

Construction of the Colonised Self and the Context of its Postcolonial Interrogations

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ABSTRACT: *This article is an attempt to trace the trajectory of the colonial construction of subjectivity of the colonised and its interrogation in the postcolonial period. Colonialism, as known to all, is not merely the invasion of territory and physical domination over it. It is sustained through the construction of the colonial mindsets in the colonised people through different discourses, including literature. This article explores the intricacies of such constructions during the colonial period and unearths how the rationale of these constructions is problematised in the postcolonial period. It also argues that even after independence from the colonial rule, the colonial paradigm re-surfaces in the form of neo-colonial hegemony and that it took over three to four decades for the liberated societies to delegitimize the Euro-centric and monolithic colonial canon.*

KEY WORDS: *Postcolonialism, Hegemony, Subjectification, Orientalism*

The later decades of the last century witnessed the discursive intervention of the postcolonial streams of thought in almost all realms of knowledge. In the field of literature, the postcolonial perception has problematised and re-organised many of the existing canons. Tracing the roots of colonial subjectification, this article attempts to explicate the epistemological contexts in which such problematizations and restructurings have taken place.

An increasing urge for freedom and liberty that extended even beyond the political sphere marked a notable feature of the post-war period. The legitimacy of the power blocks underwent serious interrogation and the new trend that emerged was one against the interests of the empire builders. Imperial domination lost its footing and many nation-states appeared right across the so-called Third World. Though the war opened the eyes of the world towards the dangers of jingoistic nationalism and imperialism, the pervasive influence of nationalist sentiments proceeded unabated in the post-war period. To elucidate this spurt of nationalism Benedict Anderson cites the instance of the U.N.O. admitting new members every year (12). It is true that new independent nations emerged day by day after the war. But quite contrary to what was expected, the much sought-for political freedom didn't make the desirable achievement in other spheres, viz. social, economic, cultural, intellectual and so on. The reason was that there was no real structural change as far as the world

order was concerned. Even though out of direct physical control, the discursively-constituted colonial subjectivity conditioned the continuation/reproduction of colonial hegemony.

Before analysing how the colonial hegemony operated in the newly-liberated nations, it will be worthwhile to look into the two phases of colonialism — one, creating the colonial mindsets by intellectual or psychological interpellation; and two, the real act of physical domination. When we make such a probe we realize that the instruments of legitimisation of the colonial hegemony lie in the conception of modernity of the enlightenment rationality. The enlightenment principles of reason, truth, objectivity, justice, morality, reality, and coherence re-oriented the whole worldview to the new paradigm of knowledge as power. Further, as Steven Best and Douglas Kellner argue, “The reductionist mode of Enlightenment rationality entails the suppression of plurality, diversity and individuality in favour of conformity and homogeneity” (38). The entire colonial enterprise grew out of this monolithic, omnipotent base, which constructed colonial authority on two powerful but false premises. The first was the notion that Europeans in the colonies made up an easily identifiable and discrete biological and social entity; a ‘natural’ community of common class-interests, racial attributes, political affinities and superior culture. The second was the related notion that the boundaries separating colonizer from colonized were thus self-evident (Stoler 211). As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin say, quoting Homi Bhabha, “The colonized is constructed within a disabling master discourse of colonialism which specified a degenerate native population to justify its conquest and subsequent rule” (178). But the Oriental/ colonized was quite unaware that s/he was living in a world constructed by the Occidental/Colonial master discourses. See what Edward W. Said says:

The Oriental lived in a different but thoroughly organized world of his own, a world with its own national, cultural, and epistemological boundaries and principles of internal coherence. Yet what gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West (40).

The western discourses which had reserved a privileged position for themselves by being rational, civilized, vocal, intellectual, white, enthusiastic, mobile, masculine and scientific condemned the Orientals, through their legitimizing strategies, to the irrational barbaric, mute, sensual, black, lazy, static, feminine, magical, unscientific, superstitious, aberrant and inferior status. As Said says an Oriental man was “first an Oriental and only second a man” (231). The western imperial discourses projected the colonized as incapable

of managing themselves and as having a dependence-complex. They did not believe in the capacity of the colonized to represent themselves. So they framed rules for the 'other', translated their works, spoke for them, revealed the 'truth' to them and took them to 'fresh woods and pastures new'. In Bart Moore-Gilbert's opinion, "As per the mainstream colonial discourse the West 'leads' the non-Western world 'into history'" (178). Ania Loomba captures another view of this scenario: "European colonialism often justified its 'civilizing mission' by claiming that it was rescuing native women from oppressive patriarchal domination" (171).

The focus of the western discourses was quite clear — it tried to destroy the native culture by 'explaining' it. Such discourses wanted to uproot the natives from their culture; and they were successful in their mission. But, where were the uprooted natives placed? Robert Young answers this question indirectly when he says, acknowledging Jean Paul Sartre's opinion, that to dehumanize the subjects, the colonialists tried "to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and destroy their culture without giving them ours" (121). The natives were thus pushed to vacuum. They have lost their earlier and original position and have not found a new one. They wandered between two worlds, the one dead and the other powerless to be born. It was this helpless condition that compelled them to yield to all sorts of domination. See what Om P. Juneja has to say in this regard: "Having been thrown out of the history making process the colonized loses interest in his selfhood and accepts the myth of his intellectual, social, cultural, religious and even physical inferiority" (3). Thus everything turned to be supportive of the ratification of colonial domination over the natives.

This clearly shows how imperialism resulted from the production of knowledge besides the invasion of territories. Epistemologically, the major strategy adopted by the Western imperialist discourses was a two-fold one — first, homogenization of the multifaceted native cultures, and second, marginalizing it as the 'other', 'savage', 'irrational' and 'inferior'.

Right from the beginning, the imperial discourses, confining themselves within the regime of truth of the western paradigm, were trying to 'study' the east. Quite naturally, they failed to identify the diversity and multiplicity that lie in the colonized lands. Irrespective of the distinct and varied geographical and cultural features, they put the cultures, lying even across continent, under the pet label of 'the native'. They craftily shut their eyes before the indigenous, micro-level significations. The project of nationalism which projected the unity at the risk of diversity, though with the extremely opposite intention of grabbing political power, in a

way, contributed to this colonial manoeuvre. By silencing the minor movements at the lower and unexplored strata of the subaltern consciousness with the unintentional aid of the nationalist agenda, the colonizers achieved the aim of bringing all the multiple forms of resistance to a single plain, fighting against which was quite easy as per the existing power equations.

Once homogeneity was effected, the next stage was “writing” the indigenous “out of literature, out of law, out of history” (Arthur 55). The colonized culture was thus pushed to the periphery and the imperial culture was posted at the centre. This was effected through the discursive construction of ‘otherness’, cited earlier, the binarism of the ‘them’ against the ‘us’. Only the imperial ‘civilizing mission’ was considered to be worth reckoning and the indigenous ‘mutterings’ were muffled. A good example for this manipulation can be seen in Macaulay’s outright rejection of the entire literatures of India and Arabia as inferior to ‘a single shelf in a good European library’. The English language was introduced and imposed over the colonies to silence the vernacular tongue and the English education was imparted to the colonized to create a class of persons native in blood and colour but ‘English in taste, in opinion, moral and in intellect’. How right Chesterton was when he pointed out that a colonized culture “can be injured or extinguished simply because it can be explained by the conqueror!” (cited in Arthur 56). Thus, discursively displaced from their own space, the colonized had no way but to bear the yoke.

In the post-war period many nations shook themselves free from the foreign imperial yoke. Thus, in the political sphere, there was a radical break. But, unfortunately, the epistemic realm did not change in accordance with the political change. Though the colonies became independent, their natives had already internalized the version of the colonizer’s system of values, attitudes, morals, institutions etc. as a result of the prolonged subjection. Taking advantage of this situation, the western discourses retained the position in tact, still keeping the liberated natives under the paradigm of western rationality. The cultural sphere remained same even though political sovereignty became an accomplished fact. The ‘other’ remained the ‘other’, the marginal the marginal. The colonial oppression, aided and abetted by its discursive practices, continued in the guise of neo-colonial hegemony.

The neo-colonial hegemony also worked almost in the same line of the preceding colonial discourse. In the cultural sphere its aim was the legitimization of monocentrism and homogeneity, marring the diversity and disparity among the newly-independent nations. The sorting of the postcolonial nations under the umbrella terms like ‘Commonwealth’ and ‘Third World’ was clearly a discursive strategy of the Euro-

American intelligentsia, the practitioners of neo-colonial hegemony. While the postcolonial nations are so diverse with respect to the social, political, cultural, economic, moral, literary and linguistic features, it is not at all justifiable to bring them all through discursive violence under such blanket terms. This strategy of homogenization is nothing but an extension of imperial practices to the post-liberation phase. It is interesting to see that the head of the Commonwealth is always the British monarch and the Third World always presupposes the more privileged First and Second worlds.

In the literary field, the confinement of the postcolonial writers within the compartments of 'Third World Literature' and 'Commonwealth Literature' has been detrimental to the consideration of the works of the authors from the erstwhile colonies with reference to the appropriate cultural context and hence has seriously militated against the development of a native or indigenous aesthetics. The western works were regarded to be worth emulating and hence the postcolonial writers' creative energies were still channelized to the imitation of the western works of art. Only those works which catered to the western interests or falling under the western paradigm were recognized and accepted. Further, with respect to critical analysis, the western theories were continued to be used for analyzing even eastern texts.

But, the cultural hegemony of the west can't continue for long and calls have come from many corners: "Come, then, comrades, the European game has ended.... It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man, and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity" (251). As a result of the self-reflexive thought that emerged in the 70s and 80s the postcolonial natives started questioning the status of knowledge as power, thereby effecting a paradigmatic shift in the postcolonial societies. The impacts of such interrogations are visible in all streams of thoughts and praxis across all postcolonial societies in heterogenous ways.

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