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Reinventing Histories: A Postcolonial Revisiting of Colonial Historiography

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Abstract

Colonial historiography systematically portrayed colonized societies as inferior to justify Western dominance, framing them as backward "Others" in need of civilizing. Postcolonial theory, following the trails of Edward Said's Orientalism, challenges these narratives, exposing their role in reinforcing imperial power structures. Key scholars like Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Leela Gandhi argue that reclaiming and rewriting history is essential to dismantling colonial legacies. Resistance to Eurocentric histories involves interrogating biased representations and centering marginalized voices. The critique extends to colonial policies of James Mill and Thomas Macaulay, particularly the imposition of English, which marginalized indigenous knowledge systems. Debates within postcolonial studies highlight tensions between Western frameworks and decolonial approaches, emphasizing the need for epistemologies rooted in local contexts. The struggle to decolonize history persists, as even postcolonial narratives sometimes inadvertently replicate colonial paradigms. Postcolonial historiography seeks to disrupt dominant narratives by prioritizing subaltern perspectives and challenging enduring power imbalances. This transformative approach underscores the political nature of history-writing and advocates for inclusive, pluralistic accounts of the past.

> [A]ll history is a story, is a narrative. So, the issue of the postcolonial people is to combat that dominant history, the colonial history which is the story of the West civilizing the world.
>
> (Ashcroft, in an interview with Jose Varghese 83)

Right from the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) which was an index to the systematic and strategic portrayal of the colonial people as politically, culturally and socially inferior to the West, there have been innumerable attempts to explore colonial historiography from various perspectives. This paper concentrates on how the colonial historiographers treated the history of the colonized for the programmatic subjectification of the 'non-Western other,' and how postcolonial theory re-views colonial historiography. Western cultural practices are deeply intertwined with power dynamics, as *Orientalism* reveals. A major function of postcolonial theory therefore has been accepted as resistance to the dominant versions of history. Sridhar Rajeswaran believes that the entire notion of

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postcolonial studies is "premised on a position of resistance" (5). In Fanon also one comes across the call for the need for an active "ontological resistance" (110). This resistance is to the images, histories and ideas perpetrated by the colonial powers about the colonized as well as to being "overdetermined from without" by them, as Fanon adds (116). Leela Gandhi holds that postcolonialism can be "seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past" (4). The re-writing of official histories thus becomes an important postcolonial project.

The manner in which the colonized were represented in colonial histories was adequate justification for the West to take up its so called 'civilizing mission.' The colonized were represented not descriptively but in such a way validating the necessity of Western interference and the implementation of their policies. Edward Said's *Orientalism* exposes the claims of superiority the West raised over the East which is portrayed as the 'other' and inferior to the West. 'The Orient features in the Western mind,' comments Said, "as a sort of surrogate and even underground self'" (193). Neil Lazarus states that "the Orient' emerges as an effect of Orientalist discourse: representation precedes and produces the reality which it can then claim merely to re-present, having obscured if not obliterated the earlier reality which, as a colonizing discourse, it had begun by misrepresenting. Hence Said's reference to 'the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period'" (10-11).

C. Vijaysree comments: "A return to the past, a retrieval of the usable past, and an analysis of the community's heritage and history emerge as important structural devices in all postcolonial writing" (qtd. in Zaidi 38). So, a postcolonial writer's task is to demolish the image of one's nation constructed by the West through history. Most of the 'official histories' deliberately misrepresented the colonized for the purpose of keeping them subservient and weak-willed.

Homi K. Bhabha asserts: Colonial discourse ...is an apparatus that turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial/ cultural/ historical differences. Its predominant strategic function is the creation of a space for 'subject peoples' through the production of knowledge in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited… the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origins, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction (qtd. in Panwar 16).

It has been demonstrated that history falls prey to the imperial motives of colonization and exploitation of the 'non-Western Other.' Whatever version of history is in the limelight is the one that has power, and may be assimilated as an integral part of the history of tomorrow. Besides history is a major area of study at all levels of education. No curriculum is prepared without giving adequate representation to the genre of history. The way the colonized is represented in histories remains as true version and is taught in academic institutions and may be accepted unquestioned by learners. G. N. Devy comments that the difficult task of "constructing historical narratives about India was made by European Indologists during the nineteenth century" and the "context for this development was that of colonialism" (1998, 2).

Edward Said has vehemently criticized Jones, Macaulay and other Orientalists for misrepresenting the colonized. Even Jones' point of view of India was largely conditioned by Greek legends and histories which had depicted India as having an exotic and intractable culture and the European representations of India as a land ruled by despots in its travel books (Devy 1998, 77). Among the postcolonial theorists of the day, there are those who view colonization in a more positive light. Harish Trivedi criticizes Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), and Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* (1989) wherein they "study plans and projections of imperial intervention rather than the reality of the native reaction to imperial intervention" (1995, viii). Trivedi in his significantly titled *Colonial Transactions* (1995) offers extended evidence of mutual exchange between the

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British and the Indian in its various sections. He claims that there had been an exchange of ideas and resources between these two countries and that there is no need to perceive them with as much anxiety and concern.

The civilizing mission of the British marked a new stage in the development of colonialism. The natives were brought under administrative control as K. N. Panikkar articulates, presumably for improving their moral and material conditions (3). Panikkar also points out how the Indian intelligentsia's internalization of colonial history worked out in the Indian context. The concept of 'divine dispensation' was one of the obvious fall-outs. According to this, what occasioned God to will British conquest was the pre-colonial past, characterized by social degradation, religious superstition, and political anarchy. This recurring theme, advanced in colonial historiography as the justification for the conquest, also became the guilt-ridden intelligentsia's rationale for their own subjection (123).

James Mill is another colonial historiographer who has misrepresented India. In his *History of British India* published in 1817 in three volumes, Mill has tried to shatter the idea that India ever had a history, and to insinuate that the people of India had affinities with primitive societies which also characterized the developmental stages of Britain. (Niranjana 22). Mill's influence was not limited to the company's administrators. The Indian intelligentsia also succumbed to Mill's History (Panikkar 123).

The translations of Christian missionaries like the Serampore Baptists, William Carey and William Ward reveal their Orientalist perspectives. Niranjana declares that for 'the missionaries theology arises from a historicist model that sets up a series of oppositions between traditional and modern, undeveloped and developed. This kind of attempt to impose linear historical narratives on different civilizations obviously legitimizes and extends colonial domination' (20).

Macaulay's 1835 "Minute on Indian Education" dismissed indigenous Indian learning as outdated and irrelevant and averred the need for English education. He commented that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Harlow and Carter 58). It is quite ironical that a postcolonial writer like Rushdie himself affirmed the greatness of literature written in English over the vernacular in India. In the introduction to a special issue of the *New Yorker*, Rushdie wrote that the "true Indian literature of the first postcolonial half century has been made in the language the British left behind (50)". Pramod K. Mishra vehemently criticizes the position assumed by Rushdie and also analyzes the historical moment that generated Rushdie's comment in his "English Language, Postcolonial Subjectivity and Globalization in India" (398). Rushdie's judgment of the worth of literature written in Indian languages would not hold at all when the comparatively meager literary output in English from India is compared to the vast and divergent genres of literature produced in various Indian languages since independence. But there is a problem inherent in Rushdie's comment- that a writer of English literature still has to be accepted first in the West if s/he has to be recognized in India.

Theorists like Gauri Viswanathan have pointed out how the study of English had a colonial project to carry out. She explicates the agenda of Macaulay's Filtration Theory in this regard and states that it purported to filter down to the colonized people the colonial ideology of the supremacy of Western civilization and hence the inferiority of the colonized native population (116, 149). Filtration Theory was "predicated on the notion that cultural values percolate downward from a position of power and by enlisting the cooperation of the intermediate classes representing the native elite" (34). Quoting Macaulay's notorious words- a "class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect"- Viswanathan claims that the colonial project entailed the production of an Indian subjectivity suitable to the governance of the colonized country through the colonizer's language and literature.

The field of education witnessed the most powerful impact of colonial hegemony. The prefatory quotation in the first chapter of Tejaswini Niranjana's *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (1995) which is taken from Trevelyan's *On the Education of the People of India* (1838) reads:

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> The passion for English knowledge has penetrated the most obscure, and extended to the most remote parts of India. The steam boats, passing up and down the Ganges, are boarded by native boys, begging not for money, but for books… Some gentlemen who were coming to Calcutta were astonished at the eagerness with which they were pressed for books by a troop of boys, who boarded the steamer form an obscure place called Comercolly. A Plato was lying on the table, and one of the party asked a boy whether that would serve his purpose. "Oh Yes" he exclaimed, "give me any book; all I want is a book". The gentle man at last hit upon the expedient of cutting up an old Quarterly Review; and distributing the articles among them.

Just as Charles Trevelyan proposed that the Indians were desirous of the 'English book,' E. M. Forster also privileged English education and its merits in comparison with Eastern education.

Ashcroft holds the view that by appropriating history as a form, as a genre, appropriating the language in which it is written, by appropriating mediums of publication, distribution, postcolonial readers can interpolate their own history, their story of the past (Varghese 83-4). But this is no easy task because all the norms that one relies on consciously or unconsciously for the narration of histories are what the European colonial masters have bequeathed. Criticizing the practice of giving undue weight to the colonizer's values, Said comments that "most cultural formations presumed the permanent primacy of the imperial power" (*Culture* 199). Referring to the urge of Third World historians to refer to works in European history Dipesh Chakrabarty states, "… "Europe" remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call "Indian", "Chinese", "Kenyan" and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called "the history of Europe". In this sense, "Indian" history itself is in a position of subalternity; one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of that history" (342). G. N. Devy testifies that colonialism creates a cultural demoralization. It creates a false sense of shame in the minds of the colonized about their own history and traditions (*After Amnesia* 10). Bhabha in 'Of Mimicry and Man" presents the concept of 'colonial mimicry', and defines it as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excesses, its difference" (126). It's a theory about the constitution of subjectivity under colonialism. It has drastic results too. Chakrabarty comments: The mode of self-representation that the "Indian" can adopt here is what Homi Bhabha has justly called "mimetic." Indian history, even in the most dedicated socialist or nationalist hands, remains a mimicry of a certain "modern" subject of "European" history and is bound to represent a sad figure of lack and failure. The transition narrative will always remain "grievously incomplete" (360). The attitude of colonial supremacy is again evident in the travel writings of Rudyard Kipling, E. M. Forster and V.S. Naipaul.

The colonial discourses denigrated Indian practices as uncivilized and barbaric. It was through this sort of binary construction of values - privileging the West and decrying the Orient - that colonial histories attempted to legitimize and justify their practices of subjectification and exploitation of the Orient. The greatest contribution of postcolonial theory is the realization that all narratives are tainted by politics and are effective means for establishing power over the narrated. Postcolonial theory has succeeded in 'tempting' us out of our blissful ignorance of Eden, by making the 'Third World' question all forms of authority.

However, it is necessary to subject Said's work to a 'contrapuntal' reading, to consider the problems Aijas Ahmad finds with it, in some detail. Ahmad points at a number of errors that have crept into Said's *Orientalism,* in his essay which is divided into nine sections. Ahmad finds that Said 'offers mutually incompatible definitions of 'Orientalism' so as to deploy these stances, the Foucauldian and the Auerbachian simultaneously" 265). Ahmad comments:

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> These ambivalences about Auerbach and about humanism and Foucault's discourse theory, which no serious intellectual would want to use simply as a method of reading and classifying canonical books because the theory itself is inseparable from Nietzschean antihumanism and the currently dominant anti-realistic theories of representation (264).

Ahmad holds that Said located "Marx firmly within the boundaries of what he calls the 'western episteme'" (264), and "Foucault's thought was drawn against humanism" (266). On the whole, Ahmad claims that Said's work is self-divided not only between Auerbachian high-humanism and Nietzschean anti-humanism, but also between a host of irreconcilable positions in cultural theory' (267-8). Ahmad dwells at length on Said's subservient attitude towards Western narratives evidenced by the book. He adds:

> With the exception of Said's own voice, the only voices we encounter in the book are precisely those of the very Western canonicity, which, Said complaints, has always silenced the Orient. Who is silencing whom, who is refusing to permit a historicized encounter between the voice of the so called 'Orientalist' and the many voices that Orientalism is said to so utterly suppress, is a question very hard to determine as we read this book. It sometime appears that one is transfixed by the power of the very voice that one debunks (271).

CONCLUSION

The postcolonial project of decolonizing historical narratives operates by exposing how colonial historiography systematically marginalized non-Western societies to justify domination. Said's *Orientalism* reveals how power dynamics shaped biased representations of the "Other," reinforcing imperial ideologies. Scholars like Fanon, Bhabha, and Gandhi advocate for reclaiming subjugated histories, challenging Eurocentric frameworks that persist in education and cultural discourse. Critiques of colonial historiography, such as Macaulay's dismissal of indigenous knowledge or Mill's erasure of Indian history, exemplify the deliberate construction of inferiority. Yet, postcolonial resistance remains fraught with contradictions, as even revisionist narratives sometimes replicate colonial paradigms. What is required is a transformative historiography that centers marginalized voices, dismantles lingering colonial epistemologies, and embraces pluralistic truths. Rewriting history is not merely academic but a political act; one vital for healing cultural amnesia and forging equitable futures. By interrogating the past, postcolonial theory equips us to imagine alternatives to enduring structures of oppression.

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