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Racial binaries and the emergence of postcolonial voices

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Abstract
The issue of race plays a significant role in the discourse of Postcolonialism. Racial prejudice was one of the key substances in the ideology of colonialism where many things had been looked upon basically in terms of racial binary. Several postcolonial writers, more or less, tried to question such racial myths. In fact, one reason for which they started raising their voices was the racial discrimination. An attempt is made in this paper to examine how racial binary was dominant in European colonial framework and how it in turn influenced the postcolonial writers to raise their voices.

Keywords: colonialism, race, other, postcolonial voices

Introduction

> This world divided into two compartments; this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species…The governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original inhabitants, 'the others'. (Fanon 1963: 30-31)

Though the questions of race, racism and 'other' and their representation in work of art are quite problematic, these are, nevertheless, serious concerns in postcolonial studies. 'Construction' of race is not a recent phenomenon. The term 'race' existed in European languages for several hundred years before Enlightenment and enjoyed a widely variable connotative span within this period. (Niro, 4) Throughout the gradual solidification of racial theory in the Enlightenment, race remained a contentious idea. Brian Niro in his *Race* (2003) opines that race and racism are phenomenologically real and the vast majority of conversation about race deals either with European conceptual origins or the North American abuse of these original racial templates. (Niro, 8) Nigel C. Gibson in *Fanon The Postcolonial Imagination* (2003) observes:

> The roots of racial and colonial Manicheanism in the modern period are found in the European Enlightenment, which viewed Europe as the centre of the world and the bringer of light to "distant region". Both Kant and Hegel developed this idea, describing the "Negro" as childish lazy, indolent and slow, lacking in history and Humanity, and needing coercive measures such as chattel slavery to free them to be productive. **(**Gibson, 6)

Since the turn of the twentieth century, however, there have been a growing number of critics and philosophers who have worked to re-orient the cultural exchange between dominant and subjugated parts of the world. In Africa, Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor worked towards an aesthetic of blackness through the Negritude movement. (Gibson, 8) Cesaire does not contest the idea that race is a social construct, but, instead, recognizes that construct. By engaging Negritude, therefore, Cesaire invalidates the hierarchy attributed to this race. For him Negritude is no longer a condition to be suffered, rather it should be celebrated. (Gibson, 10)

Likewise Frantz Fanon helped investigate the material and psychological interdependency in the formation of an empire of white and black binary positions. Fanon points out that colonial thought, from travel literature of the nineteenth century to administrative and psychological services of the twentieth century, was built on Enlightenment categories promoted by imperial scientism. It painted the native as the quintessence of evil, and colonizers as the apogee of good. (Fanon 1963: 15) Fanon contested the European liberal humanist view of the 'subject', arguing that in the colonial situation, the natives, the tribes people, the masses, the peasantry, and so on, are so utterly dehumanized by the violence of colonial reality and its discourse that they seem unable to articulate their own thought. Fanon opines:

> The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality… (Fanon 1963: 32)

Again, Fanon argues in *Black Skin White Masks*:

> The Negro is comparison. There is the first truth. He is comparison: that is, he is constantly preoccupied with self-evaluation and with the ego-ideal. Whenever he comes into contact with someone else, the question of value, of merit own, arises. (Fanon 1967: 211)

Fanon seems to embrace black consciousness at one point in *Black Skin White Masks* and suggests that it is by embracing the reaction to White construction of the Black, or the colonized, that one can deconstruct it and thus begin to get beyond it. Homi K. Bhabha remarks that Fanon recognizes the crucial importance for subordinated people of asserting their indigenous cultural traditions and retrieving their repressed histories. (Bhabha, 13)

Edward Said has also played an integral role in the

formation of a postcolonial response that reacts to the troubled exchange between East and West. Said considers the significance of race under the broad notions of dominant discourse and the 'others' that it creates. According to Edward Said, Europe functions as a subject, asserts its control over the means of communication and at the same time, constitutes the colonial natives as 'other'. Homi Bhabha discusses the extent to which colonizers depend on the concept of fixity in the ideological construction of otherness.(Said 1978: 155) He also identifies the primary strategy of this discourse as stereotypes and points out that the Western addiction for fixed points of identification always function within the poles of a binary opposition - black and white. (Bhabha, 95)

Brian Niro says that literature is often the place where social constructs such as race and 'other' are put to test. Certain literary texts by the colonial European writers exemplify the fact very well. Such texts reveal a pervasive attitude among the 'civilized' European colonial powers to ignore other ways of life alien to them. This practice has always been regarded as a marked political and ideological requirement for the perpetration of colonialism. (Singh, 14) There are ample examples where the colonizers or the writers from the colonial community crudely distorted the picture of the colonized people and their culture. It seems that the widely circulated Eurocentric conceptualization of culture tended to locate the colonized people within European civilization. And when it was not found, the colonized became 'other'. The practice of projecting non-European, non-white as primitive or savage ensures the denial of culture, art, literature, religion etc. to the other societies located outside Europe. In case of Africa it is more notable. In their preoccupation to justify their colonial domination, European philosophy, literature, anthropology and historiography sought means and ways to construct and define African cultures as primitive. (Singh, 22) In their scheme of things, otherwise labeled as 'civilizing' and 'developing' missions, the primitive symbolized an anachronism which therefore should be wiped out from the earth without any kind of hesitation. To the colonial masters of Europe, they constituted simply the 'other', who were meant only to be ruled and subjugated. Portrayed as an inscrutable mass of primitivism, tribalism, savagery, cannibalism and black magic, Africans were subjugated to the inhuman colonial exploitation and oppression. In this context we can put Lewis R. Gordon's view in his *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*:

> African people, in the midst of all the creation and expansion of Europe, began to discover that they had two identities imposed from without- namely, the continental identity of being African and the racial identity of being black. (Gordon, 196)

Thingnam Kishan Singh in *Rethinking Colonialism* (2006) expresses that as far as European representation of racism is concerned, English literature seems to be very influential and dominating specimen. He condemns some of the formidable writers of English literature such as William Shakespeare (1564-1616), William Blake (1757-1827), Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) and Joyce Cary (1888-1957), among others, who seem to be concerned, at one point of time or the other, with issues of race and empire. These writers, according to Singh, showed disastrous implications for the colonized. At the same time he questions the role of English literary criticism in isolating literary text from the historical condition of production.

We also see that there is criticism available that discuses Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in terms of a banal opposition where Prospero, the cultural European, tries to civilize Caliban, 'the savage'. Thus, in Frank Karmode's analysis, Caliban becomes the savage and a deformed slave. (Karmode, 142) A contextualized reading will inform the reader of the ways in which the play reflects the European imperialist desire in the sixteenth century: inclinations for voyages, adventures and quest for unknown lands. The play takes place on an island under Prospero's control whose native inhabitants, Ariel and Caliban aid their master's works. *The Tempest* attracted a lot of attention from postcolonial critics for its portrayal of Ariel and Caliban's reaction to foreign control. It is assumed that Shakespeare probably based the play on Montaigne's "Of Cannibals" (Shakespeare 1998: 92) and it is interesting to note that Caliban is almost an anagram of cannibal. It is worth mentioning that the word cannibal was used by the European colonizers to refer to the people of the newly discovered lands. In the essay "The Discourse of Cannibalism in Early Modern Travel Writing", Ted Motohashi writes:

> It is a paradox that 'Cannibal', a vernacular word orally apprehended by Columbus, became one of the most powerful terms in the written literature of conquest. For the 'cannibals' sign to be articulated as a normative representation of the transgressive Other, it was necessary to conceal the initial dialogism of its reception. (Motohashi, 1999)

It implies that Shakespeare might be influenced by colonial construction of the natives as Cannibals. A close study of the play reveals that Caliban has been enslaved in the play, as is the case of native people being 'colonized' by the colonizers. Aime Cesaire's reading can bring out racial politics implicit in Shakespeare and traditional criticism:

> Prospero is the man of cold reason, the man of methodical conquest- in other words, a portrait of the 'enlightened European…Caliban is the man still close to his beginning, whose links with the natural world has not yet been broken. Caliban can still participate in a world of created marvels, where as his master can merely 'create' them through his acquired knowledge**.** (Singh, 15)

One can find a 'racial' tone in one of William Blake's poem 'The Little Black Boy'. The poem was published in 1789, a time when slavery was still legal and campaign for the abolition of slavery was still young. Though Blake seems to question the convention of the time with basic Christian ideals as he uses the sun as the metaphor for God and his kingdom in the third stanza of the poem, some phrases in the poem can also evoke a racist tone. In the poem, the little black boy takes birth in the wilderness, away from the comforts of the civilized European home and he is made to lament his fate. The play of 'black' and 'white' divorces the boy from his identity.

> My mother bore me in the southern wild
> And I am black, but O, my soul is white
> White as an angel is the English child
> But I am black as if bereaved of light (Blake, 43)

The black boy, thus, has to put efforts to earn the love of the white boy. Again, set by the colour of their skin, the whites thought that it was their responsibility to bring civilization to the blacks. Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901*)* can be interpreted as a project that articulates 'hegemonic' relations between the white colonizers and the black colonized. Kipling conveys this message by locating the educated Hurree babu in a position that is subordinate to Kim. Kim belongs to the class of the ruler; he becomes the authoritative principle and babu occupies the position of the 'other'. Benita Perry's comment in "Kipling's Imperialism" that Kipling's writings articulate a new imperialist patriotism and fabricate a linear narrative of England's 'undefined heritage' can be justified in this context. (Perry, 123)

These imply that the practice of representing the blacks and their blackness as 'other' in terms of racial binary in literature by the whites has a long history and such representations seem to be articulated from a subjective position. But the way in which Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* depicts the black natives of Africa, urged Chinua Achebe to utter the following words:

> … *Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality…The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked. ('An Image of Africa', *HI*, 3-12)

It would be important, therefore, to see briefly how Conrad presents Africa and its natives in *Heart of Darkness*. In the subsequent pages an attempt is made to see how such a depiction influenced Achebe.

In *Heart of Darkness,* almost no voice is given to the African characters. There are only two instances in the novel where Conrad permits an African to utter some pidginize English words. The first occurs when 'cannibalism gets the better of them ('An Image of Africa', *HI*, 12).

"Catch'm'', he snapped, with a bloodshot widening of his eyes and a flesh of sharp white teeth-"Catch im. Give' im to us.'' (*HD*, 144)

The other occasion is the announcement made by the manager's boy:

> "Mistah Kurtz –he dead" (*HD*, 178)

Further Marlow says that in place of speech, the natives make "a violent babble of uncouth sounds" (*HD*, 120)

Marlow's first experience on seeing the native is- "a lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants…" (*HD*, 116) Marlow gradually comes to realize that he is entering into a "gloomy circle of some inferno" (*HD*, 118) where only 'black shapes' can be seen. Marlow's narrative, thus, directs our eyes to a landscape of the 'stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention' (*HD*, 137) The inhabitants of this world can only be named as 'savages'(*HD*,117,155,167), 'cannibals'(*HD*,138), 'criminals'(*HD*,138), 'black shapes'(*HD*,118), 'black shadows'(*HD*,118) etc. It is important to note that they are hardly referred to as human beings and if so it is within a feeling of suspicion.

Marlow wonders why the natives, contrary to what he thought earlier, do not try to eat the whites though they seem very hungry:

> "Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear- or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is…" (*HD*, 145-146)

To a great extent, the natives remain unknown, beyond one's comprehension in the novel.

There is some evidence to show that Conrad did not like the exploitation in Africa by the Europeans. In a letter to Roger Casement written on December 21, 1903, Conrad says:

> "And the fact remains that there exists in Africa a Congo state, created by the act of European powers where ruthless, systematic cruelty towards the black is the basic of administration." (*HD*, XXIV)

In another essay, Conrad referred to the Belgian exploitation of Africa as 'the vilest scramble for loot that disfigured the history of human conscience' (*HD*, XXI) In *HD*, Conrad tries to subvert the stereotype of the whites by depicting such evil in the colonizers. So, along with subverting the stereotype of the whites, Conrad could have also presented the other aspects of the natives. Therefore, the question that confronts one is: why does Conrad in his novel present the natives basically as 'black shapes' or 'savages'?

According to Elleke Boehmer:

> For a Victorian writer to resist the prevailing representation of empire would have meant resisting the very self perceptions on which mid-to late nineteenth century society grounded itself. In a society steeped in imperial ideologies, however, such move was unlikely. (Boehmer, 43)

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's perspective is also guided by certain stereotypes that are prevalent in the late Nineteenth century Europe. (Conrad clarifies in *HD* that the indictment is not of King Leopold II's Belgian exploitation alone but 'all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz'. *HD*, 154) Perhaps Conrad also could not separate himself from the Eurocentric fixity, taking the colonized as 'other'. That is why Marlow's interpretations of the natives are based on the metaphorical pattern of his own culture; he tries to comprehend the natives by taking recourse to certain conventional tropes. His rhetoric gets reflected in his representation of Kurtz's African mistress. Marlow evokes an erotic and wild image of the African woman-"And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman." (*HD*, 167)

Chinua Achebe alleges in 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' that the blacks are dehumanized in the novel (*HI*, 13). He points out that Marlow's use of the term 'niggers' is historically realistic. Achebe's criticism, in one respect, could have gone further. Marlow notes that Kurtz is drawn to a nocturnal ritual in the jungle which is attended by a sinister figure: "A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns- antelope horns, I think- on its head.'' (*HD*, 173) Details of phrasing (e.g. 'I think') create the suspicion that these figures might truly be satanic.

Elizabeth Colson, in her essay "African society at the time

of the scramble" opines:

> In the 1870s various communities in Africa had their own culture, and they differed radically from one another with regard to fundamental institutions such as family organization, inheritance, land rights, village political organization, religious beliefs and rituals. (Colson, 29)

But we do not see anything of these in *Heart of Darkness* which show that an insular and monolithic ideology confines African sensibility and circumscribes it within the pervasive domain of certain stereotypes in the novel.

Again, Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* is the story of a young Nigerian who works as a clerk for the British at an English district office in Fade. (Innes, 20) The novel finally narrates the story of this clerk who longs to be shot dead by an Englishman. Mercy killing of African character is celebrated here. But there is no sense of African culture as such in the novel. Different African critics condemn the novel as superficial and the character of Johnson as childish. About the novel C. L. Innes comments:

> The novel seeks above all to celebrate the character of Johnson, who is portrayed as a Dionysian character, bursting with emotion, song, dance and spontaneity, and enamoured of European civilization…Cary's novel opposes the spontaneous African man of feeling inspired by the romance of European civilization to the iron rule of native conservatism or European law... (Innes, 21-22)

Thus we can assume that the pictures of the African natives in *Heart of Darkness* and *Mister Johnson* are not entirely true. Rather, the pictures seem monolithic or notably Eurocentric. It may invite any African to present the reality of Africa by other ways. This is what really happened in case of the writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o who are trying to present an entirely different Africa in their works. The misrepresentations of Africa and its people, to a large extent, prompt them to present the socio-cultural reality of the African societies at the time of colonial expansion through their fiction. They have taken 'novel' as the medium to present the 'realistic' picture of the African tribes. Ngugi goes one step further when he presents a historical account of the *Mau Mau* revolt against the British colonial rulers in his first novel *Weep Not, Child* (1964). Some of Chinua Achebe's comments show that he began writing his novels partly in reaction to the European representation of Africa and its natives so crudely distorted by the colonizers. His position is quite clear in this respect:

> …as far as I am concerned the fundamental theme must first be disposed of. This theme-put quite simply-is that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity that they must now regain…The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they must lost. ('The Role of the Writer in a New Nation', 118)

It implies, 'othering' of the African natives by the Europeans greatly influenced Achebe. Like Cesaire and Fanon, Achebe accepts blackness in the Africans, but not in the way in which it has been presented. He shows an acute reaction to the Eurocentric writings, performing his role as a 'cultural nationalist'. Edward Said urges in *Culture and Imperialism* that after the Second World War there has been a massive intellectual, moral and imaginative overhaul and deconstruction of Western representation of the non-Western world. (Said 1994: 238) It can be said to be true in case of Achebe. Achebe further writes:

> Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse-to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement…But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better. ('The Novelist as Teacher', *HI*, 44-45)

It will be interesting, therefore, to see what the postcolonial voices show against Conrad's, Cary's and others' racial representations of Africa and its people and how they show it. Is it really a resistance on their part? It will be equally important to observe how writer like Chinua Achebe has presented the whites when the question of comparison comes ('we are much better') because critic like Ted Motohashi holds the following view about the white colonizers:

> The colonizers who tried to construct their identities according to such paradigms as white, Christian, civilized, rational, sexually controlled, termed those who transgressed their norms as 'savage', impugning 'abnormalities' to the native population. Yet in describing the Other's transgressive behaviour, the colonizers in fact expressed their own fantasized desire (and actual behaviour): treachery, rape, murder, misogyny, sexual device- they themselves were hybrid, transgressing entities. (Motohashi, 90)

Thus, one is confronted with questions like: Is presenting the whites in postcolonial fiction a part of their resistance? Or, is it a kind of 'othering'? Are the postcolonial writers free from racial binary? Are they doing the same thing that they accuse Conrad of? Such issues need to be addressed as well as these may indicate the emergence of postcolonial voices in a new light.

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