practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement and rebellions. Such practices produced and were produced through a variety of writings—public and private records, letters and trade documents, government papers, fiction and scientific literature. So colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other peoples' land and goods.

Marxist thinking on this subject locates a crucial distinction between early and modern colonialism. Whereas earlier colonialism was pre-capitalist, modern colonialism was established alongside capitalism in Western Europe. [Bottomore; 1983: 81-85] Modern colonialism did more than extract tribute, goods and wealth from the countries that it conquered—it restructured the economies of the latter, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonized and colonial countries. This flow worked in both directions—slaves and indentured labour as well as raw materials were transported to manufactured goods in the metropolis, or in other locations for metropolitan consumption, but the colonies also provided captive markets for European goods. Thus slaves were moved from Africa to Americas, and in the West Indian plantations they produced sugar for consumption in Europe, and raw cotton was moved from India to be manufactured into cloth in England and then sold back to India whose own cloth production suffered as a result. In whichever direction human and materials travelled, the profits always flowed back into the so-called 'mother country'. Thus Loomba opines that colonialism was the midwife that assisted at the birth of European capitalism, or that without colonial expansion the transition to capitalism could not have taken place in Europe. [Loomba; 1998: 2-4]

2. Colonial Writing

Colonial literature, which is assumed to be literature reflecting a colonial ethos, usually lacks more precise definition, partly because it is now not much canonized, and partly because it is so heterogeneous. E. Boehmer has made a distinction between the terms colonial and colonialist when applied to literature. Colonial literature, which is the more general term, will be taken to mean writing concerned with colonial perceptions and experience, written mainly by metropolitans, but also by creoles and indigenes, during colonial times. Colonialist literature in contrast was that which was specifically concerned with colonial expansion. On the whole, it was literature written by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European lands dominated by them. It embodied the imperialists' point of view. Its distinctive stereotype language was geared to mediating the white man's relationship with colonized peoples. [Boehmer; 1995: 2-3]

Colonial or even colonialist writing was never as invasively confident or as pompously dismissive of indigenous cultures as its oppositional pairing with post colonial writing might suggest. It is worth recalling also that initiatives which we now call post colonial first began to emerge before the time of formal independence, and therefore formed part of colonial literature.

Language and literature are together implicated in constructing the binary of a European self and a non-European other, which, as Said's Orientalism suggested, is a part of the creation of colonial authority. Peter Hulme's work on the formation of a colonial discourse in sixteenth century's America, is extremely illuminating in this regard. Hulme shows how two words—'cannibal' and 'hurricane'—were lifted from Native American tongues and adopted as new words into all major European languages in order to 'strengthen an ideological discourse'. [1986a: 101]

Colonial writing is important for revealing the ways in which that world system could represent the degradation of other human beings as natural, an innate part of their degenerate or barbarian state. Over determined by stereotype, the characterization of indigenous peoples tended to screen out their agency, diversity, resistance, thinking, voices. It is on the basis that postcolonial theorists refer to the colonized as the colonial other, or simply the other.

Some Victorian writers and thinkers—Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Trollope and Dickens among them—directly responded to imperial developments in essays and journalism as well as in longer work. But for most it would be true to say that their writing participated in the representation of British global power mainly by taking it for granted. As Edward Said has put it, mainstream realist novels, therefore, could be of imperial domination even if they were not about it. Where the rest of the world was ignored in a novel, it was because that rest, the non-west, was assumed to be marginal and secondary to the metropolis.

Rather than simply being the writing which 'came after' empire, postcolonial literature is that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspective. To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writers sought to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization—the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination. Postcolonial literature is therefore deeply marked by experiences of cultural exclusion and division under empire.

Michael Gorra points out; critics such as Edward W. Said and Abdul Jan Mohamed tend "to settle for a Manichaeism of their own, a too easy reliance on binary distinctions between the center and the margin, the canonical and the noncanonical, relying on the tired vocabulary they would nevertheless destabilize". [Gorra; 1997: 4-5]

A very recent phase of postcolonial scholarship attempts to move beyond easy binaries of colonizer/colonized. Such theorists as Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha and Trinh Minh-ha, taking a cue from post-structuralist philosophy, have tended to focus their analyses on the role of language and writing specifically in the dissemination, of, and resistance to, colonial ideologies. Such studies as Bhabha's "Location of Culture" seek to apply this heightened awareness of the ambiguities and undecidabilities of Western thought and writing in general to interrogate the contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in colonial discourses.

George Orwell's self-conscious colonist in "Shooting an Elephant" perfectly exemplifies this colonial ambivalence: "A sahib has got to act like a sahib..... He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it." The colonized subject also wears a mask of acquiescence or resistance, love and identification, or hatred and resistance. But each of these essentialized "masks" deconstruct themselves upon the colonized subject's realization that they are neither wholly apart—from nor a part—of the colonizing regime; that is, the fact of colonization brings with it the inevitable intermingling of cultural discourses between colonizing and colonized groups, and the impossibility that either one will emerge 'uncontaminated' by the other.

In literary terms, this new postcolonial discourse moves beyond both a subsidiary 'Commonwealth' status and a nativist anticolonialism to achieve a space within the erstwhile master's literature from which to write its own hybrid or syncretic identity. Such new postcolonial writings embody what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have, in their work on Franz Kafka, ironically called a "minor literature" that minority groups construct "within a major language."

3. Colonial Discourses

'Discourse', a term used frequently in contemporary critical writing, is the context in which knowledge is produced. It defines the limits of what can be said, and what is prohibited. It sanctions and legitimizes knowledge. It is the context, also, of representation, speech and language. Discourse, in contemporary thinking, is about power and regulation because it is the very context of language and expression.

Theories of colonial discourses have played a great role in the development of Post colonialism. In general, they explore the ways that representations and modes of perception are used as fundamental weapons of colonial power to keep colonized people subservient to colonial rule. To make theoretical sense of the colonized's complicity in the colonial condition; we have to understand the mechanisms of power. The logic of power as critics like Benita Parry insist, is fundamentally coercive, its campaign is frequently seductive. While it may manifest itself in a show and application of force, it is equally likely to appear as the disinterested purveyor of cultural enlightenment and reform. Through this double representation, power offers itself both as a political limit and as a cultural possibility. [Gandhi; 1998: 14] The apparent political exclusivity of power is thus matched, as Foucault argues, by its web-like inclusiveness:

"Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position simultaneously undergoing or exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are like vehicles of power, not its points of application". [Foucault; 1980a: 98]

Thus, if power is available as a form of 'subjection', it is also a procedure which is 'subjectivised' through, and within, particular individuals. According to Foucault, there is no 'outside' to power—it is always, already, everywhere. In his book "The Intimate Enemy" (1983), Ashis Nandy writes:

This colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process, it helps to generalize the concept of modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in minds.

Colonialism, then, to put it simply, marks the historical process whereby the 'West' attempts systematically to cancel or negate the cultural difference and value of the 'non-west'. [Gandhi, 1998: 16] colonialism is perpetuated in part by justifying the idea that it is right and proper to rule over other peoples, and by getting colonized people to accept their lower ranking in the colonial order of things—a process—'colonizing the mind'. It operates by persuading people to internalize its logic and speak its language; to perpetuate the values and assumptions of the colonizers regards the ways they perceive and represent the world. [McLeod; 2000: 18]

Under colonialism, colonized people are made subservient to ways of regarding the world which reflect and support colonialist values. Actually, a particular value-system is taught as the best, truest world-view. The cultural values of the colonized people are deemed as 'lacking in value', or even as being 'uncivilized', from which they must be rescued. The colonialists take the 'great' task of 'civilizing' the nation—'White's burden'. The British Empire did not rule by military and physical force alone. It endured by getting both colonizing and colonized people to see their world and themselves in a particular way, internalizing the language of Empire as representing the natural, true order of life. McLeod opines, that the internationalization of colonial sets of values was an effective way of disempowering people which was the source of trauma for colonized peoples who were taught to look negatively upon their people, their culture and themselves. (McLeod, 2000:19)

In their important work, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin state bluntly that the crucial function of language is as a medium of power. (Ashcroft et al. 2001: 38) Writing back in a postcolonial context to the centre of power therefore involves a reappraisal of the dominant language, and a reclaiming of linguistic alternatives, whether as variant of that dominant language or as totally different systems. Colonialism, Ngũgĩ claims, involved both the undervaluing of a people's culture and the elevation of the language of the colonizer: "The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized". [wa Thiong'o 1986: 16]

Colonies were established, as we know, for valuable raw materials, new markets and commercial gain. The process also involved the export of many aspect of European culture. In the first instance, religion often went hand in hand with profit. In Latin America, the Church established itself rapidly through a series of measures, varying from outright brutality to the subtle shifting of sites and objects of worship from one culture to another through a process of remaining and resanctifying. Crucial to the missionary enterprise was, of course, translation, and it is significant that in many parts of the world the translation of sacred texts was seen as a fundamental step on the road to 'civilization'. [Bassnett in Chew& Richards, 2010: 86-87]

Ultimately, the colony was always seen as the product of the place of origin, as a kind of copy. Given that a focus in translation discourse is the idea of loss incurred in the transfer, the copy was bound to be regard as inferior to the original: and similarly the colony was inferior to the culture from which it originated. In both cases, the journey from the point of origin carried the implicit notion of an inferior product resulting from that journey.

4. References

1. Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1989) "The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures". London: Routledge
2. Bhabha Homi K (1994) "The Location of Culture". London: Routledge
3. Boehmer, E (1995) "Colonial and Postcolonial Literature". Oxford: O.U.P
4. Bottomore, T (1983) "A Dictionary of Marxist Thought". Oxford: Blackwell
5. Bush Barbara (2006) "Imperialism and Postcolonialism". U.K: Pearson Education Ltd
6. Chew Shirley and Richards David (2010) ed. "A Concise Companion to Postcolonial Literature". USA: Willey- Blackwell
7. Chrisman Laura (2003) "Postcolonial Contraventions". Manchester: Manchester University Press
8. Clifford James (1988) "The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art". Cambridge: Harvard UP
9. Dodson Michael S. (2010) "Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture: India 1770-1880" New Delhi: Foundation Books
10. Fanon Frantz (1952/ 1986) "Black Skin, White Masks" trans. Charles Lam Markmann, USA: Pluto Press
11. ---(1961/ 1967) "The Wretched of Earth" trans. Constance Farrington, London: Penguin Press
12. Foucault, M (1980) "Power/ Knowledge: selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977", ed. Colin Gordon, Hertfordshire: Harvester Press
13. Gandhi Leela (1995) "Post colonial Theory: A Critical Introduction". New Delhi: Oxford University Press
14. Gorra, Michael (1997) "After Empire: Scott Naipaul, Rushdie". Chicago: University of Chicago Press
15. Greenblatt, S (1991) "Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World". Chicago: Chicago University Press
16. Hall, S & Gieben, B (1992) "Formations of Modernity". UK: Polity Press
17. Hulme, P (1986) "Colonial Encounters, Europe and the Native Carribean 1492-1797. London: Methuen
18. Loomba Ania (1998) "Colonialism/ Postcolonialism". London: Routledge
19. McLeod John (2000) "Beginning Postcolonialism". Manchester: Manchester University Press
20. Mongia Padmini (1997) "Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader". New Delhi: Oxford University Press
21. Nandy Ashis (1983) "The Intimate Enemy". Oxford: O.U.P
22. Pagden, Anthony (1995) "Lords of All the Worlds: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France 1500-1850". New Haven
23. Said Edward (1978) "Orientalism". New York: Pantheon
24. wa Thiong'o, N (1986) "Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature". London: James Currey
25. Young Robert (1990) "White Mythologies: Writing History and the West". London: Routledge