Decolonising the Mind

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Syed Haider

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> ‘My dear doctor,’ said Flory, ‘how can you make out that we are in this country for any purpose except to steal? It is so simple…the British Empire is a device for giving trade monopolies to the English…’
>
> ‘My friend, it is pathetic to hear you talk so…while your businessmen develop the resources of our country, your officials are civilising us, elevating us to their level, from pure public spirit…you have bought us law and order. The unswerving British Justice and the Pax Britannica.’ ‘Pox Britannica, doctor, Pox Britannica.’

George Orwell, *Burmese Days*

There is without doubt a sense of humour in Orwell. The argument is by no means ‘vaguely’ political and the irony merely serves to amplify the comical tone, captured well in the end by Flory’s play on words of ‘Pox Britannica’. The humour is also generated from Orwell’s deliberate choice to invert expectation. By making the Indian the mouthpiece of British Imperial propaganda the Englishman appears out of place, for in this instance the Indian is more English than the English. But there is yet more to it than that. Orwell, no supporter of Empire, acknowledges in the disjointedness between what is being said and by whom it is being said that if there is humour it is multi-layered. The reader acknowledges that the Englishman is letting the cat out of the bag and so there is an uneasiness in so far as his point is tacitly acknowledged. The fact that the Indian does not understand generates a humour of a wryly British kind, the type that would be followed in the private game rooms of the coloniser with the remark, ‘gosh, that was close boys’. The ‘topsy-turvy affair’ then, hinges on the native and his or her indoctrination.

Part of the machinery of Empire was cultural. The use Napoleon made of Orientalists in his Egyptian expedition, for example, is well recorded and became for many subsequent imperialists a modus operandi. These scholars of the east provided a sense of authority over the east, connecting – in the Foucauldian sense – knowledge with power. 'The point in all of this,' says Said, 'is that for Napoleon Egypt was a project that acquired reality in his mind, and later in his preparations for its conquest, through experiences that belong to the realm of ideas and myths culled from texts, not empirical reality'[2]. Similarly colonialists in the Empire, travellers, bureaucrats, imagined the Orient as much as experienced it, and what facilitated this was the numerous textual representation from the illusive Turks in Shakespeare to the sensual harems of the*Arabian Nights*. All in all, the Empire was held together in many instances through a culture that helped project the desired image, and what could be better if the natives believed the projection too.

Writing in 1888 to the editor of the Egyptian Journal,*al-Muqtataf*, a reader asked, 'how is it that we have come to be regarded as part of the Orient? Are we not closer to Europe than to China or North Africa?' The reason was, the editor explained, 'because those who study us call themselves Orientalists.' But the scepticism didn't last and 'five years later when he had come to know some of the leading Orientalists of his day, the editor was willing to accept the Orient as self image. "It is we [he says] who have placed ourselves in this position. There is one thing that unites us all in the Orient: our past greatness and our present backwardness"'[3].

It is true that the conquered often see the reasons for their defeat in the culture of the victor and so are more liable to perceive even themselves through the eyes of the conqueror. Abdulrazaq Gurnah addresses this issue in his novel,*By the Sea*, when Saleh remembers the British presence in Zanzibar during his childhood years. Gurnah uses the fictional narrator to explore the frame of mind of real colonised people. Saleh, in his thoughts as we read them, admits to an admiration of the British 'for their audacity in being there, calling the shots with such an appearance of assurance, and for knowing so much about things that mattered'. But then later on he realises that*admired* maybe 'too uncomplicated a way of describing what I think we felt'. In trying to understand the psychology that was at play he returns to the idea of narratives 'they' constructed about 'us', and that they were 'so complete and well-fitting' that is was as if 'they had remade us, in ways we no longer had any recourse but to accept'[4]. Saleh's tone indicates the sense of powerlessness of the conquered a state in which the acceptance of the coloniser's labels and categories invariably slips into the consciousness of the conquered. What assists this is the cultural continuity of narratives and the cultural agencies that produce them. In the colonial framework, scholars, writers, painters all become crucial players in the process of colonisation. The images created gain authority by their mere publication and ideas become authoritative because being located in texts ratifies them. Slowly, and the process is slow in comparison to our electronic media age, the images and ideas located in texts seep into the culture of the colonised. This has a paradoxical effect. On the one hand it helps foster an atmosphere conducive to rule because the indigenous population become subordinate to the ideas or images. But on the other hand it has the potential to generate resistance through a rejection of the images and ideas. We shall deal with the latter in due time suffice to say the cultural mechanisms of colonial rule produce an ingenious strategy to control the backlash.

The tension in modern cultural discourse has its own history and in part has to do with the ascendancy of the scientific paradigm as dominating the claim of validity. In it rests the more philosophical ground of empiricism and as a result one must make greater strides to produce something of the like in other subject areas. To say, for example, images and ideas produced by the coloniser to represent and control the natives became internalised is to be prey to the charge of vagueness – for the subsidiary question is,*how* did it get internalised? Here then emerges an interesting insight, for the people who assist the internalisation are the natives themselves and specifically the learned amongst them – those who follow the education system brought by the coloniser as part of the framework of his enterprise.

'It is we,' says Gandhi magnanimously, 'the English-knowing [Indian] men who have enslaved India'[5]. Using the collective pronoun Gandhi draws the reader into the argument without alienating him since Gandhi implicates himself in the charge too. But the charge is not to gain points or endear the reader; there is within it a deeper truth which underpins the Gandhian perspective and the postcolonial aspiration. For Gandhi loosing touch with ones own culture and heritage bore the very climate in which invasion and continued occupation became possible because the natives of the lands began to loose confidence in themselves and sought the colonisers way, his clothes, his customs, and in the charge above, his language. Post 1970's there has been much focus and interest in the study of the ways in which language constructs our worldview, our identity, and society at large. And though Gandhi may not have been aware, necessarily, of the role of language in such a detailed and complex way he was aware of the imperialist educational programme. 'Their writings hypnotise us.' he explains, 'And so, one by one, we are drawn into the vortex'[6].

T.B. Macaulay's now infamous minutes on Indian Education demonstrates in vivid terms the colonialist idea. He bombastically declares the worthlessness of the literature of India and Arabia claiming that there is not even a 'single shelf of a good European library' against which the entire literature of India and Arabia may be compared. He builds on from this, positing that the only way forward for these stagnated civilisations is to adopt western education – but this is not entirely altruistic on his part, because what he hopes for is a 'class of men who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern'[7]. This class of men would not merely use the English language as a tool of interpretation. In fact any translation that took place would be one way, keeping the British in their position of tutorship and the Indians in their position of learners. More strikingly this translator class would be 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect'. For Macaulay the imperialist education program would bring about in the Indian a change of self which would mean more than indirect rule, it would in fact be the road to the 'Englistan' that Gandhi alluded to in*Hind Swaraj*.

This was indirect rule in the best possible way. This elite class would, it was thought, identify themselves more closely to the West and therefore be puppet like for the coloniser. For the colonised it would be, when they looked up, an Indian that was ruling them and not a white face. What is evoked in this imagery is the title of Fanon's groundbreaking book,*Black Skins, White Masks.* The relationship between the two is an intriguing one in the way that points of perspective shift and transmute according to the audience confronting this elite. To the native what is apparent, or at least shown is the*black skins*, while in the company of the coloniser it is the*white masks* which belie the other reality. In such a state the elite find themselves cut adrift and alone constantly shifting between perceptions and expectations and in such a state they become detached from their fellow brethren caught in a kind of no mans land. Their priority and objective becomes the retention of power (afforded by the colonialist presence) and the concern for themselves. 'English knowing Indians,' Gandhi says, 'have not hesitated to cheat and strike terror into the people.'[8] Slowly the elite start speaking the words of the coloniser and illustrate a dependency on him for the very constructs of their thought. Their ideals, their values, their norms become the measure of the rest, and it is sufficient to try to indigenise the imports, but essentially they remain outside the cultural and philosophical self of the natives. This importation in turn ruptures the continuity of their historical development after invasion and colonisation.

This intellectual division which is created within colonised communities is the real essence of divide and rule and it is a point worth posing whether the European colonial could have ever imagined his intellectual division lasting even after his physical exit from other peoples' land. In America during the 1930s and 1940s a situation had emerged which was similar to the many colonial nations under the European empires. Having arrived in 1941 at his half sister's home in Boston, Malcolm X, then a Malcolm Little, took a walk to explore the city. 'What I thought I was seeing there in Roxbury [an affluent part of Boston City] were high class, educated, important Negroes, living well, working in big jobs and positions.' Malcolm X presents a picture of idyllic harmony, of 'quiet homes sat back in their mowed yards.' These Negroes he says, 'walked along the sidewalks looking haughty and dignified, on their way to work, to shop, to visit, to church.'[9] But his reflective narrative immediately undercuts the picture as he explains,

> '…what I was really seeing was only a big city version of those 'successful' Negro bootblacks and janitors back in Lansing. The only difference was that the one in Boston had been brainwashed even more thoroughly. They prided themselves on being incomparably more 'cultured', 'cultivated', 'dignified', and better off than their black brethren down in the ghetto'[10]

Malcolm draws the distinction as many great leaders have between an appearance and a reality. Born into society; no one of us having created it; inheriting its modes of thought; it is not surprising that our very powers of imagination are stunted and we perceive the status quo as natural or inevitable, or unchangeable. 'A man, whilst he is dreaming,' said Gandhi, 'believes in his dream; he is undeceived only when he is awakened from his sleep.'[11] Such a notion pervades The Autobiography of Malcolm X, and is in fact what provides the great power behind his words as he leads us from his own self-delusion to that very awakening. Narrating his first conk, the straightening of his natural afro-hair, Malcolm takes us through the tragically comedic incident of the burning sensation and the feeling of the comb 'as if it were raking off my skin'. This is followed by the dumbstruck image of himself standing staring in the mirror awestruck by the reflection of his straightened hair. 'How ridiculous I was!' he remarks.

`This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh with lye, in order to cook my natural hair until it was limp to have it look like a white man's hair. I had joined the multitude of Negro men and women in America who had been brainwashed into believing that the black people were 'inferior' – and the white man 'superior' – that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look 'pretty' by white standards.[12]

The colonised mind then is one in which its power of imagination is sapped and the course of action presented as a dichotomy – acceptance of the colonisers labels and categories of thought, behaviour, and customs, or a violent rejection. But the host of thinkers connected to the apparatus of colonisation were not, and are not, mere props, they are in many ways as crucial to the machinery as are the tanks and fighter aeroplanes. Being confronted by the former was but part of the plan as Macaulay and others foresaw, and the latter was no unexpected reaction either. The rejection was by the powerless and was, as expected, manifested itself in violence against the colonial authorities. Yet in many ways this reaction itself was nurtured and it would be difficult, nigh impossible, to assert whether it was not in some ways fashioned by the coloniser himself.

It served the purposes of the coloniser to have the native appear violent and passionate, it was the very essence of what differentiated the calm, rational coloniser from the colonised. It also highlighted the colonial state as sensible, well thought out, and running smoothly under the educated and controlled presence of the European, whose inner disposition reflected the structure of his enterprise. The image of the natives as violent, whether created after the manifestation of violence, or before and thereby fuelling a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy, meant the coloniser was not entirely without control over even those who rejected the colonialist and what he stood for. In the opening chapter of her book,*An Ordinary Peron's Guide To Empire*, Arundhati Roy expresses her thoughts on her own writing and identifies the theme of much of what she writes, 'fiction as well as non-fiction, [as being] the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they're engaged in'[13]. We may recast her words, in the colonial context, as the battle between the powerful and the powerless; the former doing everything he can to keep himself propped up in his position of privilege, and the latter doing all they can to pull him down. As it happens though, the coloniser captures through representation the violence of the colonised; he begins to decontextualise it filtering it through an array of labels, ready at hand, to explain why what is happening is happening. He brings on authorities supposedly experts on the issues – anthropologists, sociologists – they frame the reality in terms of their ideas sealing off the discussion from normative cause and effects, and casting the natives ever more strongly as agitators, anti-colonial dissidents, rogue elements. And so, almost imperceptibly, the aggressor becomes the aggrieved and the disaffected colonised subjects become the aggressor.

So the endless circle continues. The break can only come when the dichotomy created by the coloniser is short-circuited. The elite are important but not as individuals, rather they must return to an identification with their fellow men and women, they must use the very education given to them as a basis from which to undermine this circular movement. They must together with the masses go back to the purity of their ideals and values. And in this was Gandhi's innovation. He promoted a return to Indian ethics and civilisation for*all* Indians and broke the circular conflict by denying the moral superiority of the coloniser. By presenting the Indian resistance as in no way feeding into the coloniser's cultural machinery that assigned meaning and value he out manoeuvred the ideologues of empire.

It is not that the Gandhian model should be, or can be, applied verbatim, but that the message which resounds from it – despite its many shortcomings – is to imagine a way outside the present boxes. To acknowledge that efforts counterproductive to the cause are merely productive for the opponent. Moreover, in the process of colonialism exists the very true component of illusion, the pomp and glory is to convince others of what the show signifies and it is in the recognition of others, positive or reactionary, that the signification becomes real. Power exists in the hands of the coloniser because the colonised recognise it; deny it and it vanishes. But the efficacy of denying the present illusory reality can only occur when one has the ability to imagine an alternative reality. The brainwashed elite wishes to walk the path paved by the coloniser and the violent reactionist is too short sighted so that in reality a physical expulsion of the coloniser does not necessarily expel him and his years of 'narratives' from our minds. What is then needed is a decolonisation of the mind; something that cannot happen without a return to ones own true self, values, heritage, and, importantly, categories of thought.

Notes: **I take this title from Ngugi wa Thiong'o's, Decolonising the Mind, (London: Heinemann Educational, 1986).** This article has been republished

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[2] Edward Said, Orientalism, (London: Penguin, 2003), p80
[3] Quoted from Timothy Mitchell, Colonising Egypt, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) p169.
[4] Abdulrazak Gurnah, By The Sea, (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p203.
[5] M. K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p104.
[6] Ibid, p35.
[7] T.B Macaulay, Selected Writings, (London: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p249.
[8] M. K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p104.
[9] Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X, (London: Penguin publishers, 2001), p122.
[10] Ibid, p122.
[11] M. K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p35.
[12] Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X, (London: Penguin publishers, 2001), p138.
[13] Arundhati Roy, The Ordinary Person's Guide To Empire, (London: Harper Collins, 2004), p13.

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