



CULTURE AND RELIGION AS CONSTRUCTS OF BRITISH IMPERIALISM IN AMITAV GHOSH'S SEA OF POPPIES AND CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract

Colonialism has been a historical phenomenon that stretches around the globe and across time. In a modern sense, colonialism, in fact, began with the 'Age of Discovery'. Colonialism impacted the lives of the natives in a mostly negative way. It started spreading its tentacles in the Indian subcontinent with the establishment of the East India Company by the Britishers in 1600AD. Africa became the target of the third wave of European colonialism after that of America and Asia. The natives of both countries were oppressed, exploited, and subjugated by the British. They were forced to adopt alien religion and culture and had to abide by their law. The worse effect of colonialism was to be seen in the mindset of the natives who were badly affected. Amitav Ghosh's 'Sea of Poppies' and Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart' are an account of the colonial impact of British rule in India and Africa respectively. By virtue of being human beings, Indians and Africans share a common saga of the consequences of exploitation. The present paper, with the help of these two novels, attempts to analyze and compare the socio-cultural and religious impacts of such transgression in the lives of these two big races on the earth, and study the differences prevailing therein, if any.

Keywords: colonialism, imperialism, religion, culture.

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1. Introduction

Colonialism refers to the domination by one country (the colonizer) over another (the colonized) to acquire financial gain and take control of another country by invading its land and later claiming it as its own. This control can be levied on different spheres of the lives of the colonized natives like social, economic, cultural, and political. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (1828) defines colonialism as “the practice of extending and maintaining a nation’s political or economic control over another people or area. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* uses the term “to describe the process of European settlement and political control over the rest of the world, including the Americas, Australia, and parts of Africa and Asia” (Kohn, 2006). Colonialism is often confused and misinterpreted as imperialism. As it is already defined that colonialism implies the control of one country over the other by conquering and exploiting the resources with a motive to get economic benefits, imperialism, on the other hand, refers to the set of policies, strategies, and practices to expand the control and power of one nation on the other on social, political or cultural life. Edward Said, the inspiring patron of postcolonial discourse, in his well-acclaimed book *Culture and Imperialism* analyses that imperialism is “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; ‘colonialism’, which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on a distant territory and often involves untold miseries for others” (1993 p8).

Historically speaking, colonialism started spreading its arms in the Indian subcontinent in early 1500 when the Portuguese came to purchase Indian spices that served the taste of European high society. The hold became stronger with the

establishment of the East India Company in 1600 which would create a monopoly of British trade with India and eventually dominated the country for more than three hundred years. The exploration of European colonization was not only limited to Asia but to African territories also. The two diverged subcontinents India and Africa were oppressed by the British colonizers who used divide and rule policy and established their colonies by exploiting them on social, economic, and cultural levels. They fabricated a dividing line between themselves and the natives and persuaded the world of their supremacy and superiority over the colonized regions. Edward Said talks about this dividing line in his colonial discourse *Orientalism*, where he argues that “this is an act of dividing the world into “us” (Westerners) and “they” (Orientals)” (1978p 45). He further says that the colonization of the Europeans marks the colonized countries as victims of subjugation. “A line is drawn between two continents. Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant” (1978p 57). The colonizers convinced the world that such territories are backward, so they need their guardianship for upliftment. As Fanon states in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, “Colonialism has made the same effort in these regions to plant deep in the minds of the native population the idea that before the advent of colonialism their history was one which was dominated by barbarism” (1961, p171). The Europeans always considered ‘the other’ as inferior and hence the despotic attitude of the colonizers grew dominant. One of the weapons to establish colonies by the Britishers in different parts of the world was the proliferation of their religion and culture. They transformed the lives of the natives by propagating Christianity and converting their religious faith and culture. During the nineteenth century, Britain and France relished extraordinary powers. Said in his book

Culture and Imperialism adds, "This century climaxed 'the rise of the West', and the Western power allowed the imperial metropolitan centers to acquire and accumulate territory on a truly astonishing scale" (p6). Amitav Ghosh's fiction *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) account for such colonial constructs and the impacts of British rule in India and Africa. In order to explore the religious and cultural constructs of colonialism, it is prudent to take into consideration some theories related to colonialism. Jean-Paul Sartre the eminent French philosopher in the preface of *The Wretched of the Earth* analyses that "the Church in the colonies is white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but the ways of the white man, of master, of oppressor" (p32). The Britishers started establishing Churches and preached Christianity. They indoctrinated the minds of the people to adopt Christianity and changed their culture and religious faith. They made every possible effort to convince the natives that their religion and culture is inferior to that of the colonizer. Fanon examines and states that "Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behaviour, recognize the unreality of his 'nation', and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure" (*The Wretched of the Earth*, p190). The present paper with the above-stated framework intends to identify the religious and cultural constructs in India and Africa by analyzing the select novels of Amitav Ghosh and Chinua Achebe.

The Novel: *Sea of Poppies*

The novel *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh is a historical novel published in 2008, the first book of the Ibis trilogy. The novel is divided into three parts namely

Land, River, and Sea, and is set in India, the Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal on the eve of the first opium war. The novel's main theme is colonialism, which reflects the oppression of Indian farmers under British rule. The farmers are forced to do opium plantation instead of farming grains which put them in heavy debt and ultimately forced them to become slaves under the Britishers. These indentured labours are known as grimityas who were mostly peasants and migrated to another country. The first and most important character of the novel is Deeti, married to Hukum Singh, an opium addict man who works in the opium factory under the Britishers. The novel opens with a vision of Deeti of the sea and the ship though she has never seen the ship in her life. Deeti is forced and assaulted by her brother-in-law Chandan Singh to become his mistress after the death of Hukum Singh, but she rejects the proposal of Chandan Singh and takes the decision to get 'sati' with the pyre of her husband, but she is saved by Kaula, an ox-cart driver who belongs to a low caste. Kaula absconds with Deeti from that place and ultimately travels on the Ibis, a transporter ship under the colonial power of Britishers which is migrating to Mauritius. They both travel on the ship to migrate to another country so that nobody can recognize and captivate them. Other characters are Zachary Reid, an acting captain under Serang Ali on Ibis, and Paulette, a French Orphan girl first raised by Jodu's parents, the Indians but later adopted by Benjamin Burnham and his family, the English after her father's death. Paulette is forced by Burnham to marry an old English judge but she escapes in disguise as an Indian woman on Ibis and starts working as a migrant worker. Raja Neel Halidar, a zamindar and high caste Indian who lives a luxurious life is trapped by the English and found guilty of forgery, and is sent to Alipore Jail. His property is seized and his wife, the queen, and his son have to live a normal life in their servant's

home. Neel's condition becomes worse when he has to live with an opium addict, a Chinese convict named Ah Fatt in the prison. Both board the Ibis together and headed for the English panel colony in Mauritius. Another character in the novel is Baboo Nob Kissin, an Indian agent who handles the indentured workers on the ship and transforms himself into a spiritual leader, and tries to form a shrine on the Ibis. All of them eventually meet on Ibis, a transporter ship who are migrating to another country under the colonial power of the Britishers. They are dominated, controlled, and exploited by the Britishers. As stated by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, "There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power" (p36). They are forced to adopt Christianity and the culture of the colonizers. They preach Christianity and put the Lord's word in the mouth of the colonized. "Oh those preachers have hard hands, my boy; they'll put the Lord's Words in your mouth even if they have to knock out your teeth to do it" (SOP p74). The Britishers intend to use the English language and English culture for their profit. "After the British proved victorious, they had previously been in the acquisition of Persian and Urdu. When it was to their advantage, they were glad to shape their lives to the world of the English" (p84). They disrespect women and look down upon them as Mr. Doughty while serving wine by Neel tells him, "Hold a bottle by the neck and a woman by the waist. Never the other way around" (p108). Paulette, a French orphan girl who loves Indian education, tradition, culture, and religion is one of the oppressed by the English. She is raised by Indians first and later by Mr. Burnham, the British. She likes Indian tradition, food, language, and culture but is forced to adopt the English culture and

religion, speak English rather than Bengali, eat English food rather than Indian, and wear gowns rather than wearing sarees. "To buy a new dress was beyond her capabilities, not just because she had no money, but also because she could not trust her own taste in memsahib fashion" (p247). Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* mentions, "his inevitable, painful experience only seems to be a banal search for exoticism. The sari becomes sacred, and shoes that come from Paris or Italy are left off in favour of pampooties, while suddenly the language of the ruling power is felt to burn your lips" (p178). Paulette is forced to change her thinking like an Indian and behave like an English. As mentioned in the novel: The bearers and khidmutgars sneered when her clothing was not quite pukka, and they would often ignore her if she spoke to them in Bengali... When draped upon Paulette, those finely tailored gowns had a tendency to slip and flap; memsahib costume of this kind being, in any case, unfamiliar to her, the lack of fit greatly compounded her discomfort (p123 & 128). The natives are not allowed to preach and cherish their religious faith. They are even not allowed to worship their deities and support their religion. Such is the case with Baboo Nob Kissin. He worships Lord Krishna and wants to build a temple, but eventually, he also joins the Ibis and is oppressed by the Britishers. He himself says, "One of my forefathers was initiated into the love of Krishna by Shri Chaitanya himself. I alone was not able to fulfill my destiny: it is my misfortune... 'Even now I am searching Lord Krishna left and right', continued the gomusta. But what to do? He is not heeding..." (p138). Introducing the conversation between the British and American characters on the topic of their illegal business, Ghosh discloses the shameless colonial policy of making money as well as spreading Christianity through illegal and immoral ways. Here Ghosh's own ironic comment on the

function of the Parliament in England is also provided through Burnham's proud remarks. Actually, proclaiming the gospel by illegal business is not God's will. "Jesus Christ is free trade and free trade is Jesus Christ" (Yesapogu, 2016). Thus, Ghosh has represented the colonial ideology by revisiting and reinterpreting the colonial past through the *Sea of Poppies*.

The Novel: *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe's debut novel, *Things Fall Apart* was published in 1958. It depicts the life of Igbo society, particularly Okonkwo and his family who is the protagonist of the novel. The novel is divided into three parts. The first part reveals the personal life of Okonkwo and his family, the religious and spiritual faith as well as the customs of the society. The second and third part describe the introduction of missionaries and white people and the influence of colonialism on the Igbo community in general, and on Okonkwo and his family in particular. Okonkwo is very famous and well-known throughout the nine villages because of his achievement in wrestling. When he was a young man of eighteen, he brought honour to his village Umuofia, by defeating a wrestler named Amalinze, the Cat. He is a wealthy farmer, powerful and courageous among his people and becomes the leader of his community. However, a misfortune changes his life. He accidentally kills Eezudu's son with his gun at his funeral. As a result of this, he, along with his family, is exiled from Umuofia for seven years to his motherland Mbanta for repentance as per the Igbo rule. Meanwhile, there is the arrival of English missionaries in Umuofia who try to establish their existence by preaching Christianity with the aim to transform the religion of the natives. "During the last planting season, a white man had appeared in their clan... The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange

man would break their clan and spread destruction among them" (TFP p101). *Things Fall Apart* has been widely cited to affirm the depredations of colonialism as the central fact of Africa. Okonkwo, the main protagonist declares in the novel, "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (p 129). It has been cited to show that colonialism destabilized societies by working out their destinies along peculiar paths of existence... 'Achebe created a narrative that placed the African at the historic centre of the colonial encounter, with the imperialistic Europeans as the usurping outsiders, whose intervention brings about cataclysmic upheaval for the traditional African civilization being colonized (Gilley 2016, p649).

The colonizers changed the religious and cultural perspectives of African people. In the novel, the English men are seen using their commanding presence to make adverse comments on the natives' religious beliefs and cultural and talked about the new God who is a saviour of mankind. They were forced to adopt the white man's religion. Achebe writes in the novel:

he told them about this new God, the Creator of all the world and all the men and women. He told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone... 'We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die,...' 'Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm, replied the white man. They are pieces of wood and stone' (TEP, p106 - 107).

The white establishes their headquarters and build Churches to spread Christianity and create their hold and forced the natives to worship their God. "We have now built a church, said Mr. Kiaga, and we want you

all to come in every seventh day to worship the true God.” (110).

Colonization affected not only the political and economic spheres of life, but also changed the religious and cultural perspectives of African people. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Europeans acquired an active colonial interest in Africa. Though it continued for only half a century, it left behind a lasting residue. The colonizer achieved political and cultural domination simultaneously, which disrupted all aspects of daily life of the indigenous people, wrenching them from the roots of traditional culture.... the Europeans went on to introduce their language and literature to the Africans ignoring the rich oral tradition of the people found in myths, legends, folktales, proverbs and riddles (Sarkhel, 2018 p7).

The Impact of Colonialism

Colonialism has a far-reaching all-around impact on the lives of the colonized. It affects the individual on personal, social, psychological, economic as well as political levels. If we examine the novel *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh has vividly exhibited the impact of colonialism on different levels. We can clearly notice that the cultural construct of colonialism has affected the mindset of Raja Neel Haldar. Rather than following Indian culture, he is inclined towards the culture of the Britishers. He hires a British tutor for his son so that he becomes proficient in English. “the Raja had hired a British Tutor for his son, to make sure that he had a thorough schooling in English” (SOP p88). The same impact is seen on Nowye, son of Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe. His mindset is totally changed by the introduction and preaching of Christianity by the British missionaries. He is so fascinated by Christianity and English culture that he joins the missionaries and accepts Christianity. Even it becomes the reason for the clash between Nowye and his father and

ultimately shatters the relationship between the two. When Obierika, a friend of Okonkwo asks Nowye about his father Okonkwo, he makes derogatory remarks rather than respond quietly. ‘How is your father?’ Obierika asked, not knowing what else to say. ‘I don’t know. He is not my father, said Nowye unhappily. (TFA p105). After knowing that Nowye has joined the missionary, Okonkwo bursts into anger and asks Nowye, ‘Where have you been?’ he stammered ... ‘Answer me’ roared Okonkwo, ‘before I kill you! He seized a heavy stick that lay on the dwarf wall and hit him two or three savage blows.... But he left hold of Nowye, who walked away and never returned’ (p111). Colonialism also creates a fear of its domination on the natives. The natives are worried about their oppression and exploitation by the Britishers. Paulette’s father, on his death bed, was worried about her and wished that she could get out of the clutches of English people and their culture:

If she remains here, in the colonies, most particularly in a city like this, where Europe hides its shame and greed, all that awaits her is degradation: the whites of this town will treat her apart, like vultures and foxes, fighting over a corpse. She will be an innocent thrown before the money-changers who pass themselves off as men of God... (SOP p137).

In the name of religious education, she is psychologically harassed by Mr. Burnham. Paulette remarks for Mr. Burnham to Zachary Reid,

It was he who wished to endure the chastening, while I was but to be the instrument of his punishment. Imagine my nervousity, Mr Reid. If your benefactor asks you to the instrument of his chastisement, with what face can you refuse?.... You may imagine, Mr Reid, my distress at the thought of attacking my benefactor thus-but he would not be denied (SOP p300).

She becomes helpless and must abide by Mr. Burnham’s words to aim his

chastisement. She becomes mentally upset and tells her condition to Mr. Reid, "You may imagine, Mr Reid, my distress at the thought of attacking my benefactor thus- but he would not be denied. He said my spiritual education would not progress otherwise. "Strike!" he cried, "smite me with thine hands!". So what could I do, Mr Reid? I made pretence there was a mosquito there, and brought my hand down on it. But this did not suffice. I heard a groan issuing of my feet- somewhat muffled, for the toe of my slipper was now inside his mouth- and he cried, "Harder, harder, smite with all thine strength" (p300).

Paulette is so terrified and mentally disturbed that she wants to come out of that situation and eventually absconds and joins Ibis in disguise as an Indian woman. Fanon mentions, "the intellectual is terrified by void, the degradation and the savagery he sees there. Now he feels that he must get away from white culture" (*The Wretched of the Earth*, p177). On a social level, the impact of colonialism can be seen as the change in individuals in particular and society in general. Society which is changed by the colonizers forced to follow and accept the new rules of the British government. Initially, the domination was imposed by preaching Christianity and building Churches. Religious imperialism gradually fructifies into more wide and dominant political imperialism. The colonizers, having taken control of people's faith, are able to depose the natives from their seat of power by forming a new government and new rules. In Africa, it can be seen in discrimination between the white and the black, and in India, the white and the brown, which ultimately incite racial feelings. As Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "Taking the continent as a whole, this religious tension may be responsible for the revival of the commonest racial feeling. Africa is divided into Black and White, and the

names that are substituted- Africa south of the Sahara – do not manage to hide this latent racism" (p129).

2. Conclusion

History speaks truth and the truth is presented through facts. These facts are presented in literature with a blend of imagination by the author. Ghosh and Achebe have presented a picture of the colonial world of India and Africa respectively through their novels and have showcased the impact of colonialism on the colonized. In both the cases, the colonizers were the British. By virtue of being human beings, Indians and Africans share a common saga of the consequences of their imperialistic exploitation. The novels taken for the present study reveal that the natives of both races have a somewhat similar impact at the individual, social-cultural and psychological levels. Both were forced to adopt Christianity and follow English culture; were in fear of losing their identity and were oppressed under the rule of the Britishers. We cannot deny the fact that under colonialism, the colonized were badly affected, subjugated, and victimized. *Sea of Poppies* and *Things Fall Apart* by Ghosh and Achebe respectively, are novels that beautifully showcase the real picture of colonialism by interpreting historical facts.

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