

Narration And Discourse Of Derogation: Orientalist Dimensions In Louis Tracy's The Red Year

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Abstract

Identification and categorization of the peculiar orientalist stereotypes present in Louis Tracy's *The Red Year: A Story of the Indian Mutiny* (1907) is the aim of the article. The argument is theoretically pivoted on the Saidian postcolonial proposition presented in his *Orientalism* (1978). The researchers contend that the selected novel stands as a superlative example of the colonial discourse and orientalist rhetoric marked by supremacism and parochialism. The prevalent (mis)representational schema of the text has been explicated and various instances of social, religious, and racial branding have been analyzed. From characterization to narration, Tracy's fictional discourse has conspicuous xenophobic colour and prejudiced parlance. The native figures have been demonized and details of the events distorted, whereas the English have been aggrandized to pitch the idea of their civilizational supremacy. Thus, the article exposes the politics of colonial poetics by identifying the derogatory stereotypes and exposing the pejorative rhetoric used therein.

Keywords: Narration, Discourse, Derogation, Orientalism, Louis Tracy

Introduction

Representation is a prominent, and perplexing, issue from the plethora of problems fathered by colonial encounters and legacies. While histories tend to fictionalize the facts to pitch agendas, the literary works sound more political than poetic to promote ideologies. Therefore, the nationalist fervor becomes so overwhelming in the kind of novels that they appear to have the agenda of, in Bhabha's idiom, "Dissemi Nation" (1990, p. 291) of ideologies than of art. This predilection for politicization further problematizes the case of the textual narratives trying to invoke history, especially in the colonial context.

In the article, the critical engagement with the complex issue of the literary representation of the historical events has been delimited to Tracy's *The Red Year* (1907). The narrative covers the deadly clashes between the mutineers/ revolutionaries and the English soldiers at various places in India, from Meerut to Delhi. The narrative point of view is fixed on the English characters throughout the novel. Furthermore, to create a semblance of historical truthfulness, he often refers to the archives (p. 50, 76). Consequently, the narrative tends to gain an archival image invoking the sense of authenticity and accuracy.

Louis Tracy's novel, with its focus on the representation of the Indian mutiny, manifests a typical orientalist outlook. It narrates the events of the "red revenge" sought by the red coats in the "red year [1857]" (Brantlinger, 1988, p. 201). Singh (1973) and Chakravarty (2004) have referred to the narratives while enlisting the major fictional works vis-à-vis the Indian revolutionary struggle against the English imperialist encroachment. The English take the historical event as, in Denis Judd's words, the "terrifying Indian rebellion" (2004, p. 70). With an explicit sense of nationalist fervour, the novel validates the English stance on the struggle.

By analyzing various stereotypes and categories of misrepresentation, the study negotiates some of the central questions: How do the English fiction writers respond to the events of the anticolonial revolution against the Raj? What are the chicaneries used by the novelist to characterize the natives? How have the English been glorified to create the impression of legitimacy for the colonial expansions? In what ways have their responses been influenced by the imperialist agendas and broader colonial discourses? These questions control the contours of the critical interpretations offered in the articles.

History, Representation, and Authenticity

The question of the authenticity of the textual representations of the historical details has always been a perplexing one and, in Montrose's idiom, "politics" seems to have been regulated by "poetics of culture" (in Newton, 1997, p. 245). Therefore, the narrative discourses, both the historical and the fictional, lack the feature of authenticity. The matter has gained wide critical attention and different dimensions of the issue have been discussed and debated. Resultantly, there is a proliferation of historical theorizations, critical discourses, and philosophical treatises revolving around the key confusions.

Hamilton (2003) has studied the complex problem of textual representation in historical documents by engaging various historicist theories. His stance about all the archival material is that various representational categories seem to be inherently the same in their formation, that is, they share their textual form. He contends that "from ancient times, philosophers have been eager to separate history from fiction" and their curiosity has brought them to the conclusion that the "disciplinary boundary" is "fragile" (p. 6). He puts the summa of his analysis and opines that it is impossible "to escape from ideology" (p. 137) in narration. Thus, the idea of inadequacy of the textual representations has been foregrounded.

Shaw, Kelly, and Semler (2013) approach various aspects of storytelling and the art of narration. The anthology is a representative one both in its scope and standard. It includes

numerous critiques of some of the authentic sources in the field. The part of the work titled “Fictional History and Historical Fiction” (pp. 83-156), thoroughly negotiates the intriguing interaction between historical and fictional narratives. The analysis and discussion posit that the line of demarcation between these narrative modes is fragile. Thus, by providing different theoretical shades of the problem of textual representations, the study further problematizes the central argument, the issue of referentiality.

In short, authenticity is not an indispensable feature of historical documents but instead, they yield to chequered narrative choices. As Selden et al describe the historical narratives to be a cluster of “discontinuous and contradictory ‘histories’” (2007, p. 191). Bennett and Royle (2016) offer the same kind of proposition: “there can be no knowledge of the past without interpretation” (p.16). Both of these propositions endorse the idea of the impressionistic rendering of history. Thus, the truthfulness of the historical narratives has been questioned and their validity challenged.

(Post)Colonial Discourses

The debate regarding representation has also been a central one in the colonial and postcolonial discourses. Sullivan (1993) has examined Kipling’s fictional narratives, with a focus on Kim, to study the representation of the empire in the Indian region. She rejects the traditional view of Kipling being the “bard of empire” (p. 9) and contends that his narratives are “the alternative fictions of empire” (p. 10). Ultimately, she concludes that, besides being an Englishman, the novelist is “also the Indian child” (p. 179). Her analysis of the competing interpretations reflects the ambiguous representational discourses in the colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Kerr (2008) studies Macaulay and O’Hanlon’s works to foreground reception of the orient in the English consciousness. He thinks that the western “vaunted imperial gaze” tarnish the image of the east “with blind spots [and] indecipherable signals” (p. 238). He generalizes his interpretation of the Victorian sensibility by drawing parallels between Macaulay and O’Hanlon’s works and the broader orientalist discourse. However, in his analysis of the orientalist rhetoric, he challenges Said’s inferences regarding the matter. Thus, Kerr has rejected the orientalist reductions on the one hand, and on the other hand, he approaches the Saidian ones skeptically.

Thus, the problems grounded in colonial politics make the issue of representation more confusing. The colonial narratives and the postcolonial counter-narratives stand in diametrical opposition and create a kind of polemical narratives. Therefore, to understand the “dialogic relation”, “colonialist fiction” is to be placed against “the anglophone fiction of the Third World” (Jan Mohamed in Ashcroft et al. 1995, p. 23). This intriguing juxtaposition has been suggested only to perceive the breadth of the gap and not to bridge it.

Methodological Approach and Theoretical Framework

Methodologically, the literary research is a qualitative one and the interpretive mode is premised upon the model of the textual analysis presented by Catherine Belsey (in Griffin,

2013, pp. 160-178). Belsey has thoroughly explicated different dimensions of the method. Accordingly, the relevant textual passages from the selected texts have been focused and the significant points have been culled to support the main argument of the study.

Theoretically, the study invokes Saidian critique of the colonial discourse in the light of his *Orientalism* (1978). In the light of his extensive and intensive reading of the colonial archives, Said has identified a reductive pattern pervasive throughout the discursive field. The reduced Orient, in his opinion, appears to be “a system of representations” created by the “Western consciousness”. Moreover, Said takes the paradigm of knowledge to as “a product of certain political forces and activities” (pp. 202-3)”

The statement is the gist of his understanding of the orientalist discourse produced throughout the centuries. Accordingly, this research has also taken the selected narrative as an instance of the “ideological fictions” (p. 321), in the Saidian idiom. Moreover, the study also capitalizes on the political gimmicks present in the text that aim to provide “a slogan for annexation” (Beloff, 1987, 45).

Orientalist Stereotypes in Tracy’s Red Year

The novelist treads the Victorians’ imperialist path and uses all the ploys to legitimize the colonial expansion and demonize the natives. Therefore, the novel is replete with colonial stereotypes and instances of the reductive chicaneries. The text’s colonial predilection becomes explicit at the outset as Tracy names the revolutionary struggle in the subtitle of the novel, “A Story of the Indian Mutiny”. In this way, the novelist sets the tone of the narrative that gets further strengthened by the following features.

The narrative vociferously pronounces that the Indians are inferior to the English and declares the war to be between “an inferior race” (p. 169), and “the dominant race” (p. 173). Markedly, the supremacist ideology is triggering the delineation of the situation in a lopsided manner. Also, the struggle between the nations has been portrayed as the clash between the continents, the east and the west. An alarmingly sweeping statement positions the clash between the parties as a combat “between civilization and barbarism, between the laws of Christianity and the lawlessness of Mahomet, supported by the cruel, inhuman, and nebulous doctrines of Hinduism” (p. 75). The reductive binarism is visible in the rendering of the fight between the Indian revolutionaries and the English soldiers. Moreover, the religious bias is further aggravating the parochial proclivity of the novelist. These are the blatant instances of imprudence in which the natives’ sense of sanctity has been ignored. Thus, the derogation located in the description is both social and religious in its nature.

Overall, the natives have been shown as the traditional emissaries of “the decaying East” (p. 317) who have nothing about improvement or evolution. Rather, deterioration and degradation are their defining features and the most prominent characteristics. He enlists an array of traits to give a derogatory touch to the natives’ image: lawlessness, fanaticism, inferior dressing, illegible language, uncontrollable passions, inhuman class system, etc. Ultimately, the novel presents a picture in which the English appear to “gods [descending]

among the Asiatic scum” (p. 245). These details have been appropriated by the novelist to prove that the east is degenerate, whereas the west towers as an icon of superiority. Moreover, this implies the Englishmen’s generosity who have chosen to face the ordeals to bring the light of civilization to the region that has always been marked by darkness.

The next strategic discursive point is portraying the east as a timeless region that stands timeless without any trace of evolution. The spatial stretch knows nothing about the progress of time and, therefore, remains in its primitive condition constantly. The bleak image has recurrently been reinforced at a different place in the text of the novel. The territory has been dubbed as “the unchanging East” as the cultural evolution has always been missing in the region “since the dawn of history” (p. 194). The idea that has been communicated makes the east a region whose present is like its past and its future can witness no change either. The perpetual predicament is the most distinctive feature of the area. Consequently, the civilizational growth is unknown to the primordial locality as they are locked beyond the wheel of progress. Their houses are huts made of mud and straws, their agriculture is scratching the earth, their civilization is nomadic—these underestimations bespeak the orientalist prejudice that is regulating the fictional narrative. Also, the following passage turns India into an impenetrable jungle situated far away from the zone of human intervention: “they could [hardly] distinguish the jungle from the arable land” (p.193). The part of the world stretched “dead as a land” in terms of normal civilizational marks. However, its life appears to have been defined by the “strange denizens” (p.194) spread across it with their unearthly features and ferocity.

The passage exaggerates the density of the jungles, magnifies the beetles, and amplifies the animals to show that the human element is a marginal one in the part of the world. The region has been depicted as an eternal abode of the strange denizens whose presence signifies a lack of civilization. In this context, when the imperialist forces capture the territory, it seems more a contest between the humans and the non-humans than between the colonizer and the colonized. Thus, the discursive strategy is a visible legitimacy tool that is being used to promote the expansionist ideology and justify the colonial enterprise.

The east has been depicted as the strange region, a region that deviates from the normal track of the other abode of humanity, the west. “Its strange weaknesses” show that it cannot compete with its foil civilization, the western one. The Indian revolutionaries have been branded as “the predatory class” (p. 22) who have instigated a “disastrous upheaval in India” (p. 95). They have been compared with “locusts” (p. 254) and given a dreadful character. The only thing that controls these “untamed savages” (p. 54) is “the wildest excesses” (p. 59). The superlative shows the vehemence with which the novelist tries to impose villainy upon the natives. The alliance of Muslims and Hindus has been taken as a coalition between “a wolf and a snake” (p. 75). All these examples tend to create an image of the east and the eastern people that is tarnished by strangeness. Thus, the writer claims eccentricity as a conspicuous trait of the orient.

Reductive assumptions about the eastern races are another recurrent factor found in the orientalist discourse and the novel consummately treads the track. For instance, the Indians

are depicted as the cowards who never show reluctance while showing back on the battlefield: “like all Asiatics, they had not dared to press on in the face of death (p. 237). During the months of the mutiny, the native rebels have never been found exhibiting the impressive version of bravery “that characterized the British troops” (p.237). The sweeping declaration attributes cowardice to the Indian masses inclusively, whereas the British soldiers have been aggrandized as the icons of gallantry and bravery. The kind of juxtaposition provides an insight into the haughty outlook of the colonizers. They create portrayals of the competing parties by assigning heroic traits to the imperialist forces and attributing weaknesses to the native rebels.

The attribution of stereotypical gender roles is also manifest in the discourse of the narrative. In the novel, the native women are yielding to the seductive advancements, “ready enough to indulge” (p. 67). The Indian males have also been branded as the “brown-skinned satyrs” (p. 92) throughout the narrative. The peculiar negative depictions are reflective of the prejudiced attitude of the colonial writer. The representational mode aims to establish the notion of the Englishmen’s supremacy.

Conclusion

The analysis offers a comprehensive discussion of the various points placed inquisitively in the beginning. The response of the novelists of empire has been brought to the limelight concerning Tracy’s fictional narrative. It has been substantiated that the colonizer rejects all the revolutionary actions and condemns them by reducing them to mere mutinous mistakes. Moreover, multifarious chicaneries have been used by the novelist to characterize the natives, ranging from portraying them as villainous to undermining their inherent capabilities to be civilized. It has also been evidenced that the English have been glorified and aggrandized with a conspicuous colonialist zeal. All these discursive gimmickries have been used to create the impression of legitimacy for the colonial expansions. Throughout the text of the novel, various kinds of colonialist stereotypes are found pervasive that, in turn, seem to be influenced by the imperialist agendas and broader colonial discourses. In short, the novel turns the colossal clashes between the nations into an arena to portray the adventures of the English protagonists. Consequently, the narratives appear to be an orientalist saga that explicitly stages the colonial themes.

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