Colonial Discourse Analysis: Foucault's Power/Knowledge Nexus and Said's *Orientalism*

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Abstract

Postcolonialism has been an integral part of the literary discourse since its inception in the late 1980s. The field of postcolonial literature combines within itself two already existing areas of study in the sphere of English literature, which are Commonwealth Literature and colonial discourse analysis. The category of Commonwealth Literature groups under its banner all the English literatures that were emerging from the once colonised parts of the British colonial empire. Colonial discourse analysis, on the other hand, refers to how the process of colonialism relates to the idea of discourse. In order to understand this, we have to turn to the ideas and insight of the twentieth century French intellectual Michel Foucault who was of the view that there are certain deep-seated regulations in every society which structure and limit the creation and circulation of discourse. The factors that limit the possibility and proliferation of discourse, according to Foucault, are: the concept of taboo, the distinction between madness and sanity, and institutional ratification. But the most important idea of Michel Foucault which informs the study of colonial discourse is that power and knowledge are interrelated, and in the exploitative colonial situation underlined by a power imbalance it is the discourse generated, circulated and ratified by the institutions of the powerful colonizers that gains acceptance as the truth. This connection between discourse and colonial power relations was most elaborately explained in Edward Said's Orientalism (1978). In this seminal text, Said argues that European colonial domination of the Orient was integrally associated with how the Orient was conceptualized, researched and talked about in Europe; and he referred to this discourse as the discourse of Orientalism. Said's Orientalism beautifully unfolds the power-knowledge nexus that connects the discourse of Orientalism with the military and economic domination of the Orient by Europe. However, Said's primary objective in this work is not just to reveal this connection, but to disrupt it; and he seeks to bring about this disruption through the strategy of contrapuntal reading of the texts underlined by the discourse of Orientalism. By contrapuntal reading Said refers to the strategy of reading the Orientalist texts against the grain, i.e., questioning the inherent assumptions of such texts. Through this practice of contrapuntal reading Said seeks to question the Europe centric values of the Orientalist texts and to point out and critique the myths and prejudices that underline them.

Key Words: Orientalism, Colonial discourse analysis, Foucault, Edward Said, power-knowledge nexus, contrapuntal reading.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century literary studies in particular, and the study of humanities in general, moved in a new direction that opened up an entirely new field of enquiry which is now known as the field of postcolonial studies. In spite of not having a very long history postcolonial studies, since its inception in the 1980s, has grown tremendously in significance and today postcolonial concerns inform a very large section of academic research and publication in the sphere of Indian academia. Postcolonialism is truly an interdisciplinary field of study where we find ourselves at a cross-section where subjects as varied as literature, history, geography, philosophy and psychology intersect one another. This makes postcolonial literary studies a very interesting field of enquiry. But at the same time this plethora of subjects, which intersect each other in the field of postcolonial studies, also make it a subject whose margins are rather vaguely defined and whose contours are difficult to grasp.

The word postcolonialism, unlike the words such as 'imagism,' was not specifically coined to signify a particular kind of literature. In fact, the use of the term postcolonialism, which can be traced as far back as the late 19th century, had little connection with the field of literature till almost the late 1980's. Till that time the word postcolonialism was primarily used as an adjective to refer to conditions or situations which occurred or existed after the end of colonial rule in the once colonised parts of the European colonial empires. So in this context postcolonialism meant post-independence and the word postcolonialism was almost always used with a hyphen separating "post" from "colonialism". It was only since the late 1980's and the 1990's that postcolonialism became an integral part of literary discussions and it brought together two already existing areas of study within the field of English literature. The first area which got incorporated within the field of postcolonial literature was referred to as Commonwealth Literature. And the other area was referred to as the study of colonial discourse or colonial discourse analysis. These two separate aspects came together to form the field of postcolonial studies and they in a way form the roots of postcolonial literature as a field of literary studies.

The label of Commonwealth literature is used to group under itself all the English literatures that have emerged from the once colonised parts of the British colonial empire. Interestingly, though, the canon of Commonwealth literature neither includes the literature of erstwhile colonies like America, nor the literature of metropolitan Britain. However, the primary concern of this paper is to study and explore the other aspect of postcolonial studies, i.e., colonial discourse analysis.

In order to deal with the concept of 'colonial discourse analysis,' let's begin our discussion with a simple and working definition of colonialism, or more specifically the post 16th century forms of colonialism as a capitalism driven enterprise where one country or group of people forcefully acquires the land and economic resources belonging to another country or group of people for the purpose of profit making. Now our concern is to

study how this process of violent subjugation, i.e. colonialism, relates to the idea of discourse. In order to understand this we have turn to the works of the twentieth century French intellectual Michel Foucault because it is from there that postcolonial studies primarily derives its understanding of discourse.

So what is a discourse? If we consult a dictionary, we will see that the simplest definition of discourse is that it is a set of meaningful statements, made orally or in writing, on a given topic. The insight that Michel Foucault brings to this simple definition of discourse through his works like *The Archaeology of Knowledge* or through his essays like "The Order of Discourse" is that there are certain deep-seated regulations which structure and limit the creation and circulation of discourse. In these works what Foucault says is that though in theory the number of things that we can say or write about is infinite, in practice the number of meaningful statements that we can make is actually strictly limited by certain factors.

Foucault primarily talks about three factors that limit and regulate the possibilities and proliferation of discourse. The first one is taboo, the second one is the distinction between madness and sanity and the third one is institutional ratification. Let us start this discussion with the notion of taboo, which is the first of the three factors mentioned by Foucault. Now in any society at any given point of time we find that there are always prohibitions surrounding certain topics. Any discussions on these topics, which are considered taboo or which are considered prohibited, are therefore socially looked down upon. Therefore, there is an absence of discourse on certain topics within certain social milieus. A fitting example in this context would be the subject of sexuality. Even today certain areas of sexuality are considered to be taboos in our society and therefore it becomes very difficult to talk about issues such as sexual violence that happens within the confines of domesticity. Although our ability to talk about sexual violence has increased greatly from what it was hundred years back, yet certain areas of sexuality and sexual violence still remains taboo. Such prohibited subjects, which Foucault called tabooed subjects, may vary from one society to another and, in fact, from one time to another. But the fact remains that whatever be the variation there will always be some subjects which are impossible or at least extremely difficult to discourse. And that fact remains constant in every society.

Now let us come to the second point, which is the distinction between madness and sanity. According to Michel Foucault, the notion of madness and sanity acts as another important factor that limits the possibility of discourse. For instance, if someone says that "humans walk on their heads," then in all likelihood that person will be taken as mad and his or her statements will be considered as outpourings of an insane mind which do not have any meaning. Thus, if discourse is to be understood as composed of meaningful statements, then someone who is deemed mad is by definition someone who cannot create a discourse. So, even though a mad person might be able to speak, the speech never gains the acceptance of a discourse. Here it is important to note that like the concept of tabooed subjects, the definition of madness too changes with time and place. As Foucault observes in his book *Madness and Civilisation*, different societies separated from one another by time or space draw the line between madness and sanity differently. But, however a society might choose

to demarcate madness from sanity the basic concept of madness remains present in all society. As a result, in any given society, at any given point of time, there would always be a group of statements which will be kept out of the pale of discourse because of its association with madness.

Apart from taboo and madness, Foucault also talks about institutional ratification as an important factor that limits the proliferation of discourse. If we think carefully, we will understand that our process of knowing something and talking or writing meaningfully about those things are closely guided by various institutions like schools, colleges, publishing industry, news agencies, learned societies, scientific laboratories, so on and so forth. These institutions control the scope of discourse by regulating the circulation of statements and by prioritising and foregrounding certain statements, while marginalising or even gagging certain other opposing statements. In this context it is important to note that if the social situation is underlined by a power imbalance, it is the institutions of the more powerful that control and regulate knowledge and its discursive manifestation. Therefore the kinds of discourse that are prevalent in any given situation largely depend on the institutions which regulate and ratify the production and dissemination of knowledge.

Now here with this last statement we come to another very important idea of Michel Foucault which is significant if we are to understand colonial discourse analysis; and the big idea is: power and knowledge are interrelated. In *Power/Knowledge* Foucault observed that if a social situation is underlined by a power imbalance, it is invariably the institutions of the more powerful that get to regulate knowledge and its discursive manifestation. In order to understand this proposition let us consider the following statement:

> *"I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. But […] I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. [….] I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."*
> *(Thomas B. Macaulay, Minutes upon Indian Education [1835] 242-43)*

The above statement is extracted from a document dated 2nd February 1835 and the document is titled *Minutes upon Indian Education*. The author of this document is Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859). While writing these words Macaulay was employed as a member of the Governor General's Council which was a body that looked after East India Company's affairs in India. So he was a part of that institution.

The above-mentioned statement made by Macaulay, which denigrates the rich tradition of Indian and Arabic literature and compares the whole of it with just a single library shelf of European books, is, as Prof. Sayan Chattopadhyay opines in one of his lectures on postcolonial literature, "at best a thoroughly biased statement" (Chattopadhyay, "Michel Foucault"). Indeed, listening to it today one might be tempted to dismiss it as a rambling of a mad person. Yet, in 1835 this statement was not dismissed as madness. In fact, it was taken very seriously; and it was taken seriously because Macaulay was making this

statement from a position of power – as a member of the Governor General's Council. Macaulay represented colonial authority that was backed by Britain's military and economic domination of India and the Middle East. The very fact that the Governor General's Council, to which Macaulay belonged, represented the institution of the powerful colonisers, gave the statements issued by one of its members an unquestioned truth value.

So it does not take much of an imagination to figure out that if Sanskrit or Arabic scholars from India or the Middle East were asked to compare their literary traditions with the tradition of European literature they would have come up with an assessment that would be very different from Macaulay's assessment. Yet their status as representatives of a subjugated population meant that their statements never enjoyed the institutional backing that was given to the statement of Macaulay. So in any situation characterised by such an imbalance of power, it is always the discourse of the powerful that gets circulated as true knowledge.

In this discussion so far we have tried to demonstrate how power influences knowledge and discourse. But Foucault's understanding of the power knowledge interrelationship tells us that knowledge and its discursive manifestations also influence power and how power is enacted. So it is not merely power which influences knowledge, it is also the other way around. Knowledge and its discursive manifestations also influence power and its enactment. To understand this let us go back to Macaulay's statement. This highly biased statement, which today frankly sounds ridiculous, not only enjoyed widespread circulation because of its relationship with colonial authority but it in turn influenced how colonial authority should function in India. So Macaulay's 1835 "Minutes upon Indian Education" was soon turned into a legal act which was called English Education Act of 1835. And this act resulted in East India Company diverting all the funds allocated for the purpose of education in India to English education.

Thus, Macaulay's discourse resulted in an exercise of colonial power that sought to systematically destroy all native institutions of learning because all native institutions of higher learning, prior to the advent of the British, used either Sanskrit or Persian as medium of instruction. This connection between discourse and colonial power relations was most elaborately explained in a book titled *Orientalism* which was published in 1978. It was authored by the Palestine born American professor Edward Said (1935-2003).

Edward Said is widely regarded as the founder of postcolonial studies and what we now know as colonial discourse analysis was something that was initiated by his book *Orientalism*. In that particular seminal text as well as in his later works like *Culture and Imperialism*, Said contends that the expansion of post 16th century European colonialism, especially in Asia, was inherently connected with a particular kind of discourse which he refers to as the discourse of Orientalism. In these texts Said further argues that much of Western literature – ranging from Greek tragedies produced during the 5th century BCE by playwrights like Aeschylus to 19th and 20th century novels written by novelists like Gustave Flaubert and Joseph Conrad – formed an integral part of this discourse of Orientalism which justified the colonial domination of the East by the West. Thus, Said,

who founded postcolonial studies, primarily focused on the literature that was produced from within the European colonial metropolis; and postcolonial literary studies, as the legacy bearer of Edward Said's works, therefore also includes discussion on metropolitan literature.

In his book *Orientalism* (1978) Said's main argument is that European colonial domination of the Orient was integrally associated with how the Orient was conceptualised, researched and talked about in Europe. In other words, what Said propounds is that the military and economic domination of the Orient was tied up with the discourse about the Orient which he refers to as Orientalism. This proposition of Said builds upon Foucault's argument that power, knowledge, and discursive manifestation of knowledge are integrally related with each other. Said takes this generalised concept of Foucault and applies it to the specific context of European colonial domination of the Orient. Thus, Orientalism, as Said defines it, implies the European coloniser's discourse about the Orient which is associated with the military and economic domination of the Orient. This is a rough and ready definition of Orientalism; and the present paper intends to elaborate on this particular definition to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the concept of Orientalism.

The term 'Orientalism' derives from the root word 'orient' and its derivatives like 'oriental' or 'orientalist,' and broadly all of these terms refer to the East or to things related to the East. But the question here, of course, is that "East of what?" Well, the reference point here is Europe and the Orient signifies a land that lies East of Europe. More specifically, the Orient or the East refers to the land that we now know as the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. This Orient or the East is contrasted with the Occident or the West which in turn refers to Europe; and together, the Orient and the Occident or the East and the West form a conceptual binary that informs various texts including a text like Rudyard Kipling's "The Ballad of East and West" where he writes, very famously, "East is East and West is West, and never shall the twain meet" (qtd. in Stedman, 246). Such use of 'East and West' or 'Orient and Occident' as contrasting conceptual categories also occurs regularly in more mundane conversations where terms like East and West or Orient and Occident are used as cryptic shorthand way to denote not just geographical spaces but also certain cultural values that include things like food habits, dress codes, bodily postures, or even moral conduct. In these instances, the Orient and the Occident offer a kind of matrix to conceptualise the world by dividing it into two broad mutually exclusive categories where whatever is represented by the Occident the exact opposite is represented by the Orient.

While discussing how the discourse of Orientalism affects colonial power relations Said talks about three broad aspects of Orientalism. These are:

- Orientalism is a particular way of thinking.
- Orientalism is an academic discipline
- Orientalism is a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient

So the first aspect Said talks about is that Orientalism is a particular style of thought which is pivoted on contrasting the Orient from the Occident. According to Said, instances

of Orientalism as a binary way of thinking can be traced as far back as the Greek tragedies of the 5th century BCE where the Orient was imagined not just as a land of Asia but as the 'other' of the European 'self;' that is to say whatever Europe stood for, the Orient, as a foil, stood for exactly the opposite things. If the Occident or Europe stood for masculinity, for instance, then the Orient by contrast assumed a feminine entity in this imaginative geography. If, for instance, the Occident represented mature adulthood then by contrast the Orient became representative of childish immaturity. If the Occident considered itself to be at the pinnacle of civilisation, then of course by contrast, Orient came to represent the depths of barbarism and moral and cultural depravity. So, in other words, the discourse of Orientalism presents the Orient as this dark and unregenerate counterpart of the Occident which is simultaneously foreign, loathsome and yet excitingly exotic. Such a discourse, which uses this binary way of thinking and which presents the Orient as a sinister yet alluring entity for the West, has been prevalent in Europe for millennia. However, as Prof. Sayan Chattopadhyay points out in his lecture on Edward Said, it was during the heydays of European colonialism that this discourse enjoyed special relevance and it mutated itself into an academic discipline.

Therefore, here we come to the second aspect of Said's definition of Orientalism. As Said argues, it was precisely when European powers started conquering the Orient during the late 18th century, Orientalism emerged in Europe as an academic discipline. So there is an inherent connection, according to Said, between the military conquest of the Orient which started roughly from the late 18th century onwards and the emergence of Orientalism as an academic discipline in Europe.

Till before the 18th century European access to the Orient was limited. But military conquests during the latter half of the 18th century allowed European scholars to scrutinise the Orient more closely. Thus, as Said points out, when in 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte led a military expedition to Egypt, he was accompanied not merely by an army of soldiers but also by an army of scholars and scientists who transformed the occupied territory into an object of enquiry and a field of systematic knowledge.

After the Napoleonic conquest, Egypt, at least for Europe, ceased to remain just a distant exotic land known primarily through hearsays, but it became one of its objects of scientific enquiry. This systematic enquiry of Egypt resulted in a multivolume Encyclopaedia called *Description de I'Egypte* which not only contained texts on natural histories and descriptions of Egyptian antiquities but also contained engravings and detailed maps of that region. So Egypt was no longer this unknown dark sinister exotic land. It became an object of enquiry, a site of systematic knowledge.

Such an exercise to systematically know the conquered country is also visible in the efforts of Warren Hastings (1732-1818) who was the first Governor General of India. His tenure in India during the late 18th century more or less coincides with the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt. Here again we see a similar approach to transform the conquered country into a field of systematic knowledge gathering. So Hastings, along with two other colonial officials – William Jones and Nathaniel Halhed, researched, compiled, and

published voluminously on various aspects related to India. These publications were on topics as diverse as law, literature, astrology, botany, history and language. So this kind of systematic knowledge gathering, which was made possible largely because of the military conquest and control of the Orient, inaugurated during the 19th century academic fields like Egyptology and Indology which were part of the broader umbrella called Oriental studies that, by the end of the 19th century, had become an integral part of the Western academia.

The huge amount of documents that this academic Orientalism produced was soon acknowledged in Europe as the most authentic way of knowing about the Orient; so much so that someone like the British philosopher James Mill could justify writing a multivolume history of India just by consulting the documents on India that were available in England without ever visiting India or without ever knowing a single Indian language. In the preface to his history of British India Mill writes:

> This writer . . . has never been in India; and, if he has any, has a very slight, and elementary acquaintance, with any of the languages of the East . . . [Yet] it appeared to me, that a sufficient stock of information was now collected in the languages of Europe, to enable the inquirer to ascertain every important point, in the history of India.

> Preface, Volume – I, *The History of British India*

If we consider the above-mentioned statement, the very audacity of this claim to know all the important points about the history of India without ever living there or without ever knowing any Indian languages seems mind-boggling. Yet such claims to knowledge about the Orient was to become commonplace during the late 18th and 19th century. And indeed, in this regard, James Mill's *The History of British India*, whose first volume was published in 1870, can be very well clubbed together with Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 Minutes upon Indian Education which dismissed the whole tradition of Indian or rather Sanskrit and Arabic literature without knowing any of these languages.

So it is important here to note that the rise of Orientalism as an academic discipline during the late 18th and 19th century did not mean that the earlier form of Orientalism completely disappeared. The style of thinking about the Orient as a dark, backward, sinister and barbaric other of the Occident continued to underline the new form of academic Orientalism and it informed whatever systematic enquiry was going on about the Orient. Let us take the example of Karl Marx's article "The British rule in India" which was published in 1853. In this article Marx, in spite of being aware of the havoc that British colonialism wrecked in India by destroying its traditional, economic, and social structures considered this British rule to be a boon in disguise. He could reckon this since his understanding of the exploitative colonial situation in India was underlined by the millennia-old prejudice that the Orient represents a backward and barbaric society. Therefore, though as a result of the British rule Indians were "thrown into a sea of woes," and though they "lost their ancient forms of civilisation" and even "hereditary means of sustenance," what was actually lost was ultimately, according to Marx, barbaric and unregenerate customs and ways of living.

So though the British colonisers inflicted this destruction they were also, according to Marx, ushering in a much needed social revolution. Thus, for Marx, even the most blatant forms of economic exploitation (which characterised colonialism) became excusable because the exploiters belonged to the Occident and the exploited were the Orientals (*Marx-Engels Reader* 658-62). Of course, these millennia-old prejudices about the Orient not only informed academic writings but they also formed the basis of literary texts that made the Orient its subject. Therefore, in Edward Said's study of the new form of Orientalism that emerged during the 18th and 19th-century we find that the names of literary writers like Lord Byron, for instance, or Gerard de Nerval or Gustave Flaubert occurring almost as frequently as the names of James Mill, Thomas Macaulay and Karl Marx.

At this juncture the question may arise that why was it that such prejudices, such myths and such half-baked research (conducted by people who had not even seen the place they were writing about) were so prevalent during the late 18th and 19th century? This question is, of course, very easily understood and explained if we go back to the insight of Michel Foucault who pointed out that the discourse that is generated, circulated and ratified by the institutions of the powerful is the discourse which gains acceptance as the truth. After the European conquest of the Orient in the 18th-century it was the discourse of Orientalism which was validated and circulated by the institutions of the Occident. Therefore the discourse of Orientalism, with all its prejudices and problematic research methodology, gained acceptance and validity as the truth – the authentic truth about the Orient. These institutions included the colonial legislature and judiciary, the learned societies like Institut d'Egypte or the Asiatic society, as well as the educational institutions set up in the colonised parts of the world to propagate Western learning. These were the institutes that connected colonial power with colonial knowledge; and together they constitute what Edward Said identifies as the third aspect of Orientalism. On the one hand, through the institutions that represent colonial authority it ratified the biased views and partial researchers as the truth about the Orient, and on the other hand it enabled the colonial power to justify its rule over the Orient by using the myths of Orientalism.

Thus, when the institutionally ratified discourse identified the Occident as the seat of civilisation and the Orient as the den of barbaric customs and vile rituals it started making eminent sense that European powers should have control over the Orient not simply because it was economically profitable to them but also because it was the morally right thing to do. In other words, it was precisely this institutional framework which supported the discourse of Orientalism that repackaged the profit making motives of European colonialism into a civilising enterprise.

At this point, it is important to note that though Said's *Orientalism* beautifully unfolds the power knowledge nexus that connects the discourse of Orientalism with the military and economic domination of the Orient by Europe, Said's main purpose in this book is not just to reveal this connection but to disrupt it. And the way in which Said seeks to bring about this disruption is through what he calls 'contrapuntal reading' of the texts that use the discourse of Orientalism.

Contrapuntal reading is an attempt to read the Orientalist texts against the grain, i.e., against the way in which its author intends it to be read. This is done by questioning the inherent assumptions that underline a particular text. For instance, if we question the basic assumption that Orient is civilizationally backward, we will see that Marx's arguments in favour of the British rule in India (which he propounds in his essay "The British rule in India") immediately breaks down because they are premised on the fact that Orient is backward and therefore the British rule in India is ultimately beneficial for them. So if we question that basic assumption, that argument unravels and falls flat. Thus, the intention of contrapuntal reading is to question the Europe centric values of the coloniser's texts and to point out and critique the myths and prejudices that underline them.

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