

The Politics of Missionary Discourses

Jolly Alex

Assistant Professor

Dept. of English

Christian College

Chengannur, Kerala, India

jollyjeru@gmail.com

Abstract

Missionaries have characteristically been charged with, cultural annihilation and for conjuring up biased images of diverse and distant peoples and places. Employing the tools of rhetorical analysis, to bear upon such “non-literary texts”, it can be contended that the relation between mission and imperialism is one of ambivalence, which refuses to be restricted in the binary framework but is in reality an amalgamation of dynamic and complex relationships. The aim is to evaluate critically the charges of imperial orthodoxy levelled on missionaries, being considered to be co-conspirators with the imperialists. Though, the missionaries cannot be said to be totally free from the influence of the empire and it has been conceded that they have their faults yet they may more appropriately designated as “ambivalent imperialist”.

Keywords: Ambivalence, Hybridisation, Contact Zone.

<https://doi.org/10.24113/ijellh.v7i11.10126>

Over the years postcolonial studies have tried to delve into the ensuing products, when people of various religious, social, cultural, racial and political circumstances come in contact for a period of time. Historians have focused on missions within India, mainly with a purview of exploring the hegemony of the colonialist and how it impacted the natives. Postcolonial Studies has focused much of its critique of British Imperialism at those informal agents accountable for the cultural crimes of colonial abuse. Missionaries have characteristically been charged with, cultural annihilation and for conjuring up biased images of diverse and distant peoples and places. In keeping with a rising inclination in historical studies, this article revisits the intricacy of missionary inclination in colonialism, and its rhetorical creation of otherness. This intricacy is seen most prominently within the literature writings produced by the missionaries themselves. Employing the tools of rhetorical analysis, to bear upon such “non-literary texts”, it can be contended that the relation between mission and imperialism is one of ambivalence, which refuses to be restricted in the binary framework but is in reality an amalgamation of dynamic and complex relationships.

European missionaries were informal agents who due to their close interaction with the indigenous people, were influential in undermining the foundations of colonialism, resulting in an eventual decentring of power equations in the colonies. The exchanges, between the missionaries and the natives produced in the minds of all those who came into this contact zone, an escalation, alteration, redefinition or radical ideological transformation. This led to the conception of a new zone with redefined ethics, which has been termed as “the third space” by Homi Bhabha and “contact zone” by Mary Louise Pratt. Pratt defines the contact zone as a liminal space where cross-cultural interactions take place. Such an interface does not suggest an equal footing, but on the contrary such developments are administered by inequalities and hierarchies of power (Pratt 33). Peter Van der Veer has, in-depth analysed imperial encounters between the Indians and Europeans and concluded that these were in reality a dialogic process

<https://doi.org/10.24113/ijellh.v7i11.10126>

which resulted in the emergence of a hybridised culture, which simultaneously influenced both the Westerners and the Indians. The interests of Christian mission, it is true, very often concurred with those of empire, but the two things were not the same. This leads us to conclude that, where missionaries acted as agents of colonialism, it was not generally deliberate and that often they actually helped “curb the worst colonial excesses.” (Said 166)

In the postcolonial world, public view had been ambiguous over the role of missionaries in the colonies. The pro-missionary school of thought tends to portray them as pioneers who risked their lives and brought about positive socio-cultural changes. Conversely, others believe that missionaries were merely “cultural imperialists”, who pursued single-minded goals in agreement with such forces as imperialism, modernization and globalization for selfish purposes. The most devastating critiques of the missionary enterprise concentrate on the missionary role in the construction of European colonialism. Since, missions were considered to flourish under the patronage of imperialism, it was a foregone conclusion that missionary enterprise and evangelisation would collapse ‘after the sunset’.

In the 1990’s a paradigm shift ensued when statistics proved that the number of Christians multiplied with the collapse of colonialism and surprisingly it became a non-western religion. The European percentage of Christianity declined whereas it was estimated that majority of Christians inhabited Asia, Africa, or Latin America and this was indeed a major demographic shift. Hence, the discourses which propagated that Western missionary movements were the monolithic imposition of European domination, no longer stands. The seismic swing in the world Christian population is stimulating a reevaluation of the hitherto prevalent post-colonialist discourses of the Western mission legacy. Andrew Porter, a historian, has attacked the perception of “cultural imperialism” as an elastic notion that has been stretched to refer to “any instance where awareness of the wider world represented by the West has influenced indigenous cultural change”, with the supposition that the change was levied by

<https://doi.org/10.24113/ijellh.v7i11.10126>

force against the interests of the colonized people. In recent historical studies, the missionaries are treated as concrete actors in definite historical situations and contributors in the emergence of hybrid relationships in their interaction with the indigenous people, who co-exist in the colonialist contexts. Hence, an attempt is made to study and reflect on the encounters between the missionary and the natives which was the point of genesis of certain realignments, hybridities, emergence of modern concepts and practices in the zones where the missionary and the natives conflagrated. Such reflections reveal that, these missionary voices, cannot be labelled as colonialist discourses on account of the ambivalence inherent in it.

Christian missionaries maintained an ambivalent relation with both imperialism and native nationalism as is reflected in their writings. A postcolonial reading of missionary literature reveals the prejudiced binary-viewing of these works and brings to the fore the ambivalence in their works. The lumping of all missionaries as one monolithic whole as imperial proselytizers, does not do justice to those missionaries who were instrumental in decentring of power dynamics in the socio-cultural milieu. Missionary narratives serve as an interface of religion, society and politics in postcolonial times taking into account the ways and processes through which modern community identities and associated cultural practices are contested, challenged and (re)configured. Studies delving into the missionary writings, show that they have been erroneously linked with imperial conquests, and haven't been acknowledged for their role in bridging the gap between the imperialists and natives. Their presence and work ushered major changes in the concept and practices of the colonizer and the colonized at this point of contact.

Studies on missionary engagement have often perceived them as concomitant with the colonial project, fixating on the colonisers' crimes and indigenous sufferings. Robert Young argues that colonialism has been charted onto the Hegelian master–slave dialectic, since it is very obvious who the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys' are. Yet, progressively it has been

<https://doi.org/10.24113/ijellh.v7i11.10126>

interrogated whether power works in such an unsophisticated manner; Foucault for one contests 'the idea that power has a single source in a master, king, or class'. Homi Bhabha, challenging the Hegelian binary, extends a different framework for the colonial experience, contending that the bi-polar oppositions of the West and the Orient are crude categories that imply that culture is fixed, or essential, when in reality identities are 'dialogic'. Colonialism can be perceived as a 'negotiation' between coloniser and colonised, out of which hybrid identities result. Applying Bhabha's design to missionary writings helps to identify the ambivalence in missionary writings, to show that they weren't orthodox imperialists though they cannot be fully exonerated of the crimes of cultural annihilation. The intricate and refined understanding of the phenomena of imperialism, is very fruitful to examine the relationship between missionary enterprise and the empire and to unravel the quintessential practices embedded in them. Hence, it's of vital significance to study these missionary writings in terms of not only its political and socio-economic aspects but also a delving into its ideological aspects. It's remarkable that in spite of so much of advancement in the theories of postcolonial discourse analysis, very few critics have focused their attention on these aspects of missionary writings. It's a common observation that most of such analysis are detailed and productive yet are not fully acceptable because of its limited purview which classifies these texts as invariably imperialist discourses. Consequently, this argument will be complicated by bringing out aspects of ambivalence that these texts are replete with, than that is hitherto acknowledged. Though missionary writings are implicated within the purview of imperialist discourse, yet the ambivalence and heterogeneity abounding in these texts, question such a myopic branding of these works.

In-depth analysis of missionary writings reveals the incongruities, tensions and ambivalence seen in imperialistic discourses in general and missionary writings in particular. Through this study and multiple other historical, sociological and cultural studies, it has been

<https://doi.org/10.24113/ijellh.v7i11.10126>

proved that the postcolonial charges levelled against missionaries are prejudiced and they can't be branded as agents of imperialism. The ambivalence in their writings disqualifies them from being "imperialist discourses" and hence it's time to critically re-evaluate the existing postcolonial reading methodology. Lamin Sanneh in his book, *Translating the Message* has contended that the Western imperialists in order to assuage their guilt have very conveniently dumped all allegations on the missionary enterprise as the ones responsible for "colonizing the consciousness" and promoting colonialism.(111) The sheer volume of the literature published by them and its relatively easy accessibility makes them an easy target to these accusations. Another reason, why missionary writings have become a soft target to postcolonial critique is because they have never been accorded the status of a complex genre which entitles a detailed literary analysis, instead its treated very facetiously and subject mostly to theological or historical studies. This understanding, therefore renders an essentialist reading of these works and disregards the complexity of relation which exists between the missionary and the empire. Thus, by essentializing certain voices and overstating their role in the colonial enterprise, the postcolonial critics continue to perpetuate the colonial legacy by turning a blind eye towards certain facts staring at their faces. It is for this reason that postcolonialism has come under criticism by various thinkers. Spivak for instance, censures it for attempting to paint with the same hue all the colonized people, while totally ignoring the heterogeneity existing in them. (285)

Other than Spivak, Arun Mukherjee, contend that postcolonial theories have reduced the world into an 'amazingly simple and uniform place', and have by the process of essentializing reduced cultures into a static and fixed identity. (14-15) Postcolonial discourses are limited because they ignore heterogeneity and hierarchies and gloss over the diversities in cultures. Postcolonial model is dependent on stereotypes of colonial agents and is a Western academic product, which is unable to

<https://doi.org/10.24113/ijellh.v7i11.10126>

explain the continuing presence of colonialism even now. Its high time that the reading practices and hermeneutics of postcolonialism are re-examined.

The aim of the work is neither to vindicate nor to condemn the missionaries, but it is to question the essentialized simplistic assertions of the relationship between the empire and mission. Such an assertion fails to take into consideration the heterogeneity and complexity inherent in both these ventures and the possibility that one didn't complement the other. Brian Stanley does concur that missionaries did indulge in cultural intrusions but the evaluation can become too much against the missionary enterprise when we take it out of context and fail to take into account the time period when this occurred, for it was indeed a period in which British Empire enjoyed considerable respect. While much has been written and said about the desire of the western missionaries to civilize the natives, yet not much work is done to gauge the desire of the local Christians to actively adopt Western accoutrements in spite of being discouraged by the missionaries. In many contexts it was observed that the mission didn't approve of Empire agendas and critiqued it. But there were times, when it directly or indirectly worked in tandem with the Empire to further their mission legacy. The attempt here isn't to exonerate missionaries, but to lay bare the 'alterity within the hegemonic' (Hodgkins 241). The aim is to evaluate critically the charges of imperial orthodoxy levelled on missionaries, being considered to be co-conspirators with the imperialists. Though, the missionaries cannot be said to be totally free from the influence of the empire and it has been conceded that they have their faults yet they may more appropriately be designated as "ambivalent imperialist". Many of the missionaries, who were in India during the British rule, were both critical of yet complicit to some extent with the doctrines of imperialism. Scrutinizing these

<https://doi.org/10.24113/ijellh.v7i11.10126>

missionary writings reveals that these works as literary genre demand greater attention than that has been hitherto accorded to it.

<https://doi.org/10.24113/ijellh.v7i11.10126>

Works Cited

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Hodgkins, C. *Reforming Empire: Protestant Colonialism and Conscience in British Literature*. Columbia/London: University of Missouri Press, 2002

Johnston, Anna. *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Mukherjee, A.P. "Post-colonialism: Some Uneasy Conjunctives" in H. Trivedi and M. Mukherjee (eds) *Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*.. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1996. pp. 14–15.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Porter, Andrew. "Cultural Imperialism and Protestant Missionary Enterprise, 1780-1914." *History* 3, 1997 (pp- 373)

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994.

Sanneh, Lamin. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact Upon Culture*. New York, 1994.

Spivak, G.C., 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Basingtoke: Macmillan Education, 1988.

Veer, Peter Van Der. *Imperial Encounters. Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton New Jersey, 2001.