



IMPERIALISM AND COLONIALISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM 16TH TO 20TH CENTURY

Dr. Subrata Kumar Mandal

* Asst. Professor, B.B. College, Asansol, WB

Abstract:

Colonization is control of power over a dependent area of people. To rule others or to conquer others has been a general episode in the history of Civilization. Modern colonization started in the age of Geographical Discovery. In the modern era it was initiated by Portugal and Spain and the other European powers like England, the Netherlands, France, and Germany followed the trend. They justified colonization on the ground of civilizing the barbaric nations. However, decolonization began around 1914 and it challenged colonial empires till 1975. The idea of colonialism is related to that of the imperialism that involves a set of attitudes using power and influence to control another nation. Imperialism is economic and political domination of one country over another. Imperial powers do not like to settle permanently; they are concerned with political power only, whereas in colonialism the colonisers settle in a conquered country permanently and they penetrate into their culture, very often the culture of the indigenous people cannot be retained. This paper is not to discuss imperialism or colonialism but reflection of colonialism and imperialism in some well-known texts of English literature. The chosen texts are Shakespeare's 'The Tempest', Mrs. Aphra Behn's 'Oroonoko' or 'The Royal Slave' Daniel Defoe's 'Robinson Crusoe' Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness', Aime Ceasire's 'A Tempest' to name only a few.

KeyWords: Colony, colonialism, civilization, scramble, barbaric, white men, slave trade, savage greed, freedom.

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Introduction

Colonialism is defined as “control by one power over a dependent area of people.” It occurs when one nation subjugates another conquering its population and exploiting it often imposing the language and culture of the colonizer. Before the First World War a large number of nations were colonized by the Europeans. According to J.A. Hobson, “Colonialism, in its best sense, is a natural overflow of nationality: its test is the power of colonist to transplant the civilization they represent to the new natural and social environment in which they fine themselves.”¹

The idea of Colonialism is related to that of the imperialism that involves a set of attitudes using power and influence to control another nation. There is a power relationship between power and colonialism since the finished product of colonialism is knowledge with power in general. However, often there is a conflict between colonial and imperial ideas. J.A. Hobson’s comment in this connection may be cited: In other ‘self – Governing colonies as in Cape Colony and Natal, where the majority of whites are not descended from British settlers, and where the presents of subjects or ‘inferior’ races in vastly preponderating numbers, and alien climatic and other



natural condition, mark out a civilization distinct from that of the mother 'country', the conflict between the colonial and imperial ideas has long been present in the forefront of the conscious of politicians.

In ancient times colonialism was practised by ancient empires like Greece, Rome, Egypt and Phoenicia. Modern Colonization began in the age of Geographical discovery. In the 15th century Portugal began looking for new trade route and sought for newer civilization beyond Europe. In 1415 Portuguese explorers flagged off their conquest by conquering Ceuta, a coastal town in North Africa and ruled till 1999. Conquest of Madeira and Cape Verde followed. Spain also did not lag behind - Christopher Columbus set out his voyage in search of western route to china and India. Initially he landed in the Bahamas to germinate the seed of colonization. Soon they became rivals in occupying lands in the Americas, India, Africa and Asia. Other European powers - England, the Netherlands, France, Germany could not remain sitting idly, rather they started fighting for the lands already occupied by Portugal and Spain. Most of the colonies gained independence during the 18th and the 19th centuries yet the orient remained the hunting ground for the European colonial powers. West Africa, Uganda and South Africa were forced to be subjugated by the British in the late nineteenth century.

Scramble till the beginning of Decolonization

In 1880's European nations focused on taking over African laws racing to natural resources, human resources and establishing colonies. The process of occupying the African lands came to be known as "The Scramble for Africa". David Damrosch explains it thus: " Some rules for this scramble were established by a conference held in Berlin in 1884, at which the European powers divided the continent into different spheres of influence and control, agreeing to respect each other's 'rights' to their holdings."³ King Leopold of Belgium named the colony 'Congo Free state and termed it as a "perfect marriage of the Nobel work of civilization and the profits of free enterprise."⁴ However, decolonization began around 1914 and it challenged colonial empires till 1975.

Justification of Colonization

The colonizers justified their conquest on the ground of legal and religious obligation claiming to have taken the role of civilization 'barbaric' and 'savage' nation. John Ruskin, in his inaugural lecture at Oxford university on Feb 8 in 1870, declared that England "must found colonies as fast and as far as she is able, formed of her most energetic and worthiest men; seizing every piece of fruitful waste ground she can set foot on, and therefore teaching these her colonists that their chief virtue is to advance the power of England by land and sea."⁵ Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The White Men's Burden' ⁶ (1899) reminds the rationale behind the increasing involvement of both the missionaries and the British Government. He advocated in favour of colonial expansion terming it to be 'profit' and 'gain' of another, implying that of the natives:

*"Take up the white Man's burden -
In patience to abide
To veil the threat of terror
And check the slow of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plan
To seek another's profit,*



And work another's gain".

However, the theme of colonization and later on decolonization has become a subject of literary texts that provides a rationale for the insular and problematic imperial vision from the 16th to the 20th century. Let us survey some of the important literary texts dealing with the theme of colonization and how they consciously attempt to uplift racial and cultural supremacy of the Europeans validating imperial rule and expansion. The texts chosen for this study include William Shakespeare's 'The Tempest'(1610-11), Mrs. Aphra Behn's 'Oroonoko'(1678), Daniel Defoe's 'Robinson Crusoe'(1719), and Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' (1899), Aime Ceasire's 'A Tempest' (1969).

Colonization in 'The Tempest'

Shakespeare's play 'The Tempest' (1610-11) is, to some extent, a study in the relation of the native races to the white men who settle in their island. However, those who object to this theory set forth that Shakespeare portrayed the black creature Caliban, as 'Monster', 'Servant Monster', 'Whelp' besides a kind of fishman. Caliban's hatred of Prospero, the usurper, his attempt to recover his possession, his vengefulness, his liking for sexual pleasure, above all his refusal to profit by the education of Prospero, his adoration of Stephano as a God, his enjoyment of the celestial liquor are things to which every coloniser of the day testified. Civilization as represented by Prospero cannot uplift the vile race of the savage. To Caliban civilization meant the power to curse and it is clearly manifested in his expression:

*"You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse".*

The contrast between Caliban on one hand and Stephano and Trinculo - representatives of worst type of colonists - on the other resembles something which has often been drawn between the noble savage and the debased type of civilization. It evokes sympathy of the readers with the savage in his degradation through the new influence of civilization. Here Caliban is intoxicated with wine and urged to a treacherous action.

Thus colonisation has raised diverse questions in the minds of the Elizabethans and these issues form a major portion of this drama. It presents three distinct cultures viz. the colonial, the colonized and finally the controversial culture existing between slavery and freedom.

Colonization and Slave Trade as in 'Oroonoko'

Mrs. Aphra Behn's novel 'Oroonoko' or 'The Royal Slave' (1678) records the history of colonization in Surinam. Besides, it was the first expression in English literature of sympathy for the plight of the slaves. It is a lively account on the basis of some first hand experience of the author. The whitemen or the Europeans' practice of slave trading is the main contention of the novella. When Prince Oroonoko returned from war with Jamoan, triumphant to his court, there arrived in the port an English ship, the captain of which was "very well known to Oroonoko, with whom he had trafficked for slaves and had used to do the same with his predecessors". Irony lies in the fact that the person, who had once supplied slaves to the white men, became a slave himself by their trick. Oroonoko was more civilized, according to the European mode, than any other and took more delight in the white nations, and above all, men of parts and wit. While the captain used to remain at court he entertained the prince everyday with globes and maps and mathematical discourses and instrument; eating, drinking, hunting



and living with him with so much familiarity and besought the prince to honour his vessel with his presence to dinner. All these formalities were nothing but hoax- they clapped great irons suddenly on the prince when he was leaped down in the hold. The same treachery was used to all the rest. When Oroonoko, on protest decided to perish himself by not taking food his followers too refused all manner of sustenance. Again their white captors used the bait of liberty and being prevailed upon by naive Oroonoko, they acquiesced to take food. Enduring a tedious voyage they arrived at the mouth of the river of Surinam, a colony belonging to the king of England; Oroonoko, with some others were sold to a young Cornish gentleman, Mr. Trefry - a good Mathematician as well as a linguist who could speak French and Spanish. Although "his (Oroonoko's) eyes insensibly commanded respect and his behavior insinuated it into every soul" his buyers, in the faith "the Christian never buy any slave but they give them some", renamed Oroonoko as ceaser. Colonialism that encourage slavery did not spare even a kingly and talented person only because he is a black. Mrs. Aphra Behn confesses, "he (Oroonoko) wanted no parts of the personal courage of that Ceaser". The simple insinuation is that colonialism does not allow development of personality of the Colonized, no matter how qualified or gifted they are.

The colonisers do not feel any qualm of conscience to "make use of those advantages of strength and force Nature has given" to possess 'the most charming black' whom they have renamed as Clemens from that of her original name Imoinda who overcame the white by virtue of her modesty.

Mrs. Behn, representative of white men entertained Ceaser with the lives of the Romans and charmed Clemens with teaching of all the pretty works she was mistress of besides imparting knowledge of the true God. However, Oroonoko never reconciled to their idea of Trinity. Apparently sympathetic towards the black slaves Mrs. Behn made false promise about Oroonoko's liberty knowing well "he should suspect we would break our words". The white men tried to curb the unrest among the slaves sternly since "such revolting are very ill examples and have very fatal consequences, oftentimes in many colonies."

Yet the struggle between the masters and the slaves was a regular episode. All the hands were against Parhamites (owner of the Plantation) because they did not love the Lord Governor and believed Ceaser was ill used. The Deputy Governor with his army pursued Ceaser whose companions were initially able to kill some Englishmen but the threat of the English "yield and live, yield and be pardoned" worked upon the slave women and children who convinced their husbands and fathers to leave Ceaser to their revenge. Ceaser, with his extraordinary valour resolved to die fighting but Trefry and Byam pleaded and protested so much that ceaser was overcome by Byam's wit and reasons and in consideration of Imoinda, Ceaser confessed to the Governor that he was "ashamed of what he had done, in endeavouring to make those free, who were by nature slaves, poor, wretched rogues, fit to be used as Christians' tools". But this did not save him and Tuskan from being bound to stakes and whipped rending the very flesh from their bones. Imoinda was spared lest she should die or miscarry resulting in their loss of another slave. They concluded Ceaser ought to be made an example to all the Negroes, to fight them from daring to threaten their betters, their lords and masters and Ceaser should be hanged.

Throughout this novella we observe how the white men try to exact unpaid human labour of the black people in order to expand their imperial gain. There remains a little grace of humanity----- mother is segregated, they even possess Black Indian women as their mistresses. Thus Oroonoko puts forward the plight and anguish of the



slaves, their rejection to be rendered subordinate, their quest for freedom and eventually death as the only means of end of suffering. To sum up we may say it is the microscopic representation of the whole slave culture prevalent in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Another aspect of the novella is the rivalry among the colonizers. Surinam was first colonised by the British and 'Par la suite' was sold over to Holland. The savage and barbarous Red Indians of the Amazon occupied Surinam. To establish and highlight the superiority of the English over the Dutch, Mrs. Behn mentions: ".....it was in the possession of the Dutch who used them not so civilly as they could take, getting into houses....."

Colonialism did not allow other people especially the Black Indians to enjoy the right of gold. The authoress states those men with bags of gold dust were brought to Param where "the Governor, by his letters, commanded (for they sent some of the gold to him) that a guard should be sent at the mouth of the river Amazon and prohibited all people from going up that river, it conducting to those mountains of gold". Hence, this novella is a touching tale of expansion of imperialism as well as capitalism by means of indiscriminate torture, gross violation of human rights and all out suppression and oppression beyond limit.

‘Robinson Crusoe’---A Representative of Colonizers

In Daniel Defoe's 'Robinson Crusoe' the idea of colonialism is hinted at, if not directly mentioned. Karl Marx in his 'Das Capital' used the story to illustrate economic theory. To Marx Crusoe proves himself to be a potential capitalist. Crusoe does not give the land away to the colonists or to those who genuinely desire to settle there, rather he likes to ensure the ownership over half of his island. His lust for wealth is not quenched even after twenty eight years' stay in a lonely island. He obtains his share from the sale of his plantation in Brazil, which was left by him even before setting out his sea voyage. Defoe did not overlook the issue of slave trade too. Even though he was successful in evading the Moorish sea captain with the help of Xury, he did not feel an iota of qualm of conscience in selling him- one condition of colonialism being gaining maximum profit. Crusoe's treating of Friday with compassion and kindness is also not unconditional, even his name is taken away and he is deprived of the right to utter his own language. Another instance of Eurocentric civilizing mission is making Friday a Christian. In this respect a lot of similarity is there between Mrs. Behn's Ceaser and Crusoe's Friday. Thus Robinson Crusoe is portrayed as a shrewd merchant, an adept craftsmen, a strong willed colonizer who retains the spirit of continuing voyage with a desire to 'drink life to the lees'.

Theme of Colonialism and Imperialism in ‘Heart of Darkness’

Joseph Conrad's novella 'Heart of Darkness' (1899) presents imperialism as a civilizing mission supposed to be taken up by the white European- who believed in their white supremacy. This masterpiece (Here after in this essay Heart of Darkness will be written as HOD) illustrates racial prejudice in late Victorian mindset. They felt self-complacency to think that they were offering service to "the silent, sullen peoples" in order to make them civilized. This attitude is clear in the attitude of British thinkers like Jane Samson who observes, "The British believed that only Europeans were capable of improving and developing African natural and human resources and were proud of their ability to survey landscapes and create the borders of new countries".⁷

The argument is based on the Eurocentric perspective of 'we' and 'they'- 'civilized' and 'savage'. Marlowe's expedition through the Dark Continent's heart exposed the true imperialistic attitude- complete deviation from



its preaching----- idealistic philanthropic project. Atrocities seem rampant everywhere for expansion of the empire and to amass profit. The natives are reduced to non -humans being robbed of human dignity, even human rights----- sometimes they are starved to death and reduced to bonded labourers. To quote Conrad's words: "It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale". Kurtz becomes symbolic of white lie and savagery practice. Hunt for ivory even at the cost of Human lives is exposure of lust for power and pelf. The novella exposes lofty and hollow ideology of civilizing mission as revealed in the words of Marlow: "I was loafing about, hindering you fellow in your work and invading your homes, just as though I had got a heavenly mission to civilize you."

This attitude is aptly criticized by Chinua Achebe for its presentation of native land as an antithesis of European civilized world. So far as colonial discourse is concerned Africa is called Dark Continent. The Eurocentric perspective disregarded and discredited the social values and organizations prevailed there before the invasion of the Europeans, thereby neglecting the history and causing damage to the psyche of the native or the so-called savages. According to Edward said, orient "has helped to define Europe as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience"⁸

Marlow, the undertaker of journey through Congo presents the devastating objects before devastated people implying insignification of men (natives) even in comparison to decaying machinery. In the name of development, the natives are rendered slaves sans human dignity. Their plight is presented with a series of squalid imagery:

"It (boiler) turned aside for the boulders, and also for an undersized railway track lying there on its back with its wheels in the air. One was off. The thing looked as dead as the dead carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails. To the left a clump of trees made a shady spot, where dark things seemed to stir feebly". [HOD, P 19]

Complete denial of human rights is evinced in the words of Marlow: "I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain."

The idea of development or upliftment of the condition of the natives has no substantiality, instead their malnutrition and misery is acute:

"They were dying slowly----- it was clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now----- nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom". [P. 21, HOD]

The actions of the white as well as the natives side by side bring out the worst of the so called civilized world. The white people represented by Kurtz desired to possess everything:

"My intended, my ivory, my station, my rivers, my _____" everything belonged to him". [P. 60, HOD]

The capitalists do not believe in sharing but grabbing is their motto: "He had collected, bartered, swindled or stolen more ivory than all the agents together?" [P. 58, HOD]

No vestige of sympathy for the black natives or human beings in general is left in them: "Perhaps you will think it passing strange, this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara". [P.



62, HOD]

The naked exposition of imperialism is manifested in expressions uttered by Marlow, such as, ‘devil of greed’, ‘devil of hot desires’ etc. Even Rabindranath could not but atone for this savagery:

*“The savage greed of the civilized
Made naked its shameless inhumanity”⁹ (Africa, Rabindranath)*

Towards the end of the 20th century Edward Said echoed the same vein of thought:

“In Europe itself at the end of the 19th century scarcely a corner of life was untouched by the facts of empire. The economics were hungry for oversea market, raw material, cheap labour and profitable land”.¹⁰

The above discussion exposes that ‘Heart of Darkness’ is a colonial discourse that shatters the myth of civilizing mission by placing it against the brutal realities of colonialism. Conrad’s depiction of the African natives in animalistic terms prompted critics to term him a proponent of imperialism. Chinua Achebe accuse Conrad as a racist and asserts: “Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as ‘the other world’. The antithesis of Europe and therefore civilization, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.”⁹ Perhaps the author’s frustration with the inanity of imperialism leads him to come to the conclusion through the persona of Marlow who realizes through England is branded a civilized land, actually it is just the opposite. This darkness and fair based on the inscrutability and impenetrability of the colonized land ‘people’ becomes a significant and recurrent theme in colonialist fiction at the turn of the century. Being faced with the immensity of African forest Mary Kinsley talks of insecurity: “I just lose all sense of human individuality, all memory of human life, with its grief and worry and doubt, and become part of the atmosphere.”¹¹

Colonialism from the viewpoint of the Colonized as reflected in ‘A Tempest’

Aime Cesaire’s politic views and concept of Negritude reflected through Caliban and Ariel, happen to be the essence of ‘A Tempest’ (1969). In its struggle for freedom as well as the attempt to colonize the black’s minds is recorded. Shakespeare’s Prospero is virtuous enough but Cesaire’s Prospero is usurper of not only the island but also of the self determination of Caliban and Ariel who are presented here as a black slave and a mulatto respectively against Shakespeare’s witch’s son and a spirit. Here Caliban openly complains against Prospero’s misbehavior.

“You threw me out of your house and made me live in a filthy cave.” [P. 13]

Or *“You’ve stolen everything from me, even my identity! Uhuru!” [P. 15]*

In consonance with the view of the western civilized people towards Africans, Cesaire’s Prospero calls Caliban ‘ugly ape’, ‘a dumb animal’. ‘a beast’, ‘villain’ and ‘nothing but an animal’. The colonizer has no respect for the natural setting or the native language, rather (he) claims to have done a lot for the Black:

“I’ve tried to save you, above all from yourself” (Page 67) and even accuses him of ingratitude “Ingrate! And who freed you from Sycorax, may I ask?”

Ariel in ‘A Tempest’ is less servile and he even gathers courage to protest against Prospero’s despotism in tantalizing a group of hungry courtiers – “It’s evil to play with their hunger as you do with their anxieties and their hopes.” (P. 28) Caliban is harsh and rebellious and full of hatred towards Prospero – “I’ll impale you! And



on a stake that you've sharpened yourself" Whereas Ariel appeals to Prospero's conscience: "You've promised me my freedom a thousand times and I'm still waiting" The attitude of the colonized represented by Shakespeare's Ariel in the 16th century was of complete surrender, submissive but Ariel of 20th century is no longer ready to remain subjugated. Hence 'A Tempest' that deals with the viewpoint of the colonized, is truly post-colonial response to William Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' and challenges Shakespeare's views and emerges as a proclamation of resistance to European cultural dominance.

Conclusion

The above discussion on Colonialism and Imperialism is ample testimony to the fact that English literature, from time to time, has taken up this theme and a huge number of literary works were published and are being published till date. The role of the colonizers is still a matter of contention. Their attitude may not be liked by the colonized or the democratic-minded people of the world but it cannot be denied in the progress of the world they played a vital role either as ruler or in the form of missionaries being patronized by the rulers.

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