

Disruptive Colonial Discourse and Spatial Disorientations: Misrepresentation of the American and Indian Territories in the British Fictional Narratives of Wars of Independence

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Abstract

*The article presents a discursive critique of misrepresentation of the American and Indian geographies in the English fictional narratives set during the times of anti-British revolutions in the respective countries. Delimiting focus on Bernard Cornwell's *The Fort* (2010) and Louis Tracy's *The Red Year* (1907), the researchers have explored the colonial world contrived in the textual galaxy of the purposive fabrications. Cornwell's novel envisages the American locale in which the apostles of the auspicious Empire have been shown fighting the wild rebels in the wilderness. Whereas Tracy delineates the Indian spatial setting in which the enlightenment project is being deterred by the defiant natives. The exploration of the fictional world has been theoretically facilitated by the postcolonial postulates vis-à-vis the textual distortions of the geographical realities. The analysis of the selected novels has evidenced the reductionist rhetoric of the English writers who portray the colonial regions as the uninhabitable trenches where civilizational light penetrates rarely and timidly. The novels discursively evacuate the territories to pave the way for expansionism and, also, conform to the broader disruptive colonial discourse that has always been used to legitimize the colonial adventures.*

Keywords: Colonial Discourse, Spatial Disorientations, CDA,

Introduction

Colonial enterprises have always been encompassing projects that include multifarious kinds of maneuvering ranging from the abstract epistemic impositions to the pragmatic political programmes. One among the coercive colonial apparatuses is the textual sabotage of the spatial

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situation of a colony. This spatial misrepresentation plays dual role: it strengthens the propagandist prognostications paving way for the act of colonial expansion and, also, contributes to the legitimacy discourse to exonerate the centre after decolonization. This disruptive discursive strategy is manifest in the literature produced in the British imperial centre vis-à-vis its various colonies.

The article is a critique of the textual envisaging of the Indian and American regions in the British fictional narratives. Informed by the postcolonial insights, the researchers approach two of the British novels to expose the speculative charting of the colonial territories: Cornwell's *The Fort: A novel of the Revolutionary War*¹ and Tracy's *The Red Year: A story of the Indian Mutiny*². Cornwell shows the Redcoats as the civilizational ambassadors in the American haed who find themselves amidst environmental crucible. Likewise, Tracy depicts the Indian milieu to be marked with the spatial nebulousness. The colonies misrepresented in the novels were maintained by the British Empire in different times and distant regions. But, interestingly, despite the spatio-temporal differences, the discursive misrepresentation reduces them to identical vacuums demanding civilizational light. The study identifies how these two novels, produced in the imperial centre, contrive to misrepresent the geographical and spatial contour of the colonies and how the discursive manipulation contributes to legitimize the colonizers' act of expansion.

Spatiality, Geography, and the Colonial Discourse

The contribution, even sometimes centrality, of the spatial positioning in understanding of the social propensities cannot be ignored in any serious epistemological and intellectual investigation. As Lawrence Buell puts aphoristically the indispensability of spatial anchorage: "there never was an *is* without a *where*."³ The postcolonial counter-discursive paradigm is awake to the problematic nature and the "essential value"⁴ of land and the representation of it in the textual artifacts.

Edward Said has addressed the issue of geography and stressed its "primacy" for proper perception of the colonial discourse. For him, colonialism or imperialism are rooted in the practice of the "geographical violence"—exploring, charting, and capturing—to which the postcolonial people respond by searching and restoring the "geographical identity".⁵ He has explained all-pervasive nature of the spatial realization that propels different projections ranging from philosophical debates to economics policies. By juxtaposing the idea of the "social space" and the "actual" one, he has discussed role of the "geographical sense" in "the construction of various kinds of knowledge".⁶ Thus, Said has acknowledged the central position of the geographical location, its

perception, and textual construction in realization of the complex interaction between the colonizers and the colonized.

Ashcroft *et al.* have accepted the Foucauldian stance about the nature and functioning of discourse, that is, through it “the world is brought into being”.⁷ So, to encompass different dimensions of the discursive practices focusing spatial and geographical phenomena, they have devoted a full-fledged section, “Place”, that contains critical postulates of the various theorists on the relevant issues. At the very outset, they explicitly state the fluid nature of *place* in the postcolonial debates by declaring it to be “a complex interaction of language, history and environment.”⁸

David Mazel has argued about the discursive disposition of the environmental and ecological concepts. He adapts the Foucauldian poststructuralist postulates to present “the environment as a construct, not as the pre discursive origin and cause of environmental discourse but rather as the effect of that discourse”.⁹ The position is quiet interesting as it proposes to reduce the apparently pragmatic, non-discursive, phenomena to mere textual production and verbal propositions.

Many other theorists and critics have presented their theses that stress the discursive nature of the idea of space: Deloughrey and Handley attribute “infinite meanings”¹⁰ to it, Glissant believes it to have the “deepest”¹¹ connotations, Huggan and Tiffin have identified the “the burgeoning alliance between postcolonial and environmental studies”¹², and many more. All these theorists are having consensus about the essential role of the spatial configuration in exploration of the epistemological and social dimensions of any civilizational segment. In short, the seminal reference work in the domain affirms the essentiality of the spatiality in deciphering the colonial discourse and producing the counter-discourse.

Fiction and National Ideological Agendas

Nationalist zeal and the novelistic traditions across the world have always had strong nexus. The reciprocal influence of these two is widely acknowledged, that is, novel propagates nationalist sentiment and nationalism precipitates fervid fictional works. The interrelation of the nation and novel has been critically acclaimed throughout the academic circles.¹³

Frantz Fanon’s argument remains the central one regarding the concept of nationalism. He considers various facets of the phenomenon of nationalism and presents a critique of the contentious dimensions of it.

His conceptualization of the nationalist ideology focuses the nexus between nation and literature. Explaining the relation, he says: “it [literature] calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation”.¹⁴ He elaborates that the programmed selection of the supposedly *useful* and the purportedly *useless* is based on the national preferences.

Homi. K. Bhabha’s anthology provides seminal critiques on the issue of the conflation of the nationalist preferences and narratives. His is an authentic compendium of scholarly ideas on the topic of the relation between nation and novel. In his peculiar elitist idiom, Bhabha explains the coalescing of “political thought and literary language”¹⁵ in the preface. It includes many enabling and interesting analyses and provides seminal sources that help to understand the interaction of narrativity and nationality.

The studies covering the themes of nation, novel, and their reciprocity abound and cannot be covered within the ambit of the article. There are many well-received works available to the researchers: Patrick Parrinder’s¹⁶, Richard Allen and Harish Trivedi’s¹⁷, Jonathan Culler and Pheng Cheah’s¹⁸, Najita’s¹⁹, and an array of the authentic sources. These works contribute to explain the complex relation of the nationalist passion and the literary imagination that generates enthusiastic yields.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The theoretical underpinning of the study is in the postcolonial propositions about working of the colonial discourse. Under the Foucauldian influence, the idea of discourse has departed the purely linguistic domain and imbibed more social implication, that is, it has become “a particular way of representing the world”.²⁰ Edward Said has adapted notion of the constructive discourse and discursive constructions to describe the complex web of the western works on the East. He identifies the colonial discourse as “a coercive framework”²¹ consummately corresponding with the coercive colonization. The seminal Saidian idea has found wide critical acclaim and became the favoured idiom of almost all the postcolonial and cultural critics. In continuation of his argument, Sara Suleri has termed the colonial discourse as the “master-myth”²² and Robert Young declared it an instance of the “epistemic”²³ violence. However, Said’s focus is on the representation of the eastern phenomena. To cover the British discourse on the American colony, Christopher Flynn’s critique has been taken as the theoretical model. He has explored and exposed the British literature that misrepresents the Americans as “a rude people living in a savage wilderness”.²⁴ The essential identification of both the critics is same:

condescending distortions of the colonial subjects and space by the imperial centre.

In the article, only spatial misrepresentation has been explored to show that even the concrete phenomena become malleable when represented discursively. The politics of textually constructed geographies in the western discourse has been identified and criticized by the postcolonial critics: Said exposes the orientalist rhetoric, Flynn counters the idea of American wilderness, and Gikandi deconstructs misrepresentation of the African landscape as merely a “monstrous presence”.²⁵ This practice of exposing the spatial misrepresentation of the colonies forms the theoretical pivot of the research.

Methodological Design

The methodological approach is qualitative one, that is, it remains a pure textual analysis of the selected novels to describe the existent misrepresentations. The method of analysis is tripartite in its formation. Firstly, Cornwell’s novel has been taken and analyzed from the postcolonial perspective with focus upon the issue of spatial misrepresentation of the American territory. Secondly, Tracy’s fictional narrative is approached to identify the discursive distortion of the Indian geographical dimensions. Lastly, the outcomes of the analyses of both the novels have been streamlined to develop the argument.

Cornwell’s America and Tracy’s India

Bernard Cornwell and Louis Tracy’s narratives correspond to the imperialist rhetoric about the colonies. In their novels, they have devised the colonial world in the name of description and promoted the colonial agendas in the name of portrayals. All the colonial discursive features have been incorporated into the texture of the novels to turn them the fictions of empire. However, we have confined our attention to exposition of spatial misrepresentation of the colonies in these novels.

Cornwell’s novel is representation of the revolutionary struggle against the British government that led the foundation of the sovereign American nation. The novel narrates retrospectively to invoke the images of the past that are evidently lopsided and visibly coloured with the biased choices. The stereotypical colonial rhetoric and the imperialist discourse have found full sway in the fiction. Besides the other multifarious colonial discursive strategies, he exhibits the peculiar predilection towards distortion of the spatial perspective. He delineates the American landscape in a way that arouses the sense of utter chaos and unwelcoming vacuum. The amorphous nature of the location has been stressed on the very outset to envisage the ghastly presence around.

The country has been dubbed contemptuously as “fog-ridden wilderness”.²⁶ Fletcher, an American young man, describes the predicament to a Scottish officer, McLean:

“We get fog in the spring, General, and fog in the summer, and then comes the fog in the fall and after that the snow, which we usually can’t see because it’s hidden by fog,” Fletcher said...²⁷

Apparently, the statement has a comic colour but it is rooted in the blanketed and bleak image of the country constructed by the colonial textual versions. Description presents the American context as a nebulous place where even differentiation between days and nights, and also between summer and winter, is difficult due to the atmospheric obscurity that is enveloping the place. In the passage, an opaque visual image of the territory is envisioned through the verbal chicanery. It is an obvious instance of unjustified reduction of the colonial territory.

However, against the blank background and enveloping nebulousness, some obnoxious instances of existence are found in the fictional world. Consequently, the annoying obscurity of the place becomes worsened when coupled with the disgusting presence. For example, Flint, a colonist American, describes *Majabigwaduce* to Revere as a place where “fog and flies is all it is, fog and flies”.²⁸ The acoustically euphonious alliterative expression communicates the ironical message, that is, the American setting is either blank or bleak without any trace of something attractive in nature. This implies that experiencing the American atmosphere is like oscillating between intolerable extremes: numbing nothingness and excruciating existence. These contraries make the area incongruous for nourishment of the civilizational project that is being promoted by the purveyors of prosperity, the British soldiers. So, the America appears as an evil vacuum marked with sparse disgusting things that function merely to mar the impression of it.

Another example of reduction of the American milieu occurs when George Collier, an admiral of the Royal Navy, describes New York, the American metropolis, as a “filthy” and “unbearable” city because its winter is “brutally cold” and summer “steamy hell”. He further represents the British sentiment about the American environment when he says in extreme anguish: “even the Dead Sea’s healthier than New York”.²⁹ He thinks about the extravagant life of London and juxtaposes his present predicament with the previous luxurious life and laments. In his sweeping statements, all the seasons of the city have been abhorred and declared unsuitable for sensible human beings, the sophisticated red coats, who have never been exposed to the tormenting,

rather torturing, environmental conditions. Moreover, these heavily loaded lexical choices are symptomatic of the vehemence with which the discursive denunciation is imbued. All these details invoke a repulsive shiver and create a disgusting impression in the mind of a reader.

Due to incompatibility of the place to accommodate the Englishmen, the British soldiers are always dissatisfied and consider the milieu absolutely inappropriate to locate the civilized and beautiful British breeds. So, when Captain Fielding, a beautiful red coat, is seen in the area, MacLean observes him sympathetically and considers the unfortunateness of his being there: "he would be far more at home in some London salon than in this American wilderness".³⁰ He is being envisaged as a sophisticated soldier whose glamour would have been properly matched by the fashionable culture of the British metropolis, London. The contrast between the sophisticated London and the strange America is sharp and suggestive of the contemptuous attitude of the English towards the place and the inhabitants who are in consummate conformity with the wilderness. Likewise, Cornwell's charming protagonist Moore, the English captain, feels annoyed on the fact of being thrown into the ghastly abyss where his jingoistic romance has dashed into dust. He has always dreaming about the graceful combats on the grand grounds where even losing one's life would be a worth doing ritual. Cornwell narrates his stream of thoughts to explain his sense of utter despondency:

*There had been a vision of redcoats drawn up in three ranks, their flags bright above them... but instead Moore's first battle had been a chaotic defeat in dark woods.*³¹

The scenario is devoid of any dream-field, no arrayed enemy, and no resplendent cavalry was there to satiate Moore's thirst for grandeur and magnificence. Instead of materializing his romantic dreams, he finds himself wandered into the dark woods that are marked only with either nothingness or baseness.

Thus, Cornwell has used various discursive chicaneries in the novel to distort the image of the spatial dimensions of the American colony. The discursively exploitative text has manifested multifarious strategies to depict the area as the deplorable one. He has envisaged the American ecological stretches in a manner that implies the civilizational void and spatial wilderness of the American area. All these textual practices are triggered by the evident proposal, the aim to legitimize the establishment of the colonial rule in the territory.

Tracy's delineation of the Indian ecological surrounding is akin to Cornwell's representation of the American one. His novel fictionalizes the epic event of the Indian Mutiny (1857), as he derogatorily dubs it in

accordance with the nationalist position. In the novel, the narration of the historical event has been processed through the parochial nationalist prism. Compositely, the text epitomizes all the orientalist stereotypes ranging from claiming India to be temporally frozen to the exotic attributions to its supposedly lamentable social disorientations. Among others, distortion of the spatial image of the Indian territorial stretches is also found in the narrative. The researchers have, being focused on the targeted element, foregrounded the spatial misrepresentation accomplished through the discursive trickeries.

Representation of India as a “strange land”³² has been one of the focal features of the writer that remains foregrounded throughout the text. In the very beginning, Tracy has set his disposition without mincing the words. When Frank Malcolm, the young English soldier and the protagonist of the novel, begins his sojourn through the mysterious Indian land, one of the first repulsive experiences is falling into a lake that, being a typical Indian one, is a mere “moat” full of filthy mud. Tracy comments on the ditch that is blanketed with the disgusting “green slime” thus: “in India such a sheet of almost stagnant water has excessive peculiarities”.³³ Besides representing the lake as a dirty one, the obvious suggestion by the word *peculiarities* is that only the Indian lakes breed venomous creatures like snakes. So, the lake invokes nothing positive and having no hint of the visual feast often attached with lakes.

With reference to the Indian social and spatial context, paucity of the civilizational factors and superabundance of non-human phenomena have been stressed in the novel. The narrative contains a passage that portrays the area in a way to make it appear like an uninhabited land swarming with the creepy creatures of various kinds. The description of the dystopia, created with the orientalist proclivity of colouring the colonies with the exotic shades, reads thus:

*“In the dense undergrowth hummed and rustled a hidden life of greater mystery. Where water lodged after the rain there were countless millions of frogs, croaking in harsh chorus, and being ceaselessly hunted by the snakes... Even the air has its strange denizens in the guise of huge beetles and vampire-winged flying foxes.”*³⁴

The passage juxtaposes the scarce human existence and exuberant non-human existential conditions. The predicament can be perceived through the point that even the monsoon, a metaphor of enlivening energy, triggers only pernicious creatures and obnoxious denizens: frogs, snakes, beetles, flying foxes, and other repulsive reptiles. These things deprive the Indian version of mystery from the enticing capacity and attach disgusting images with it. Moreover, the Indian environment has also received an antagonistic reception by Tracy. The seasons have been

shown to be devoid of the prototypical qualities and, also, the atmosphere has been attributed the unattractive traits. For example, he clarifies superiority of the English environment by putting it vis-à-vis the Indian one:

*“A May morning in the Punjab must not be confused with its prototype in Britain. Undimmed by cloud, unchecked by cooling breeze, the sun scorches the earth from the moment his glowing rays first peep over the horizon.”*³⁵

The contrast is clear communication of denigration of the Indian setting that offers scorching rays and blistering beams. These instances, compositely, contribute to contrive a picture of the Indian environmental setting as an incompatible one for the sustenance of any civilization. The ulterior motif behind the rendering is to present the English as the self-sacrificing custodians of the humanitarianism who have compromised for the philanthropist ideals and stepped down into the Indian setting that is incongruous with their social sophistication.

Depiction of the oriental countries, especially the colonial territories, as timeless and static specimens is a common practice among the purveyors of the orientalist rhetoric and colonial discourse. Tracy is no exception in the array of the orientalist writers. His belief in the timelessness of the Orient has also found expression in the novel. He expresses his disdainful view that “civilization has made but few marks on” the Indians and they continue living under the primordial predicament “since the dawn of history”.³⁶ Houses of the Indians have been reduced to the “mud hovels”.³⁷ All these details explicitly propose the paucity of sophistication and imply the social inferiority.

Thus, the novel is a manifest ratification of the fact that Tracy has tuned the Indian spatial stretches in a way to suit his parochial projections about the nature and nurture of the people of the land. The hazardously exotic land, that demands civilizational message and corrective agents, has been constructed with help of the discursive constructions. Furthermore, the peculiar spatial rendering suggests the predicament of the uncivilized people who are inhabitants of this nebulous space and experiencing the primordial existential dilemmas.

The critical review shows that both of the novels present the respective geographies as horrible vacuums without any civilizational substance. The representational rhetoric and the contrived images in both the novels are identical that propose: 1) the colonies are primarily cultural vacuums devoid of the civilizational paraphernalia; 2) their inhabitants are savages and may make the English *go native*; 3) and they are in dire need of the cultural patronage. The corresponding colonialist

proposals are also akin 1) the colonial enterprises are legitimate, rather recommended; 2) the colonization is for the benefit of the colonized peoples; 3) and it is sheer generosity of the British to present themselves voluntarily to accomplish the altruistic task and bear the burden of enlightening the world around. Thus, these novels, like all other colonial fictional pieces, conform to the political agendas of the British government, though in the semblance of the aesthetic artifacts.

Conclusion

The explication of different discursive dimensions present in the British fictional narratives has exemplified how the literary emissaries of the British Empire have misrepresented the geographical/spatio-ecological perspectives of the colonies to rationalize its expansions and, also, how they continue distorting to assuage the malpractices of the past. The British colonial discourse has gone beyond the anthropocentric issues and included the spatial perspectives to accomplish the inclusive conceptual capture. Cornwell has contrived the American wilderness to imply the civilizational vacuum that ought to be replaced by the British noble culture. Similarly, Tracy's India is another offshoot of the colonialist imagination and imperialist preoccupation. Precisely, both the narratives explicitly propose indispensability of the colonial adventures that are marked with benevolence of the British who deteriorated into these uninhabited infernos to enlighten them with the civilizational torch. Thus, the analysis and comparison ratify that the discursive distortion is a deliberate strategy used to establish legitimacy of the colonization on the pretext of promotion of the civilizational schemes. These different elements substantiate the inference of the researchers regarding the bizarre and dreadful verbal visualization of the American landscape and Indian spatial settings.

Moreover, the critique has exposed that though the colonial expansions were reversed in the process of decolonization in the form of the military retrieval and resultant geographical emancipation of the once-colonized terrains, the conceptual clutches tapered by the British colonizers keep on contriving the consciousness of once-colonized countries. It is further proposed that for actualization of the dream of the true emancipation, these discursive cocoons are to be ripped.

Notes & references

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