

Colonial Paradigm in the Western Narrative Angle: An Evaluation

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Abstract

This paper examines how the power centers of an epoch of history controls the socio-cultural, economic and political discourses of a period. The axiomatic contention of Foucault – Discourse is Power – is perhaps the pivotal point from where Edward Said begins his enquiry. The paradigm of culture is innate in any ethnic environment and the phase of occupation can super – impose a Western angle and perspective on the cultural motifs such as thought pattern, religious practices, social customs and conventions even etiquette and dress code in personal domain of the colonised.

Key words: Discourse, Power, Paradigm, Cultural Motif

The monumental critical treatise entitled *Orientalism* authored by the Palestinian born postcolonial writer Edward Said attempts at evaluating the socio-cultural impact of Western colonisation mostly on the African and Asian continents. The historical perspective has always been on the politico-economic impact of the colonial rule, whereas Edward Said quite pioneeringly unravelled the redefined parameters of the cultural paradigm in the colonial and neo-colonial phase. Following in his footsteps, scholars like Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Gayathri Spivak theorised on the total cultural impact, its ethnic repercussions and the emerging cultural manifestations of the colonial epoch of human history.

The propaganda medium of colonial invasion has always been a highly strategic educational system which brought in a new medium and message. In the Indian context, the medium was English and the message was the White man's racial, rational and cultural supremacy. This inevitably resulted in the evolution of new narratological angle in the discourses of the time. This resulted in a comparative supremacy of all forms of intellectual discourses that have been imported from the West, whether they be literary, jurisprudential, socio political or faith linked.

In the Indian context, as well as in the African cultural scene the impact was a well-nurtured inferiority complex in the psyche of the ethnic races. In the words of Rudyard Kipling, India, culturally speaking is 'a White man's burden'. In the African context, it was a psychic obsession which grossly under-rated the black man's elementary human nature; no wonder, The Tempest, the most convincing colonial allegory has contained a Caliban whose beastly spill-over's came over to the last decade of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century. Caliban though, an Elizabethan motif, anticipates the massive cultural inferiority of the occupied races of Asia and Africa.

In any analysis, the ultimate perception that emerges with regard to the colonial paradigm is a dominant Western narrative angle that permeates any discourse of the colonial epoch; whether it is history, literature, philosophy or the social sciences. The history of colonisation shows that in the colonized societies that are characterized by unequal power relations, culturally specific values and practices of the colonised are endangered along with their feeling of cultural belonging. This means that the values of a culture, such as honour, pride, shame, myths, sacrifices, sacred symbols and other elements that are exposed to a shift, becomes distorted in the process of interaction with a more dominant culture and eventually result in disorientation. This disorientation is closely related to the influences that come from the coloniser's culture.

Colonialism, in the historical sense, designates the occupation and ruling of overseas territories by the European powers aiming at economic, political and military benefits. Colonialism has a long historic record in which one territory has been subjugated and exploited by another. Ania Loomba (1998), the noted postcolonial cultural critic and theorist confirms colonialism in her monumental work Colonialism/Postcolonialism as "a recurrent and wide spread feature of human history" (Loomba 2).

Colonial 'occupation' is a phraseology which needs relevance in this context different from that of the term 'conquest'. Cambridge Advance Dictionary (2008) defines 'occupation' as 'an army or a group of people who move into and take control of a place.' In the colonial perspective, the term occupation is highly significant and is different from conquest in many ways. Conquest mainly dealt with the process of conquering and taking control of the foreign land by exerting power. Whereas on the other side, colonial occupation is marked by the settlement of foreign powers in oriental countries like Asia and Africa after which they start controlling the occupied territories by giving education, converting the natives to the alien culture and finally becoming the administrators of the newly occupied land. In the Indian context as well as in the African colonial scenario under study, the European powers not only conquered the foreign lands, but also occupied it as strangers in the beginning and slowly became its omnipotent rulers. Historically speaking, White settlers were the agents of the colonial rule, and their contributions to the colonies in the cultural and the economic area do not align them with that of the other colonized people.

There were many motives and hidden agendas that pushed Europeans towards colonizing foreign lands. Primarily, the West established colonies to gain economic profits, inaugurating the sea route to establish the trade monopoly with the East. The Industrial Revolution in the second half of the eighteenth century also demanded more raw materials for European markets to run their industries to flourish in business. In the Indian context as well as in the African cultural scenario Europeans depended on their colonies for raw materials to be used in their factories in Europe. In turn, the West hoped to sell the manufactured goods to their colonies, which served as new markets giving high returns. In the African colonial context, the natives were denied human identity as they were represented by the West as inhuman creatures, mere conglomeration of flesh fitted with eyes, legs and so on. They were presented as subordinate, inferior and horrible in their representations in the Western world and hence could be easily enslaved as their servants. During the time of colonial invasion, Africans were transported to Europe and other British colonies to get them employed in plantations and estates to do tedious and laborious work. They were also transported to other British colonies to work in coal mines and to engage in other rigorous jobs. African women were also transported to Europe to do household work in palaces and mansions and he same is questioned by the South African Poet Arthur Nortje in his celebrated poem 'Immigrant'.

Soon after the arrival of Europeans, feudalism, the dominant social system of the medieval era was replaced by the bureaucratic-military establishment, carefully and cautiously designed by the Western utilitarian technocrats, for maintaining law and order in their colonies. The Europeans also imposed the additional fiscal burden on the ordinary people of their colonies and the income so generated by exorbitant tax collection was shared among the landlords or petty bourgeoisie of the country. The imposition of an additional burden of tax on the native people in the great famine of Bengal is visualized by the celebrated Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chatterjee in his historical and patriotic novel Anandamath (1882). The precious and expensive commodities cultivated in India and Africa like gold, diamonds, and commercial merchandised products like tea, coffee, cocoa, cardamom, pepper and the natural colouring dyes like indigos were exported to Great Britain. However, the pattern of life changed as the new upper class so formed by the West replaced the overall cultural paradigm of the newly formed colonies.

The textile industry in India also illustrates the changing economic paradigm of the colonial era. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the production of light cotton fabrics were monopolized by India. The weavers of Indian handlooms proved their skill in textile manufacturing and the quality of the same eventually provoked the European masters to stop such production by giving punishments like amputation of their fingers. Later, the Industrialization equipped England to produce machines that were much more times productive than the average Indian worker. Owing to West's dominant economic and political position, England could freely introduce her cotton fabric into India, which ultimately ruined the Indian cotton industry.

Thomas Macaulay was the master brain behind the implementation of English education in India. Macaulay (1835) in his monumental work titled Minutes articulated the goals of British Colonial Imperialism in a strategic way as it could provide a class of people Indian in Blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, words and intellect. As a diplomatic racist, Macaulay's plan was to educate Indians in the colonizer's language and to make them understand everything about Western civilization. Thus English education was taken as a medium through which the West instilled their ideologies to Indian and African minds dismissing the ethnic and conventional educational ways prevalent in such continents.

Religion was one of the major colonial motives that influenced the colonized to embrace the Western ways of life. The European missionaries who set their foot in Asia and Africa had a clear motif to converting the natives to Christianity, which they considered as a tactic to conquer the newly landed country. They converted the natives to the so called superior culture by educating them about the Almighty God, the creator, heaven and hell as a reward for earthly behaviour; as opposed to the faith of their forefathers and other traditional beliefs of the indigenous culture.

The evil effect of colonialism is still evident in the prior colonies today. These effects can be felt at many different levels in life and culture of the people of the country. When Britain colonized India and Africa, the English language quickly spreaded, and the indigenous languages of the natives began to be wiped out. In addition to that, the traditional culture of such occupied territories was changed, taking on a more European style. With such changes in its culture, language and the ways of life, the newly formed country was forced to rediscover itself in a fast paced-world. Sanskrit, the learned language of India and the language of aristocracy lost its value in society and the elite class of India started learning English, the language of the refined. The ancient universities in India like Nalanda and Thakshashila became desolate and the value of Sanskrit education deteriorated. Western educated people became the privileged class of the society and they were the only category of people considered for governmental jobs and socially superior designations. The privilege of English education is portrayed in the classical work of O Chandumenon's *Indulekha* in which the protagonist Madhavan is represented as a Western educated native who does not have to wait for government sector jobs in South India during the colonial phase of Indian history.

Similarly, Christian missionary activities in the colonial era destroyed the native African culture through the gospels of salvation, obedience and work. By giving Western education, they dominated the colonial country and stood as the fatherly benefactor. Christian missionaries preached against African cultures and they were emphatic that the Africans' salvation must be gauged by the extent to which traditional cultural practices were abandoned. They served the colonial state and developed the economy of Africa with semi-skilled workers, clerks and chiefs. The European trained such employees later became the ambassadors of Western culture in Africa.

Colonialism thus totally destroyed African culture, especially its values, practices, rites and rituals and as a result of that, many Africans forgot their culture and behaved like Europeans. African people completely lost their ethnic culture, tradition, language, food habits, their behaviour aspect and thought patterns, instead they started speaking, dressing and eating like Europeans and as a result it demoralized the African people, especially the new generation. Some natives were infatuated with the glittering and glamorous Western style and fashions and as a result, they lost their cultural identity after the arrival of Europeans. The loss of natural African values and the acceptance of the artificial European ways are reflected in Okara's poem 'Once Upon a Time' where he exposes the ills of Modern African society with its worship of materialism, corruption and artificial values. Okara goes on to say that laughing and shaking hands have lost its cordiality and intolerance makes Africans shut the door on another without the least provocation. Here the poet celebrates the African values and equates Africa with intuition and innocence and the West with artificiality and analytical reasoning.

Towards the end of the colonial era, the native Africans blindly imitated the Western ways of life, especially education, style, and behavioural pattern and believed that Western cultural patterns were superior to their ethnic African culture and values. As a result, some native Africans left Africa for better living conditions and settled permanently in Europe. Some Africans on the other hand had their higher education in prestigious European universities like Oxford and Cambridge and returned to their mother country on patriotic grounds. The natives who settled in Europe were, however enticed by the Western civilization, lifestyle and culture and changed completely in the Western style. But after a long stay in the Western countries, they grew nostalgic for their ethnic, cultural roots and returned to their native land like the prodigal son mentioned in the Bible. The loss of ethnic values and one's own roots is clearly depicted by Christopher Okigbo, the celebrated Nigerian poet in his poem titled 'Passage' where he is standing in front of the idol of the river Goddess Idoto, Christopher Okigbo, wept out bitterly:

Before you, Mother Idoto, naked I stand

Before your watery presence a prodigal

Leaning on an oil bean

Lost in your legend... (1- 4)

Christopher Okigbo is a converted Christian poet who is regarded by the critics and the contemporaries as 'the poet of destiny'. As a poet of destiny, Okigbo has a definite cultural identity and mission to revamp his ethnic culture which is precious to his men. Okigbo's poem here reflects the divided cultural heritage of his country and the need to save the pristine culture of his community after the prolonged colonial oppression.

In short, it becomes obvious that the East as seen through the Western cultural lens has had its own restrictive and conditioning aspects, primarily motivated by the dominant power equations of the occupational phase of the colonial epoch. Culture as perceived and defined in any phase of history has always been subordinate to power centres as has been testified here by the analysis of the cultural colonial paradigm in the Western narrative angle in the present context.

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