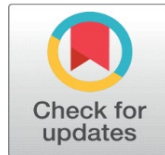
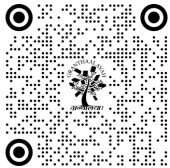


AMBIVALENCE AND SUBVERSION IN MISSIONARY NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial studies have focused much of their attention on critiquing imperialism and its repercussions. In this process charges have been levelled not only against the imperialists, who are the primary agents in establishing this colossal exploitative enterprise, but also on informal agents like missionaries who were also present at the scene during that period. This study aims to analyse the persistent debate over the part played by the missionaries in the consolidation of the empire. It has been a postcolonial refrain that missionary writings played a significant role in creating a larger than life image of the missionaries as pioneer risk takers and conveniently othering the natives and representing them as barbarians passively awaiting rescue and relief. Consequently, the relation between missionaries and the empire has been the subject of much debate and deliberations, hence this paper examines this charge by analysing select missionary writings to prove whether these incriminate them or stand antithetical to colonialism as a digressive mechanism. For this purpose the paper closely scrutinizes *Native Life in Travancore* and *The Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and its People, with Especial Reference to Missionary Labour* – which are ethnographic accounts penned by an LMS missionary Samuel Mateer, to investigate whether or not missionary writings extend as imperialist discourses. The argument affected is that, these texts display ambivalence and hence, cannot be labelled as unequivocally imperialist. The surfacing of multiple conflicting impulses in these writings, problematise a simplistic categorisation of it as a pure imperialistic discourse.

Keywords: Missionary Writings, Imperialism, Ambivalence, Subversion

1. INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial studies have focused much of their attention on critiquing imperialism and its repercussions. In this process charges have been levelled not only against the imperialists, who are the primary agents in establishing this colossal exploitative enterprise, but also on informal agents like missionaries who were also present at the scene during that period. Missionaries have been regularly upbraided for being hand in glove with the colonialists working to further the empire and its interests. This study aims to analyse the persistent debate over the part played by the missionaries in the consolidation of the empire. It has been a postcolonial refrain that missionary writings played a significant role in creating a larger than life image of the missionaries as pioneer risk takers and conveniently

othering the natives and representing them as barbarians passively awaiting rescue and relief. Consequently, the relation between missionaries and the empire has been the subject of much debate and deliberations, hence this paper examines this charge by analysing select missionary writings to prove whether these incriminate them or stand antithetical to colonialism as a digressive mechanism. For this purpose the paper closely scrutinizes *Native Life in Travancore* and *The Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and its People, with Especial Reference to Missionary Labour* – two ethnographic accounts by an LMS missionary Samuel Mateer, who was based in Travancore, to investigate whether or not missionary writings extend as imperialist discourses. The argument affected is that, these texts display ambivalence and hence, cannot be labelled as unequivocally imperialist. The surfacing of multiple conflicting impulses in these writings, problematise a simplistic categorisation of it as a pure imperialistic discourse.

2. REVIEW OF STUDIES THUS FAR

Orientalism, the seminal text by the Palestinian thinker and critic Edward Said, presents his postcolonial approach to the institution of imperialism and closely scrutinizes the devices employed by the Empire in propagating and establishing this institution. Edward Said was amongst the first to articulate the colonial discourse analytic theory. Said firmly affirmed that colonialism was not merely a phenomenon with political and economic ramifications, but was instead dependent on, as Peter Hulme states “an ensemble of linguistically-based practices unified in their common deployment in the management of colonial relationships” [1]. Such features were so comprehensive appearing in manifold texts that they could not be abridged into the predispositions and biases of individual authors. Instead as Michel Foucault puts it, these postulations were “structured by discursive frameworks” [2], and “given credibility and force by the power relations found in imperialism “as noted by Said [3]. Said’s emphasis was on “practices and rules” and “methodological organization of thinking” says Mills [4] that underlay such works. The employment of tools of discourse analysis by Said was initially considered as ground-breaking, later however it came under severe exposition. Various critics began to point out to its limited purview, and began to reject its perception of a singular homogeneous discourse and instead as Sara Mills points out, replaced it with the conception of “various discourses circulating within the colonial period”. [4] Hence, over a period of time, Saidian discourses underwent a refinement and as Peter Hulme puts it “during the colonial period large parts of the non-European world were produced for Europe through a discourse that imbricated sets of questions and assumptions, methods of procedure and analysis, and kinds of writing and imagery”. [1]

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In this intricate and refined understanding of the phenomena of imperialism, it would be very fruitful to examine the relationship between missionary enterprise and the empire-by analysing critically the essence of their writings and the quintessential practices embedded in them. Hence, it is of vital significance to study these missionary writings in terms of not only its political and economic aspects but also delving into its ideological aspects. It is remarkable that in spite of so much of advancement in the theories of postcolonial discourse analysis, very few critics have focused their attention on these aspects of missionary writings. It is a common observation that most of such analyses are detailed and productive yet are not fully acceptable because of its limited purview which classifies these texts as invariably

imperialist discourses. This discussion will initially focus on the imperial aspects of the select missionary texts -Native Life in Travancore and The Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and its People, with Especial Reference to Missionary Labour by deliberating on its mechanics of 'othering' the natives and its portrayal of their lands and culture. Consequently, this argument will be complicated by bringing out aspects of ambivalence that these texts are replete with than that is hitherto acknowledged. Though missionary writings are implicated within the purview of imperialist discourse, yet the ambivalence and heterogeneity abounding in these texts, question such a myopic branding of these works.

4. MISSIONARY WRITINGS AS IMPERIALIST DISCOURSES

Missionary writings are implicated as imperialist discourses on multiple counts for instance their being considered 'discovery' narratives. For instance, Leon de Kock speaks of the absurdity of the Western superiority complex revealed at their "discovery" of Eastern lands. It exemplifies the great Western "self-delusion" which gives an impression that these places along with their fauna and flora and, "natural phenomena came into full and proper existence only once the imperial western eye fell upon them and transformed them into a European narrative of discovering the unknown" [5]. Hence, the missionary becomes the observing man, who calls into existence, that which did not exist before, and perpetuates the saga of discovery and stamps the white-man's supremacy in this act of appropriation. For instance, in Samuel Mateer's- The Land of Charity, the author describes the land of Travancore to the Western eyes as:

From its physical conformation Travancore is literally "a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills." Fourteen principal rivers take their rise in the mountains, and before falling into the sea spread out, more or less, over the low grounds near the coast, forming inland lakes or estuaries of irregular forms, locally called "backwaters". These "backwaters" have been united by canals running parallel with the coast, and they are thus of immense value as a means of communication between the Northern and Southern districts. [6]

According to de Kock, this seemingly benign "act of witness" as in reality "an act of appropriation by Western knowledge" [5]. It is something akin to what Mary Louis Pratt describes as anti-conquest. Such an understanding of missionary writings is indicative of the contemporary unease with what Derek Gregory has called the relationship between "claims to knowledge and the metaphors of vision" and the workings of power in "visual appropriations of the world" [7]. Further on, Leon de Kock argues that, these accounts sound like the objective narrative of a chivalrous scientist or ethnographer, fastidiously observing his way around the virgin territories, but then they progress on from here in such a way that "emphasizes a mastery over nature" [5]. But it is not merely the scientific descriptive account that accomplishes this end, but because it follows the common imperialist discursive exercise, of integrating incidents of exploration in which the author confronts formidable natural obstacles or wild creatures, and confronts and overcomes them, that this end is achieved. For instance, Mateer in Native Life mentions of his encounters with snakes:

I have on various occasions found cobras and other serpents in the garden, in the thatch of the bungalow when annually renewed, creeping about amongst the flower-pots, in the bath- room, in the soiled clothes basket, and once even under the bed...The last snake I killed was on the window of my bedroom. Rain had been falling all night, and the unfortunate snake no doubt expected to find hospitality and

shelter, if nowhere, in the house of a missionary. Creeping in by the lattice of the window he quietly lay down to sleep on the frame. Finding the intruder there, on rising in the morning, I took a large knife, and at one blow struck off his head. [8]

Mateer's confrontation with the forces of nature and his victory over them exemplify, as Glenn Hooper and Tim Young's write, "[i]t is a truism that animals signify the border between nature and the wild on the one hand, and civilization and human on the other. Thus, the presence of the beast can represent a threat to order, but its narrative suppression contains it" [9]. Hence, Mateer's killing of the snake conveys the figurative weight of civilization's subjugation over savage nature. Another such instance is mentioned by Mateer regarding Gouri Letchmi, the sister of Rajah Bala Rima, who was clueless regarding running the administration and the affairs of the state, when on the death of her brother, the crown was suddenly thrust on her. She having no other option, Mateer in *Native Life* says of her consequent action in a highly approving tone, "This Princess had the good sense to place the administration of the country into the hands of Colonel Munro, the British Resident..." [8]. Hence, we can see that missionary writings have not been unjustly labelled as imperialist discourse as the above instances bear witness to the same. These texts do give us an impression that the mission and the empire were glove in hand rowing towards the same end of expanding and establishing the empire.

5. MISSIONARY WRITINGS AS AMBIVALENT DISCOURSES

The perception of a univocal discourse, as advocated by Edward Said has been challenged by Homi Bhabha's ground breaking concepts on ambivalence and hybridity. In Bhabha's view, it is regularly seen that "denied" knowledges arrive upon "the prevailing discourse and disenfranchise the basis of its authority" [10]. To be more precise, "[t]he effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridisation rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions" [10]. The argument is based on the premise that the subversive existence of the 'other' invades the colonizer's discourse; such a situation destabilizes the hegemonic hold of the colonizer and allows the repressed to overthrow the yoke. Hence, a close perusal of these texts reveals, the seeds of ambivalence in all their activities, which though concealed in the rhetoric of narration, keeps popping out from time to time in spite of being discursively bridled. Most of the rhetoric which placates imperial eyes springs up out of a need to cater to the home audience's expectations. Even though, the writers are thwarted on this count, yet they don't fail to utilise this platform to whip their conscience and critique their own cultures. For instance, Mateer, challenges the Western readers by comparing and contrasting their lives with that of the native converts who tenaciously cling on to their faith in spite of undergoing severe persecutions. For instance, Mateer describes the great opposition experienced from the heathen, especially in the Puniattu Rajah's country. The inquirers were beaten by some of the Rajah's servants, "made to stand in water up to their very necks" to wash Christianity out of them; "kept in stocks for days, chillies rubbed in their eyes, and their heads tied up in bags and in loosened head cloths filled with the large black ground-ants and red tree-ants" [8]. The steadfastness of the native believer is contrasted with the fickleness of the readers. This transformation in the natives had been affected by the civilising influence of the gospel through the efforts of the missionaries-this arrogant subtext is interspersed in these missionary narratives and that appears to be the agenda of the missionaries. But in reality, there exists an ambiguous, hidden agenda in it as well which is to project before the home audience the spectacle of an ideal Christian community tenaciously moving forward

undeterred and unshackled, thus juxtaposing the two churches spurring on one through the testimonies of the other. Hence, such a juxtaposing, rescues it from being labelled as an imperialist text. The conventionally accepted power equation however, tilts the scales in favour of the imperialist. However, these texts show a complete reversal in the construed power equations. Sometimes this departure is subtle and other times much more explicit, to the extent it seems to challenge imperialist discourses head on. These missionary texts reveal a radical stand enforced by the writers to the point of antagonizing Western sensibilities. Such instances of ambivalence can be seen scattered all over these texts, this maybe concerning education, medical aid, sanitation etc. Whenever and wherever, the native practices are derided, the tendency is to position it along with imperialist texts. But at the same time, we find a contrasting aspect in the same texts, which expresses utmost recognition with the natives, and an empathetic attitude towards them, which almost constrains them to stand with the natives in their struggles, and this qualifies it to be a “dissident discourse”, which raises voice against the native oppressors as well as the ruling imperialists. Thus, the dissident chords interspersed with imperialist symphony, make it an ambivalent composition.

6. MISSIONARY WRITINGS: SUBVERSIVE ELEMENTS

On one hand these texts display colonial superiority, while on the other they display the colonizer’s anxiety and vulnerability by demonstrating what Helmers and Mazzeo call “the dialogic nature of vision” [11]. In other words, these missionary texts make evident that in any cross- cultural encounter the “observer is also observed” [11]. For instance, Mateer mentions the case of the Cunnar Pulayars who lived only four miles north of Alleppy yet, “The very appearance of a European in their midst causes a fearful alarm” [8]. He is seen as a white-apparition evoking absolute terror in the minds of the natives rather than his complexion arousing the expected reverential awe. Undaunted by this gesture, Mateer tries to regain upper hand even in this event of being marked as a spectacle by mentioning that such a reaction might be on account of him being the first white man, they would ever set their eyes on. Later Mateer recollects his struggles in mastering the native language, which was fraught with “egregious blunders”.

I remember on one occasion observing a gentle twinkling smile steal over the faces of my hearers, and on afterthought recollected that I realised made a mistake of half a letter in a text which I had quoted, “Riches make to themselves wings like an eagle,”-a “karugei,” I should have said; but “karuthei,” a donkey, was the word which, by a slip of the tongue, I uttered ; and as the good people had never seen wings on a donkey in that part of the world, it was no wonder that their fancy- was tickled by the ludicrous idea.[8]

The repetitive incidence of such humour is of striking concern in the wake of the vast study conducted in postcolonial theories regarding the nature of laughter in repressive colonial conditions. This school of thought, following Bakhtin, has concentrated on its latent agency and subversive influence. Laughter which emanates from the margins should not be assumed to be a mark of frivolity, but instead as something that has serious repercussions, to the extent that it can destabilise the centre. Hence, such incidents, highlighting humour function to disconcert the readers and evokes in their mind an uncertainty and anxiety produced on account of the ironic response of the natives, which is entirely unprecedented. In the event of cross-cultural encounters, the missionaries came across many practices among the encountered groups, which were so contrary to their sensibilities and even hideous at times, yet contrary to expectations, they

refrained from condemning it all and instead went the extra mile to understand the root cause behind the genesis and acceptance of such practices in these societies. For instance, Mateer discusses the custom of polyandry prevalent and practiced commonly in the state of Travancore. Although Mateer condones polyandry yet he attempts to understand its implications and acceptance in that particular cultural context.

The monstrous custom of polyandry, or of one woman having several husbands, is sometimes practised in Travancore by carpenters, stonemasons, and individuals of other castes. Several brothers living together are unable to support a wife for each, and take one amongst them, who resides with them all. The children are reckoned to belong to each. [8]

In this case, Mateer states poverty to be the reason behind the existence of this “monstrous” practice among the economically backward people. Such economic limitations were a viable reason to tolerate this custom. However, Mateer traces a positive outcome of this practice as well. He says, “These peculiar usages of the Nairs naturally give to their females considerable social influence and liberty of choice and action” [6]. The status of women in such cultures is more elevated than in other societies on account of this custom. This attitude harboured by Mateer reflects that his aim is not to unilaterally enumerate and criticize strange customs, but even when his cultural sensibilities go against it, he stops short of condemning it and instead tries to comprehend the peculiarities of the customs of the encountered group. At one point, Mateer compares and contrasts between European and Indian fashion, and the expected appraisal would be his applauding the Westerners for their delicate fashion sensibility and tastes. But surprisingly, he derides the ever-changing Western fashion trends and lauds the Indian dressing trend which has remained constant down the years. He even goes to the other extreme of advising the West to emulate the East in this regard.

Female dress in Travancore does not vary like the ever- changing fashions of European countries. For perhaps two or three thousand years it has remained unaltered. When fully dressed, rich golden ornaments and a few handsome flowers are used to decorate the hair. Might it not be worthy the consideration of fashionable ladies at home whether it would not be a hitherto unthought-of novelty, amidst the fashions of “chignons” at present, to try the effect of wearing them, not at the back, or upper part of the head, but at the side, in imitation of this ancient, yet novel, Malabar fashion? Strange that none of the leaders of fashion in Europe have thought of this! [8]

Rather than concentrating on the peculiarity of their dress practices, he constrains his readers to comprehend that the fashions of home are not that appreciable, and the simplicity of the natives is laudatory. The juxtaposition between Travancore and Western women functions to destabilise the established existing differences between them and puts them on a level plain. Similarly, another unfamiliar Indian custom discussed is the removal of footwear before entering a house. Mateer says, “Natives, up to the highest in rank, put off the shoes before receiving visitors or entering a house, just as Europeans uncover the head; while on the other hand they retain the turban, or head-dress, which is always worn according to the rules of Hindu etiquette on such occasions” [6]. By comparing this custom of removing the footwear with the European custom of removing their hats, the writer is trying to demonstrate a sense of similarity, because of which the reader will refrain from a scornful derision or contemptuous rendering of this strange Oriental custom. In this manner, missionary writings employ textual devices which facilitate them to resist the excesses of racial stereotyping. Although they did

express their racial prejudices in the initial days of their encounter with the natives, yet resistance to stereotyping is an obvious feature in these texts. Their lived experience dissuaded them not only from physical labelling, but also intellectual and personality profiling, merely based on racial differences. Mateer concludes “we see points of startling resemblance or identity between the superstitions of the East and those of the West. Human nature is the same in every land” [8]. The missionary’s familiarity with the natives has proved to them the frivolity of the typecasting and a realization of the heterogeneity of humanity world over.

7. CONCLUSION

All these examples undoubtedly show that these missionary texts which have been charged as imperialist discourses are in reality an amalgam of disparate experiences like cross-cultural encounters, an attempt towards identification with the encountered groups, confronting racial prejudices head on and being a platform for the hitherto suppressed native voices. These writings also serve as a receptacle, where the ‘others’ are presented to the readers in such a way that they are familiarised rather than ‘othered’. Such aspects of these texts cause one to reconsider their static imperialistic labelling and accord them a more dynamic and progressive status.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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