

Subjective Responses of the Colonial Men to the Objectives of the Empire as Reflected in Three Literary Texts

Mohammed Sarwar Alam¹, Md. Absar Uddin²

¹Assistant Professor, ²Lecturer
Department of English Language and Literature
International Islamic University Chittagong
154/A, College Road, Chittagong- 4203, Bangladesh

Abstract: *In contemporary history, Western colonialism, based on its ideological and epistemological visions, has affected almost all the modes of life across the world. Apart from other things, it has given birth to volumes of literary narratives dealing with colonial experiences. Many colonial people have served the objectives of colonialism and some of them have been immortalized in the pieces of literary representations. At the collective level, they served the invariable objectives of colonialism within their respective capacities but at the personal level, these people responded to colonialism in varying moods, introspections and reflections. In this paper, we are making a comparative and contrastive analysis to reveal how individual colonial men variably responded to colonial experiences while serving and executing almost invariable objectives of colonialism as reflected in three canonical literary texts- An Outpost of Progress by Joseph Conrad, Shooting an Elephant by George Orwell and A Passage to India by E M Forster.*

Keywords: *Epistemology, rationalism, capitalism, subjectivity, self.*

I. Introduction

Historically saying, it is often commonly agreed that colonization or imperialism is as old as human civilizations. Man's imperial desire to colonize others has variously been interpreted and theorized by the political scientists. The world by this time has witnessed the rises and falls of so many Empires. In the modern history of the world, Western imperialism has so massively shaped and determined the history that 'The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds' (Nandi, 1983:XI).

To insightfully deal with the study we are going to undertake in this paper, it would be rewarding for us to briefly revisit the construction of Western colonial history. At the root of western imperialism, there is the growingly organized and systematic consolidation of industrial capitalism based on the principles of laissez faire- an interest-based banking system and a tight currency system for controlling finances. Based on multi-faceted dominating factors-technological, economic and military, Western or European imperialism had been flourishing during sixteen or seventeen century Christian era mostly led by Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, British, German etc. These colonial forces had been 'mutually competitive and hostile' yet; they had emerged out to be an ideally unified world-wide imperialistic venture of European Expansionism. About the immediate preceding history of the Western imperial expansion, Khan judgmentally remarks,

For various reasons, the rise of this western commercial capitalism coincided with the decadence and downfall of the old Empires of the Turkish Ottomans, Iranian Safavids and Indian Mughuls. (1990:13)

At the ideological level, western imperialism has grounded its roots on rationalism .In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Max Weber attempts to establish relationship between rationalism and the birth of capitalism (Qtd in Lin: 1997,140) . Western Rationalism fertilized by the western historical Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment has always been at struggle to place Man at the centre of the universe constructing absolute autonomy of the human subjectivity. There has been a conjugal relationship between rationalism and capitalism. It is this attitude of rationalist thought that enabled the west to dominate over various fields. Having designated rationalism as characteristic of Western culture, Weber is able to demonstrate that capitalism as an economic system is made possible in the West only by means of 'rational organization' (Qtd in Lin: 1997, 140).

At the epistemological level, Western expansionism has systematically developed the idea of 'Orientalism' which has been ably critiqued by Edward Said (1978).To the Western colonial man, Orientalist vision has provided almost the ethical complacency of being racially superior, culturally advanced and civilized as contrasted with the colonial natives who are systematically metamorphosed and constructed to be inferior, savage, unadvanced etc. On other hand, rationalistic capitalism has structured his lifestyle in the almost inescapable frame of 'capitalistic individualism, egotism and blind personal interest' (Qtd in Khan, 1990,15).He

has always found grounds and justifications to support and legitimize the hegemonic rule of colonialism and to carry 'The Whiteman's Burden.'

It is under these colonial phenomena that colonial men often worked, acted, reacted, interacted and reflected their experiences. Under the macro structure of the colonial administration, so many micros/colonial men have served the colonial missions/ objectives. While serving the almost common colonial objectives, these men have responded to their experiences with their varying subjective outlooks. In this paper, we are undertaking an attempt to investigate into three literary texts and show how the major characters in them varyingly respond to the colonial experiences at the subjective levels even though they have all been serving the almost invariable objectives of colonialism. The three texts are *An Outpost of Progress* by Joseph Conrad, *Shooting an Elephant* by George Orwell and *A Passage to India* by E M Forster. We would introspectively look into the subjective responses of some particular characters to colonialism reflected and represented in these literary texts. For our purpose, we will deal only with the central characters of the texts.

II. Construction of Subjectivity And Its Possible Responses in Colonial Contexts:

Individuality, identity, agency and subjectivity are variously located, defined and constructed in various traditions of knowledge systems. Importantly, location and potential possibility of 'self' in these constructions are often emphasized. In the discourse of European Enlightenment, individuality of human beings has been emphasized. In Marxist traditions, usually a human being does not construct his/her agency with his/her conscious attempts. Reverse, the collective consciousness of the society influences his/her consciousness. It is debatably accepted that discourses, institutions and structures and ideologies construct subjectivity to varying extents in varying contexts. At the personal level, subjectivity is experiencing and forming views from personal perspective. At the collective level, subjectivity is often considered to be an active agency functioning through connections and interconnections with the broader social network. The location of 'self' remains at the core of subjectivity. In philosophic traditions, it is the 'source of consciousnesses', and 'the agent responsible for an individual's thoughts and actions'. It is also located to be the 'substantial entity of a person which endures and unifies consciousness over time.' In the spiritual traditions, it is the agency of the self that addresses the ultimate questions of life. In its spiritual agency, paradoxically and interactively, the 'self' acts as both subject and object. Biologically, being physically located in a body, the 'self' has to be concerned with 'safety and desire' and it has to be selfish. But at the same time, the 'self' has to co-operate others for its own survival and it has to become selfless to various extents. In cultural settings/histories of the society, the 'self' in a subject, for its inherent tendencies/characteristics, tries to practice goodness, ethics and justice etc. In postcolonial discourses, the subjectivities of 'self/we and the 'Other' have emerged significantly.

While serving the common objectives of the empire, Colonial men as represented in the literary texts have responded to their experiences subjectively. Our motivation in this paper lies in exploring variable subjective responses to colonial common objectives and to evaluate the subjectivities of the selected literary characters in the light of the question posed by Ashcroft et al.,

If the subject is produced by ideology, discourse or language, is it trapped in this subjectivity beyond the power of choice, recognition or resistance? (2000:225)

For our purpose, we will particularly refer to the subjective responses of the colonial men to landscapes of the colonized, to colonialism, to their own profession, to the natives and to the colonizers belonging to their own race etc.

III. Shooting an Elephant

Shooting an Elephant is a short but revealing essay. The narrator in the essay can be identically taken to be Orwell himself since the experiences shared are autobiographical ones. Here, we intensively and intimately experience the dilemma of a reluctant shooter shooting an elephant under the pressure that had been 'unnerving' to him. This had to be done by a colonial sub-divisional police officer in a colonized space in Moulmein in lower Burma. The narrator's incapacity to portray Burma as society of real human beings is noticeable. Burma as a country, a nation, a history, a culture does not really exist. To judge the natives and their lifestyles by European standard sounds misleading.

From the very beginning the narrator's sense of 'self' belonging to English/European superiority is maintained. His attitude appears to be cynical, snobbish and negligent towards Burmese natives and their lifestyles. The Burmese emerge out to be the inferior 'Other' narrated in degrading terms as 'the crowd (31)', 'yellow faces (36)' etc.

The narrator has sensitively and insightfully dealt with the imperial actions and counter actions respectively by the colonial stuffs and the natives at the field level. He could sensitively feel the bitter 'anti-European feeling', 'sneering yellow faces (31)' 'jeer at Europeans (31)', etc. The narrator confesses that 'the insults hooted after' and 'got badly' on his nerves.

Throughout, the narrator has been left with Hamlet's dilemma 'to shoot or not to shoot' (Alam, 2006:56). Despite the fact that the elephant has damaged some properties and killed a black Dravidian coolie, the narrator could not find sufficient reasons to kill it which appeared to be harmless at the time of being killed. Perhaps, the narrator's moral dilemma in serving as a colonial staff has been metaphorically represented through his dilemma in shooting the elephant. But he was followed and pressurized by the 'will of those yellow faces behind him'. And he confesses, '...when the white man turns tyrant it is own freedom that he destroys' (36). To him, a white man in the colony has 'to wear a mask' and 'his face grows to meet it'. He has to do what the 'natives expect of him' and his whole life' in the east is 'a long struggle' not to be laughed at by the natives. Contrastingly, unlike Rony Heaslop, a rigid and proud colonial magistrate in *A Passage to India*, we discover in the narrator of *Shooting an Elephant*, a reluctant, wavering and embarrassed colonial officer whose outlook towards his profession is sensibly self-critical.

The narrator in *Shooting an Elephant* appears to be a disguised imperialist who narrates from the perspective of the English, the ruler. It has a 'subjective truth' that has significance only for the ruling class. It appears 'he is a victim of imperialism, a captive of its by-products, of isolation and moral corruption, and its code of behavior.' (Alam, 2006:59). The narrator considers imperialism to be 'an evil thing'; 'an oppressive system', 'British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny' and colonial brutalities oppressed him with 'an intolerable sense of guilt'. But in ultimate sense, the narrator could not go and think beyond the system that the political context destined him to serve. It is evident in the feelings of the narrator:

I did not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is still a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it. (32)

Perhaps, the strength of the narrator (who is said to be identical with Orwell) in *Shooting an Elephant* lies in the fact that its entrapped subjectivity in the imperial system is often resisting, sensitive and painfully self-critical. As Meyers (2000:69) explains of both *A Hanging* and *Shooting an Elephant*:

These autobiographical, confessional pieces, the result of intense psychological self-searching, show Orwell mastering the experience and conquering his sense of failure, shame and guilt. He had learned to do what he could not do while still in Burma: dissociate himself from the colonial system and atone for what he thought were his sins. (qtd. in Tyner,2005: 263).

IV. An Outpost of Progress:

An Outpost of Progress is a short story by Joseph Conrad which ironically deals with the progress and civilization which have often been the official ideals of colonialism. And, to carry this 'progress and civilization', posts and outposts had been set up even in the remote jungles of Africa by the colonial powers. But, the mercantile objectives of the civilization have been laid open at the end of the story, 'The Managing Director of the Great Civilizing Company (since we know that civilization follows trade) landed first, and incontinently lost sight of the steamer' (25). Stephen Land (1984:43) remarks that '*An Outpost of Progress* is typical in exhibiting the ironic contrast between stated ideals and actual motives.' (Qtd. in Bensemmane, 2011:4)

As narrated in *An Outpost of Progress*, Kayerts and Carlier are the two colonial staffs posted in an outpost of a colonial company in a remote jungle of Congo. Kayerts used to work at a telegraph administration and he left the job to earn enough money for the dowry of his daughter Melie. Carlier used to work as a cavalry officer. Being 'obnoxious to his family' he was forced to have an appointment in the Company as a second-class agent. Commercially and practically, they had to depend on two natives-Makola, a 'civilized Sierra Leone nigger' and Gobila, a tribal leader who believed in miraculous powers of the whites. Practically, these two colonial men are reported to be worthless and useless 'imbeciles' who are insultingly considered to fit the useless outpost by the director of the Company. For our purpose, we are going to deal with the subjective responses of these two colonial men whom we increasingly discover to be incapable, short-sighted and narrow. These are the facets in them that ultimately lead them to their tragic ends.

Tyner (2005:266-267) conclusively argues that landscape or physical setting constitutes and destroys the 'self' of the person living through it. In *An Outpost of Progress*, we find Kayerts and Carlier increasingly losing their selves and succumbing to the wilderness of the alien setting they have been posted in. Back home, they used to be part of a society and being 'insignificant and incapable individuals', their 'existence is only possible through the high organization of civilized crowds' (5). The native 'wild, vigorous, strange, incomprehensible and mysterious' landscape in the African jungle, according to the narrator of the story '...tries the civilized nerves of the foolish and the wise alike (5)'. Not being as wise as Orwell's narrator or as strong as Rony in *A Passage to India*, Kayerts and Carlier have been tried by the utter loneliness and wilderness. With their weak subjectivity, they failed to overcome the trial and became the inescapable victims. The narrator aptly remarks,

'That was the root of the trouble! There was nobody there; and being left there alone with their weakness, they became daily more like a pair of accomplices than a couple of devoted friends' (19).

Unlike Orwell's narrator, and like Rony in *A Passage to India*, Kayerts and Carlier uncritically and straightforwardly believe in and work for the civilizing mission of colonialism. They are not humanitarian enough to question their imperial presence; nor are they moral enough to suffer from unresolved ethical dilemma of colonialism. They needed jobs to earn money and any intellectual, philosophical or ethical position regarding colonialism had been beyond their subjective capacity. Certainly, their subjectivity has been constructed by European model of society and Euro-centric racial superiority. Thus, they dream of a progress in Africa and imagine it to be solely European one, 'Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and-and-billiard rooms (9). After the slave-deal, Gobila and his tribe who used to believe in the mysterious powers of the whites became suspicious of them and they stopped supplying the necessities that were essential for the survival of Kayerts and Carlier. Makola and Carlier tried to open communications but they were thwarted with 'a shower of arrows.' At a point, out of his racial arrogance and superiority, Carlier 'talked about the necessity of exterminating all the niggers before the country could be made habitable' (19). Thus in the words of Bensemmame (2011),

'They (Kayerts and Carlier) are in the first place overpowered by an environment which they thought they could control, a 'wilderness' which simply has activated their basest instincts and has led to their moral and physical annihilation. The regret felt by Kayerts with the utterance 'help! My God', like Kurtz's expression 'the horror! the horror!', can only convey a realization of having acted under a malevolent influence coming from the wilderness... (5)'

Rather than dominating a colonized space, Kayerts and Carlier became dominated and met their tragic ends. And, we find them to be shortsighted, opportunistic, narrow and unable to go beyond their selfish subjective interests. Also, in them we discover the Euro-centric subjectivity that uncritically believes in the myths of colonial civilizing mission and European racial superiority.

V. A Passage to India

During the politically turbulent period of colonial India, E M Forster wrote his novel *A Passage to India* (1924) based on personal experiences and relationships. The novel deals more with social aspects than with political upheavals of the times. Mostly, we find two groups of characters-one belonging to the native Indians, the other belonging to the Anglo-Indians. Centrally, the novel focuses on the social tensions arising out of cultural clashes particularly focusing on the experimental friendship between Dr Aziz and Cyril Fielding. For our study, we would like to select Rony Heaslop, one of the major Anglo-Indian characters in the novel to see his subjective responses in the structure of colonialism.

Rony Heaslop is the city magistrate in the depicted colonial city of Chandrapore. From the very outset of the novel, we observe the racial tensions between the natives and the Anglo-Indians. Living in the same city these two groups belong to two separate worlds. Chandrapore Club is a microcosm of the empire where Indians are not allowed to enter. The Bridge party was a superficial attempt to bridge the gap and predictably it failed. Disagreeing with sympathetic attitude towards the natives by her mother Mrs Moore, Rony proudly asserts,

'...I am out here to work, mind, to hold this wretched country by force. I'm not a missionary or a Labour Member or a vague sentimental literary man. I'm just a servant of the government; it's the profession you wanted me to choose myself, and that's that. We're not pleasant in India, and we don't intend to be pleasant. We've something more important to do' (69).

Rony finds and rationalizes every excuse to justify their colonial presence in India. The riot between Hindus and Muslims arising out of cutting the branches of a certain peepul tree on the occasion of Mohurram gives Rony a colonial sense of complacency to justify their rule: 'But Rony had not disliked his day, for it proved that the British were necessary to India; ... (110)

Landscape plays a vital role in all colonized spaces. In *A Passage to India*, Maravar Caves is the spot where the climactic incident of the novel took place-the supposed assault on Adela by Dr Aziz. It continues to be an intriguing, puzzling and unresolved riddle in the novel. In Fanon's term, these caves symbolize the 'negation of values', which is often imposed on the colonized by the colonizers. Based on the puzzling riddle Dr Aziz was arrested and brought before the trial. Out of racial arrogance and superiority, almost all the Anglo-Indians including Rony manipulated the situation with the immoral purpose of convicting Dr Aziz. Adela has been motivated and even pressurized to speak against Dr Aziz before the court by the Anglo-Indians. But fortunately she came back to her sense and confessed, 'Dr Aziz never followed me into the cave' (231). Dr Aziz had to be released by the court but Adela had been almost ostracized by her community. In her trying times, Rony's attitude towards her was not sympathetic in spite of the fact that Adela belonged to his race and she was supposed to be his wife.

In Rony's subjectivity, we find the location of an uncritical, uncompromising and illiberal colonial man. His subjectivity appears to be trapped in the colonial system without visible potentiality of resisting, critiquing and recognizing.

VI. Conclusion

We would argue that colonial men's responses to their experiences at the subjective level are peculiarly and revealingly varying. In *An Outpost of Progress* by Joseph Conrad, we find Kayerts and Carlier, the two low-posted trading agents to be men with narrow minds and incapable of dealing with the situations. In Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant*, we discover an almost reluctant imperialist with highly sensible and self-critical outlooks. In E M Forster's *A Passage to India*, we experience a rubber-stump type of colonial man in the character of Rony Heaslop who appears to be uncompromisingly arrogant, illiberal and helplessly trapped.

We see that a 'subject' constructed by so many operative and dynamic forces in the society can remain entrapped in a system with its subjectivity losing the power of 'choice, recognition or resistance'. Also, a 'subject', can retain its power of 'choice, recognition or resistance' by making a conscious effort to 'recapture and scrutinize' its 'self'. As Fanon (1967:231) puts it,

'It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self; it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men [sic] will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world'.(qtd. in Tyner, 2005:266).

In Orwell's narrator, we recognize a 'subject' with the potential 'to recapture the self and to scrutinize it'(Ashcroft, 2000:225). But, in the subjectivity of Kayerts, Carlier and Rony, the potentiality remains entrapped.

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