



Article Title

Ethnocentric Solipsism and Rhetoric of Dehumanization: A Postcolonial Reading of Imperial Hubris in Selected Colonial Novels

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Abstract:

*Supremacist projections of the Self and reductive representations of the Other have been among the foremost colonial discursive practices. The same skewed representational predilection is manifest also in colonial fictional works. The article aims to unpack the colonial discursive pattern apropos characterization that is pervasive in the selected novels: James Grant's *First Love and Last Love* (1868/ 2007), Louis Tracy's *The Red Year* (1907/ 2020), and E.M Foster's *A Passage to India* (1924/ 2021). Two of the features of the colonial rhetoric are focused in the study: creation of uncanny characters and concoction of eerie ambience. To regulate the argument of the study, Michael Clarke's (2013) identification of ethnocentric solipsism and imperialism has been invoked. His ideas guide the textual analysis, facilitate interpretation, and scaffold the argument. The analysis evidences that all the three novels offer uncanny portrayals of the native characters, whereas the English are glorified. Moreover, an eerie ambience has been discursively created to invoke the sense of exoticism and mystery. Both racial and civilizational fallacies have been used in these fictional narratives to depict the desired personae and setting. The article, therefore, posits that the peculiar art of characterization is marked by the imperial hubris and unwarranted solipsism.*

Keywords: *Ethnocentric Solipsism, Dehumanization, Imperial Hubris, Postcolonial Reading, Colonial Novels.*

Introduction:

The fictional discourse constructed by the colonial novelists bespeaks that these writers have predilection for distortion of the culture of colonized society to legitimize the unwarranted act of occupation and eulogize the expansionist ideals. They portray the colonial people in a reductive manner to create an impression of the civilizational vacuum that calls for colonization as a remedial step. This supremacist rhetoric shapes, and is also shaped by, the nationalist ideologies. Therefore, it is essential for a critique of colonialism to understand that “the ideology of racial superiority” (Loomba, 2005, p. 109) is a strong trigger behind expansionism

along other contributing factors. For creation of the required discursive field for pitching the xenophobic ideas and ideals, various kind of strategies are used by the literary envoys of the empire, ranging from misrepresentation of the colonial territory as a “blank space” (Gikandi, 1991, p. 26) to depiction of the colonial characters as “savages” (Cornwell, 2010, p. 70). All these tropes and trickeries found in the fictional narratives aim at vilification of the native people whose territory has been appropriated. The agenda of the approach is to legitimize the policies of a system named *inglorious empire* by Shahi Tharoor (2017). Summarily, the encompassing nature of the reductive discourse, as constructed in the mainstream colonial writings, is an evident fact.

Three of the colonial novelists have been selected for this study: James Grant (1822-1887), Louis Tracy (1863-1928), and E.M. Foster (1879-1970). All the three novelists have written about the English people’s encounters with the sub-continental people, the colonized natives, in different contexts and times. These colonial novels follow the tradition of the mainstream colonial fiction of creating “the desired yet despised” (Ramone, 2011, p. 79) native people for completing the social binary. Their novels are rich repositories of the prejudiced colonial reflections of the Indian civilization and, therefore, stand in the array of colonial cartographies. The novels create a racially skewed discourse that has been labelled by Naik as “white darkness” (1991, p. 75). These writers evidently exhibit their ideologically motivated choices and politically biased demarcations.

James Grant is a “prolific Victorian military novelist” (Horsburgh, 1975, p. 48) whose fictional writings are primarily inspired by his penchant for historical matters and materials. His novel *First Love and Last Love* (1868/ 2007) is a narrative in the context of the Indian struggle for freedom in 1857. It places both the nations, the English and the Indians, in a confrontational position and draws lopsided charts to portray the events. In the novel, the English characters are given a visible aura of superiority over the subjugated natives. Thus, the novel conforms to the broader orientalist rhetoric and portrays “the English, morally superior” (Anwar et al., 2017, p. 88).

Louis Tracy is another of the Victorian novelists whose *The Red Year* (1907/ 2020) is one of the texts engaged as a primary source in this study. His fictional version of the details of the clash between the colonizers and the colonized natives conforms to “the official stance of the English” (Khan et al. 2018, p. 248). Accordingly, he creates a textual picture in which the English are painted with exuberant colors, whereas the locals are drawn with a black daub. Thus, Grant and Tracy’s novels are on the same historical event of the War of Independence of 1857. In this context, they present their colonial perceptions of the cultural practices of the sub-continental people.

E. M. Foster is a writer of high caliber whose fictional oeuvre has won acclaim across the globe for its artistic excellence and imaginative richness. For the study, his *A Passage to India* (1924/2021) has been selected as one of the primary texts. Owing to the mesmerizing narrative forces, the novel has been categorized as “his most innovative work” (Poole, 2009, p. 346). The novel skillfully depicts the “most troubling engagements” (Suleri, 1992, p. 132) between the colonizer and the colonized in the colonial space of sub-continent. However, like the other two novelists, Forster’s narrative succumbs to the colonial impulses and puts forth a parochial vision of the colonial world.

All the three writers have approached colonial society and space to create their fictional narratives. They have narrated the stories of the Raj by engaging the complex social, political, and historical markers of the period. Every novelist has his idiosyncrasies and preferences in depiction of details, but the overall aura of righteous indignation is shared by all of them. Along these lines, the ethnocentric solipsism is manifested in their narratives that shows their overwhelming sense of imperial hubris. Thus, misrepresentation of colonial society is a unifying theme of the novels.

Research Questions:

1. To explore James Grant, Louis Tracy, and E.M. Foster’s (mis)representations of colonial society with reference to the selected novels.
2. To find how the discursive strategies of misrepresentation correspond with ethnocentric solipsism and rhetoric of dehumanization.

Research Questions:

1. How do James Grant, Louis Tracy, and E.M. Foster (mis)represent colonial society in their selected novels?
2. In what ways do the discursive strategies of misrepresentation and rhetoric of dehumanization correspond with ethnocentric solipsism and supremacism?

Significance of the Study:

Pakistan is a postcolonial nation and, therefore, it is essential for the epistemic accuracy of its academia to critically engage with the cultural critiques and fictional representations that have been offered in the colonial discourse. In absence of an active dialogue with the dominant cultures and civilizations, it becomes challenging to cope with ever-evolving global trends and traditions that, in turn, produces a civilizational passivity. In this context, the study is expected to facilitate the postcolonial readers by offering an informed interpretation of the colonial gimmicks and textual politics located in the selected texts. This will also help them to attempt to intellectually contest the domineering discourses in the textual field.

Literature Review:

There is a superabundance of the critical material apropos the western colonial discourses and

imperial archives. Especially since the rise of poststructuralist thought, hegemonic discourses have been criticized and subverted extensively. Said's study (1975/ 1995) in this regard stands as an acme of the intellectual output. He has surveyed and evaluated the Orientalist work spanning across centuries. Said has categorized all these literary, historical, philological, philosophical, and political writings as the "ideological fictions" (1975/ 1995, p. 321). The imperial politics that is controlling all these discursive fields has been brought to the surface by Said through a rigorous analysis of the data. His identification of the recurrent supremacist patterns in the colonial archives is a superlative critical contribution.

Bhabha (1990) has proffered a sound critique of the complexities of the entanglement between the nationalist choices and their impact upon the act of narration. At the outset, he states the predilection the work for a thorough study of the intricate reciprocations between the "political thought and literary language" (p. 1) of nation. The study contains enlightening contributions from the leading scholars in the field that makes it a groundbreaking work. It engages with various nuances of the discourse of the interrelation between the politics and poetics of any civilization. His term for the intriguing interrelation is equally intriguing, that is, "DissemiNation" (p. 291).

Sullivan (1993) has studied the fictional works of one of the most celebrated Anglo-Indian orientalist, Rudyard Kipling. She has developed an encompassing analysis of Kipling's fictional narratives with a special focus on his iconic work *Kim* (1901). Relying on Bhabha's complex cultural interventions, she has attempted to exonerate Kipling from his indictment as a narrow-minded orientalist. This stands evidently as an alternative interpretation of the novelist's works that were perceived previously as a compendium of colonial anecdotes. Her informed critique posits that he is not a hidebound promoter of the hegemonic discourses, rather his fictions show that he is "also the Indian child" (p. 179). Therefore, the study is of seminal kind and merits critical applause for introducing a unique perspective.

Young (1990/ 2004) proposes the notion of *white mythologies* to deconstruct the western skewed historiographical tradition. He debunks all the unwarranted historical concoctions offered by western history in the name of the universal truths. Theoretically, Young is inspired by three of the leading postcolonial intellectuals: Edward Said (p. 181), Homi Bhabha (p. 186), and Gayatri Spivak" (p. 199). His informed analysis presents a rigorous dissection of the hollow western rhetoric of civilizational supremacy.

Parrinder (2008) presents his analysis of development of the English novel to show the literary tradition has been contributing towards "making and remaking" (p. 314) of the national ethos and nationalist ideologies. His is also an inclusive survey of fictional works from the inception,

the eighteenth century, to contemporary times. The thrust of his argument is that the many of the prominent English novelists are more inclined towards the polemical and historical preferences than the literary ones.

Simpson (2020) offers an interesting read of the discourse vis-à-vis the idea of the Anthropocene. He scrutinizes the historical marking of the geological period to propose that the conceptualization is not a value-free one, as it is projected, but instead it is “steeped in Eurocentric and colonial understandings” (p. 54). The insight is of an interesting and appealing nature as it yokes together apparently divergent discourses. Thus, the interdisciplinary critique substantiates the parochial propensities of the dominant discourses that are been circulated in the semblance of science and knowledge.

Haque and Janjua (2023) have studied representation of discriminatory attitude and discourse with reference to reception of Meghan Markle in the British society. Through a systematic analysis of the data, they have evidenced that the English people are prejudiced against those who belong to any “non-British race” (p. 164). Identification of the reason of the prejudiced attitude, xenophobia, and sense of superiority has also been offered in the study. They consider “socio-ethnic politics” as the root cause of the “discrimination” (p. 152) that is also manifest in their language. Thus, it is an informative analysis of the condescending attitude of the English towards other races and nations.

All these studies have a unifying point, that is, they establish that the colonial discursive practices aim at floating of the epistemic impositions in the name of history, literature, philology, and other forms of western knowledge. They study various aspects of the acts of colonization and the representational discourses thereof and, also, the correspondence between these actualities and narratives. Thus, the review facilitates locating the argument of the study in the conceptual continuum.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework:

The methodological approach of literary study is primarily guided by the principles and norms of the “textual analysis” as outlined by the prominent theorist Catherine Belsey (in Griffin, 2013, pp. 160-178). In the domain of thematic qualitative approaches, the method is a suitable source for offering substantial “interpretations” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). The method supports scrupulous reading of the textual material and accomplishment of the informed inferences. Moreover, as the study takes three different fictional works as the primary sources, Edward Said’s approach of “comparative literature of imperialism” (1993, 18) has also been used to streamline the interpretations. Thus, the methodological approach combines textual and comparative methods to develop a systematic critique of the selected texts.

Primarily, the postcolonial postulates regarding reading of the colonial literary texts provide

the theoretical pivot for the argument of the study. Postcolonial theory is an “oppositional subject” (Ashcroft et al., 1995, p. 11) that takes study of interrelation of “the nation and the narrative” as “one of the most debated topics” (Ashcroft et al., 1995, p. 152). However, because of the variety of the theoretical positions available in the domain, the study focuses for guidance peculiarly on Michael Clarke’s argument about the relation between “ethnocentric solipsism” and “imperialism” (2013, p. 130). He has offered a critique, encoded in an esoteric idiom, of the colonial discourse with reference representations of the imperialist ideologies in Tim O’Brian’s fictional works. Clarke’s theoretical identifications can be compared to Chinua Achebe’s fictional sensibilities when the novelist rebuts the colonial officer, the “District Commissioner” (2017, p. 209), for his unjust indifference to the great tragedy of a native hero. Clarke has exposed the condescending imperialist attitude of the colonial writer who has used reductive strategies to legitimize expansionism.

Ethnocentric Solipsism and Imperial Hubris in the Selected Fictions:

All the three novels selected as the primary sources—*First Love and Last Love*, *The Red Year*, and *A Passage to India*—incorporate into their textures multifarious gimmickries to produce the desired discourse. Ranging from promotion of the British rhetoric of benevolence to the creation of biased nomenclature, several strategies have been used by the writers. However, the study is delimited only to exposition of the textual attempts to dehumanize the natives through ethnocentric solipsism. It also explains how this dehumanization is relevant to the social phenomenon of imperial hubris. Therefore, the textual material has been dissected to foreground only the point of reference in the discussion.

Creation of Uncanny and Creepy Characters:

These novelists have created characters that are uncanny in nature and creepy in impression. Their characters are not the honest representations of the natives, but instead an evident reflection of their desires regarding the Other. This narrative attitude has been described by Suleri as the “active longing” (1992, p. 11). Grant’s novel *First Love and Last Love* is replete with the native characters that have been framed in accordance with the kind of colonial desires. He begins his narrative by describing them as “scoundrels”, “niggers”, “mahogany-visaged” (1868/ 2007, p. 1, 4). The term nigger explicitly communicates the racial prejudice. Grant describes a group of Indians as “a herd of wild-looking and half naked Indian” (1868/ 2007, p. 38). Due to the abundance of the kind of aberrant characters in the region, as created in the novel, he calls it “the den of dacoits” (1868/ 2007, p. 333). Hence, Grant pen moves like a sword unleashed against the native people.

Likewise, in his *The Red Year*, Tracy creates ghastly characters to invoke the sense of disgust and to float the rhetoric of dehumanization. The natives’ abodes are “mud hovels” (1907/ 2020, p. 31) where they have been living “since the dawn of history” (1907/ 2020, p. 194) without

taking any evolutionary step. Their native society is shown to be devoid of any of the civilizational marks of progress. For instance, their language has been described as an “illegible scrawl” (1907/ 2020, p. a79). They are reduced to being “the browned-skinned satyrs” (1907/ 2020, p. 169). Thus, through the fictional concoction, Tracy attempts to envisage the image of the “inferior race” (1907/ 2020, p. 169).

In the same way, in *A Passage to India*, Forster sets the tone of his discourse of degradation at the outset by portraying the native society of Chandrapore as “excrescence” (1924/ 2021, p. 1). He goes on to unequivocally denounce the natives as “the inhabitants of mud” (1924/ 2021, p. 1). Forster’s Mr. McBryde, the police officer, has been shown remarking scornfully about the Indian wives, “I know those wives” (1924/ 2021, p. 1). Moreover, the inhuman passivity of the native females and unbridled sentimentalism of Dr. Aziz further exacerbate the image of the natives. His aggrandized English characters, like Fielding, stand as foils to the vilified natives to make the difference between them more glaring. Thus, all the three novelists have depicted the natives with a demeaning style and in black color. Their epistemic impositions are apparent in their discursive choices and ways of characterization.

Concoction of Eerie Ambience:

To invoke the civilizational dangers for the English people and give the native an utterly dehumanized form, the colonial narratives evacuate the native region from the markers of human society. The locale is painted as “a savage wilderness” (Flynn, 2008, p. 143) to be stepped in with utmost caution to avoid untoward happenings. In *First Love and Last Love*, Grant has delineated the contour of the native region in a way that corresponds with the frightening depictions found in the colonial discourse. India is a place that none of the English “calls India home—not even those who have been here for thirty years or more” (1868/ 2007, p. 18). The dangers of the region have been communicated unambiguously: “European seldom reposed in Indian without having a weapon at hand” (1868/ 2007, p. 22). Finally, the most defining expression of degradation of the region finds its way thus, “life in India is but one long fever” (1868/ 2007, p. 93). All these details evidence the obnoxious treatment of the setting of the region in the novel.

Tracy’s *The Red Year* presents the Indian society as a representative part of “the decaying East” (1907/ 2020, p. 317). The environment is always awful and thus unfavorable for civilization’s growth. The relentless language has been used to demonize the Indian ambience: “India seems to be dead as a land but tremendously alive as a storehouse of insects, animals, and reptiles (1907/ 2020, p. 193). The description evacuates the territory of the human presence and makes it brim with creepy creatures. This instances an obvious form of dehumanization of society in an utterly unmerited manner. All these details help to invoke the upsetting image of “the unchanging East” (1907/ 2020, p. 194).

Forster's *A Passage to India* epitomizes the eerie nature of the region through the symbol of "horrid" (1924/ 2021, p. 147) Marabar Caves. The dark and frightening caves are the setting for actual and hallucinated transgressions. The horrific presence is aggravating the cultural clash between the civilized colonizers and the uncivilized natives. The English perception of the Indian environment is expressed in another way, through comments of Mr. McBryde, the police officer. He finds "the Indian climate" (1924/ 2021, p. 147) to be the trigger behind all the criminal acts being committed all around. These instances of the indictment of the Indian ambience without any logic evince the prejudiced attitude of the English novelists.

Conclusion:

As the colonial discourses are always an encompassing rhetoric marked by various social, political, epistemic factors, the selected colonial fictions are no exceptions. The study exposes two of the targeted discursive chicaneries in these novels: creation of uncanny characters and the eerie ambience. In the context of the novels, these strategies do a double function: 1) they dehumanize the native civilization and 2) portray the colonizers as the benevolent race that is compromising their comforts to bring civilization to the wilderness inhabited by the wild people. *First Love and Last Love*, *The Red Year*, and *A Passage to India*—all the three of the fictional works create the discourse of degradation to vilify the natives and aggrandize the English colonizers. However, Foster shows a comparatively more tolerant attitude towards the natives in his *A Passage to India*. The other two novelists are more blatant in their denunciation of the local society. But the collective conscious of the English about the secondary status of the Indian people and territory is unmistakably presented in all the texts. In its entirety, the discursive pattern constructed in the selected novels consummately conforms to the degrading colonial discourses and they vociferously enunciate the unwarranted imperial hubris and the unwanted ethnocentric solipsism.

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