

# Colonialism and Victorian Literature (An Introspective Study)

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## Abstract

The years 1830-1890 roughly comprised what is called the Victorian age and the literature produced in this period presents many dissimilar features. This is regarded as the age of compromise. A conflict was distinctly seen in many fields like social, political, religion etc.

Political especially imperialistic turmoil cast a great impact on the Victorian literature. The Victorian period in British history marks the high point of British imperialism. Though the British policy of colonial expansion had begun earlier, during the nineteenth century Britain not only consolidated its existing empire, but also experienced an unprecedented expansion in its colonial possessions. This process began after the 1857 Mutiny in India, when India was placed under the direct control of the crown, and continued through the scramble for Africa in the late 1800s, so that by the end of the century it could be proudly proclaimed that "the sun never sets on the British Empire". The impact of colonialism, however is not restricted to the so-called colonial novels. The 19<sup>th</sup> century's dominant genre of domestic fiction is also implicitly informed by colonial ideology. Though the novels of writers like Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot focus on domestic British society, Britain's overseas possessions frequently play an important role in the action. Thus, Sir Thomas Bertram's estate in Mansfield Park is maintained by his possessions in Antigua while David Copperfield's Mr. Micawber achieves success in Australia and St. John Rivers in Jane Eyre leaves for India to fulfil his missionary aspirations. Colonialism thus provides an expanded canvas even to the domestic novels which reveal the inextricable involvement of domestic British society in the colonial enterprise. At the time, the implicit presence in these novels of ideas such as the savage nature of the natives and the white man's burden of bringing civilization to them also involves these texts in the dissemination of racial and colonial ideologies that provided the conceptual framework for colonialism. In the cases like Conrad's Heart of Darkness the colonized "other" functions as a vantage point for a self-critique of western civilization. It is still not allowed to articulate a distinct subject position of its own. The critics like Gayatri Spivak and Jenny Sharpe analyze the relationship between colonial ideology and the growth of British feminism in Victorian England evident in the works of writers like Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte. The exploration of the ideological complicities and resistances that characterize Victorian literature provides an insight into the complex ideological configurations of neo-colonialism that are an inescapable reality of late twentieth century culture and politics.

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The Victorian period in British history marks the high point of British imperialism. Though the British policy of colonial expansion had begun earlier, during the nineteenth century Britain not only consolidated its existing empire, but also experienced an unprecedented expansion in its colonial possessions. This process began after the 1857 Mutiny in India, when India was placed under the direct control of the Crown, and continued through the scramble for Africa in the late 1800s, so that by the end of the century it could be proudly proclaimed that "the sun never sets on the British Empire." The tremendous upsurge of imperial activity during the nineteenth century, though physically taking place in areas distant from British shores, had a broad and

pervasive impact on British culture. The literature of the period is thus inextricably embroiled in the imperialist project. In the view of many critics, irrespective of the direct involvement of individual literary works with the colonial enterprise, the overall contours of Victorian literature are consistently shaped by the influence of colonial ideology, which informed the collective unconscious of the British public during the entire period.

The most obvious influence of colonialism on Victorian literature is evident in the colonial novels of writers like H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, and Joseph Conrad. These novels, which include works like Haggard's *She* (1889) and Kipling's *Kim* (1901), are usually set in the distant lands that Britain colonized and attempt to expose the insular domestic public to the exotic strangeness of their country's colonial possessions. The reality of colonialism enters these texts as the necessary background that makes possible their narratives of adventure and romance. The linking of colonialism with the genre of the romantic adventure story is also evident in the abundant children's fiction of the time, which includes works by Robert Louis Stevenson and R. M. Ballantyne. While using Britain's colonial enterprise as the setting of their narratives, such novels also participate in the construction and propagation of colonial ideology by providing an implicit justification for British imperialism. Colonialism, therefore, appears in these colonial novels not only as the literal backdrop for their narrative action, but also as the ideological framework that provides the reason of the action.

The impact of colonialism, however, is not restricted to the so-called colonial novels. The nineteenth century's dominant genre of domestic fiction is also implicitly informed by colonial ideology. Though the novels of writers like Jane Austen, Charlotte Brönte, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot focus on domestic British society, Britain's overseas possessions frequently play an important role in the action. Thus, Sir Thomas Bertram's estate in *Mansfield Park* is maintained by his possessions in Antigua while *David Copperfield's* Mr. Micawber achieves success in Australia and St. John Rivers in *Jane Eyre* leaves for India to fulfill his missionary aspirations. Colonialism thus provides an expanded canvas even to the domestic novels, which reveal the inextricable involvement of domestic British society in the colonial enterprise. At the same time, the implicit presence in these novels of ideas such as the savage nature of natives and the white man's burden of bringing civilization to them also involves these texts in the dissemination of racial and colonial ideologies that provided the conceptual framework for colonialism. Though an awareness of the colonial presence in Victorian literature is evident in critical studies during the first half of the twentieth century, such criticism is usually restricted to an examination of colonial novels and an evaluation of the authors' differing attitudes to the colonial enterprise as reflected in their writings. It is only in the latter half of the twentieth century, in the so-called postcolonial period, that critics have explored the pervasive influence of colonial ideology throughout nineteenth-century British culture and society. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is a seminal work in this respect, providing an exhaustive analysis of the West's construction of the Orient as its "other." Such a construction, Said argues, is not motivated by any desire to represent faithfully the reality of the colonized cultures and their people. Instead, it works as a form of ideological control, allowing the West to create a series of Manichean oppositions between the colonizer and the colonized that make the latter manageable and provide a moral justification for the colonial enterprise. Even literary works like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) that overtly question the validity of colonialism are informed by this Manichean aesthetic, which problematizes their critique of imperialism. In such cases, while the colonized "other" functions as a vantage point for a self-critique of Western civilization, it is still not allowed to articulate a distinct subject-position of its own.

The use of the "other" for self-critique and the construction of alternative subject-positions within the British context is also explored by feminist postcolonial critics like Gayatri Spivak and Jenny Sharpe. These critics analyze the relationship between colonial ideology and the growth of British feminism in Victorian England evident in the works of writers like Jane Austen and Charlotte Brönte. Similarly, colonial ideology is also seen to have an impact on the representation of domestic class relations, whereby the lower classes are frequently portrayed as internal "others" who share the characteristics of the colonized and hence require similar strategies of control. By thus exploring the class, gender, and racial politics that inform colonial ideology, postcolonial critics reveal the complexities of colonialism and its multi-faceted influence on Victorian society and literature. At the same time, such criticism reveals a contemporary relevance to the literary output of the nineteenth century. The exploration of the ideological complicities and resistances that characterize

Victorian literature provides an insight into the complex ideological configurations of neo-colonialism that are an inescapable reality of late-twentieth-century culture and politics. In an attempt to advance the British Empire's trading, as well as material and monetary gains, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a vast expansion of the British Empire. Another primary concern of colonialism and imperialism was to help the natives (of the lands being colonized) by civilizing them. Victorian literature is deeply aware of the colonialism and imperialism that the Victorians encountered. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which many Victorian authors created narratives of Empire that introduced colonialism as a civilizing mission that sought to help natives of colonized lands. In particular, I will be focusing on William Gladstone's speech "Our Colonies." I then want to complicate the British view of colonialism by introducing Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The White Man's Burden." In contrast to (most) current understanding of colonialism, Kipling shows that although the Victorians supported colonialism, they did so because they truly believed they were helping the native people. William Gladstone was an extremely political figure; he served as the Prime Minister four times and was the leader of the Liberal Party in Great Britain. During his earlier life in parliament, one of Gladstone's main concerns was colonial policy and he was appointed Colonial Secretary in 1845. Gladstone was in opposition to military expansion of the Empire, but believed that the Empire should expand based on agreement and good relations with the natives of the land. He believed that colonies should be placed around the world in order to advance civilization. Gladstone thought Britain should partake in this advancement because he viewed Great Britain as an exceptional country, government and civilization with good moral values.

In November 1855, Gladstone delivered a speech to the Mechanics Institute in Chester. In this speech, *Our Colonies*, Gladstone sought to explicate his own reasons for supporting the expansion of the British Empire and British colonies. He prioritized two basic functions of colonies: to promote trade and to spread British ideology, "they (colonies) are desirable for both the material and for the moral and social results". He further states in his speech that one of the primary concerns of colonialism was to advance the "reproduction of the image and likeness of England". Gladstone promotes his personal notions of the British Empire as the greatest economic, governmental and moral authority in the world (1759). Gladstone's, in his speech, focuses on the positive contributions of Great Britain; he states that Great Britain positively contributes to the "moral and social advantage" of the colonies. He appraises the British law and social structure and aspires to expand it to the rest of the world. He further concludes that Great Britain's constitution, harmony, freedom, rights and laws are better than those of any other country (1759). Gladstone clearly states that his reason for supporting colonialism isn't simply based on personal material benefit (1758). He argues that in keeping colonies, the British Empire is helping the natives of the lands by providing them with British ideological, as well as other, systems. He wants to globally spread British structures of law, government, etc. because he thinks that doing so will help the colonized people. He further argues that if others mimic Britain, become a part of it and adapt its structures, they will also obtain benefits (such as good a government and social order). By arguing that the colonial system and British colonialism will help the natives of the land, Gladstone suggests that those people actually require Great Britain's help. In praising British civilization, Gladstone automatically looks down on other countries and suggests that they lack civilization. He further suggests that lacking civilization is a negative aspect. Gladstone creates a dualist structure that places Great Britain above any and all other nations. In his view, Great Britain is a country "blessed with laws and a constitution that are eminently beneficial to mankind". Gladstone's views on other nations also appear in many other Victorian literatures. Rudyard Kipling was born in Mumbai, India in 1865 . He lived with his parents in India for five years before being sent to England to pursue an education. In England, he was taken care of by caretakers and remained with them for five years (1876). After that, Kipling was sent to boarding school until he turned sixteen (1876). At sixteen, Kipling returned to India for seven years to work as a journalist. While in India, Kipling did a lot of exploring and met many Indian residents (1876). Much of his earlier work was centered on the exotic Indian people, culture and practices he witnessed while in India (1876). Rudyard Kipling wrote "The White Man's Burden" in 1898 in the poem, Kipling seeks to emphasize the responsibility of civilized nations (Great Britain and America) towards people of other lands. At certain points in the poem, the reader is reminded of Gladstone's



speech and the importance of civilizing uncivilized peoples and nations. Yet, Kipling's narrative is a lot more complex than Gladstone's dualistic speech. Having spent so much of his time in India, Kipling, perhaps unconsciously, seems to transition between hybridity and dualism. Hybridity is apparent in the poem where Kipling seems to be able to identify with the people that he describes and dualisms are apparent when Kipling clearly creates a distinction between himself and the others (natives of another country). "The White Man's Burden" was written to address/ for the American people after their acquisition of Cuba and the Philippines in 1898. The poem suggests to the reader that the White man has a responsibility to other peoples and nations. This responsibility is to assure that other nations become as civilized as White nations so that they may live a better life and adopt better life styles. The first stanza begins with "take up the White man's burden". This line suggests that helping other nations is a burden that White men should partake in (1777). The stanza ends with referencing the natives as "half devil and half child" which suggests that they're less than human. The stanza is completed by the line "to serve your captives needs" (1777). The line suggests that the people of another native land need their colonizers to help them turn from "half devil and half child" to completely human.

The second stanza of the poem continues in the same way, further reinforcing the responsibility of the White man to civilize and help other people and nations (Kipling, 1777). In the third stanza, Kipling suggests that the native people deal with "famine" and "sickness;" he writes, "fill full the mouth of famine/ And bid the sickness cease" (1777). This sounds extremely familiar to the speech that Gladstone made. Both authors emphasize the ways in which colonialism helps the people that it seeks to colonialize. The only thing that seems to be missing from Kipling's poetic understanding of colonialism is the monetary gain of the British Empire (1777). The last stanza of the Kipling's poem alludes to the Biblical story of Moses, "the cry of hosts ye humoe/ (Ah, slowly!) towards the light;- / "Why bought ye from our bondage, Our loves Egyptian night!". When Moses bought the Israelites out of the bondage of Egypt and the Pharaoh, they complained of the hardships they had to face (1777). In this way, Kipling once more emphasizes the ways in which colonialism is the "burden" of the White man. He shows that although the White nations are helping the other uncivilized nations of the world, they still aren't appreciated (1777).

It is well-known that the Victorian period in British history was also the marker of the highpoint of British imperialism, among other things. Therefore, it comes to be that colonialism and the ideology that accompanies it is well-embedded in the common unconsciousness of the British individual. As Edward Said says in his work 'Orientalism', "fields of learning, as much as the works of even the most eccentric artist, are constrained and acted upon by society, by cultural traditions, by worldly circumstance, and by stabilizing influences like schools, libraries and governments...both learned and imaginative writing are never free, but are limited in their imagery, assumptions, and intentions." Imperialism, therefore, as a history and a phenomenon predominantly seen in the Victorian era, has a great influence on much of popular culture, including the novels written at the time. This influence is most overtly present in the "colonial novels" of several writers such as H. Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, and Rudyard Kipling. It is also noticed in the works of writers for children by Robert Louis Stevenson, for instance. However, colonialism and the drive towards imperialism is implicit not just in the overtly "colonial" novels of the aforementioned writers, but in several novels of the time that seem to revolve around the domestic sphere in England, such as those written by women; for instance, Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte. This essay will therefore look at the works of Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson and Charlotte Bronte's 'Jane Eyre' in order to explore the complicated British attitude towards imperialism as seen in these novels. What runs through all of these works as a common theme is what Said calls Orientalism in his book of the same name. According to him, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." This is most easily noticed in Robert Louis Stevenson's novels, which were said to be a "revival" of the romances popular in the seventeenth century. The reason that the "Orient" repeats itself in the literature of the Victorian period, and after that, is that "it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea,

personality, experience.” Said claims that Orientalism as it is set out is a strategy of the West (or Europe) to “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” It enables a pattern of relative strength between the East and the West that allows the West to define itself. What is obvious in Orientalism is of course the idea of European identity as superior to other, non-European racial and social identities. It is this strain of thought that the reader observes in ‘Jane Eyre’. As Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak puts it in her essay titled ‘Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism’, propagation of the colonial discourse was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. Imperialism was understood as the social mission of England (the “white man’s burden”). In the opening chapter of ‘Jane Eyre’, we are shown a picture of “marginalization and privatization of the protagonist”, as put by Fox Groves, whom Spivak cites in her essay. Consequently, Jane aligns herself to the racial other when she says that she sits like a “Turk” or like an “Indian”. She repeatedly “inserts herself into the margin”. When Jane withdraws to seclusion to read, in her “self-marginalized uniqueness, reader and Jane become one-both are reading.” When Jane moves from what Spivak calls her “counter family” at Lowood with Mrs Temple and Helen Burns (which fails because it is a family consisting only of women) to the set of the “family-in-law”, it is the “unquestioned ideology of imperialist axiomatics” that allows her to do so. Bertha Mason, therefore, a woman of non-British, non-white origin, a “native subject”, functions interestingly in the text. Spivak says that her function in the novel is to render indiscriminate the boundary between animal and human- as in several cases, most notably when Jane observes that she “bellowed”, she looks like a “clothed hyena”, and that she “snatched and growled like a wild animal”- and thus reduce her own entitlement under the spirit, if not the letter of the law. ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’ by Jean Rhys, a retelling of ‘Jane Eyre’ from the perspective of the colonial Other, suggests, in Rochester’s violent renaming of Antoinette as Bertha, that even so intimate a thing as personal and human identity can be determined by the politics of imperialism. Therefore, Spivak says that if one is to follow the story Rhys sets out in ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’, ‘Jane Eyre’ can be read as the orchestration and staging of the self-immolation of the “good wife” Bertha Mason.

According to Elsie Michie, Rochester himself is identified with the racial Other almost as much as Jane and Bertha are. He is consistently linked to two images of racial difference; one is that of the Irish man, violently impulsive, barely considered a “white” man, likened to a “white chimpanzee”, and the other is the image of an “Oriental despot” that Jane compares him to when he showers her with gifts. Rochester, like the image of the Irish man in popular culture of the time (especially cartoons in Punch) is described as having an “unusual breadth of chest”, a “dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow”. He is impetuous and irrational, characteristics generally attributed to the Irish immigrants, who, as media from the 1840s suggests, had become at once a burden to the English as well as a re-legitimation of their superiority.

Susan Meyer puts forward a slightly different argument in her essay on colonialism in ‘Jane Eyre’. She begins by saying that Charlotte Brontë uses references to relations between Europeans and races subjected to the might of European imperialism to represent various configurations of power within the British society- female subordination in sexual relationships, female insurrection and rage against male domination, and the oppressive class position of the female without family ties and a middle class income. What comes across, however, is a conflict between Brontë’s sympathy for the oppressed and a hostile sense of racial supremacy. An unflattering parallel is drawn in the earlier chapters between British imperialism and the Roman Empire, but the oppression of non-white races as represented by Charlotte Brontë is tied up with class and gender, and she elides over historical and political reasons. Therefore, the critique of imperialism and the identification with the oppressed collapses into a mere appropriation of the image of slavery, and nothing else. The ending of the novel betrays an anxiety that imperialism and oppression will leave a lasting mark on English society and history, yet the novel’s own appropriation of non-white races for figurative purposes bears a disturbing resemblance to that history. However, imperialism as represented by Bertha Mason’s imprisonment is referred to as the “crime incarnate” that “can neither be expelled nor subdued by the owner”. Rochester refers to his riches as the “tent of Achan”, and Thornfield and its third floor become the material embodiment of the

history of the English ruling class as embodied by the Rochesters. There is, thus, a critique, but the novel constantly displaces blame for slavery onto the “darkraces” themselves, only alluding directly to slavery directly as practised by dark skinned people. All aspects of oppression also come to be marked as the “Other”, and the primary imperative of the novel is to cleanse the domestic sphere of England- as when Jane literally “clean(s) down” Moor House. She becomes the purifying “Saviour”, almost, as she cleans out the “plague” of inequality from the domestic space of England. Though the novel in part supports St. John’s mission to cleanse the other races and bring God’s word to them, it also critiques him. He lacks true “compassion”, possessing only the charity that is entailed by his “Evangelical” duty. When Jane thinks “this parlour is not his sphere”, she instantly associates him with the plague-ridden colonial environment rather than the home of England, and sets him up at odds with Jane’s and the novel’s values in his preference for domination he wishes to “hew down” others’ “prejudices of creed”. Even in his description there is contained an icy racial superiority that is condemned by the narrative, because its first victim is Jane herself.

Bertha Mason institutes the “cleaning” of England; she burns down Rochester’s ill-gotten wealth, and in the process, herself is purified from the novel. The novel thus ends in a more egalitarian society. There is a hint of trouble, however, that the stain of imperialism never will fade from the collective consciousness. Jane’s family at Ferndean seems idyllic, even Edenic, and yet there is a sense of “damping”, a fogginess that lingers from Thornfield and other oppressive, unhealthy sites in the text, because Jane’s own wealth is from the colonies. The understanding of the colonial or imperialist imperative in Robert Louis Stevenson and Kipling’s work, however, is slightly more nuanced. It is more similar to what Said says when he furthers his argument on Orientalism in his introduction to the book of the same name: “it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some case to control, manipulate, even to incorporate what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world.” Orientalism slowly becomes, therefore, a “political- intellectual” tradition that has its own history and archive of thought. This is only borne out by Curzon’s speech in the House of Lords on September 27, 1909, when he says that “our familiarity, not merely with the languages of the people of the East but with their customs, their feelings, their traditions, their history and religion, our capacity to understand what may be called the genius of the East, is the sole basis upon which we are likely to be able to maintain in the future the position we have won.” Said says that “to a very great extent Curzon’s ideas derive logically from a good century of British utilitarian administration of and philosophy about the Eastern colonies.” It is this that Kipling’s ‘Kim’ represents fully. As Alicia Mistry writes, “Kipling’s *Kim*, whilst being a tale of colonial power and native struggle, serves more as an extraordinary recognition of British imperialism at a specific moment in its history. As such, Kipling admirably tells a story that has both political and literary merit. Although, Kipling the writer is always more prominent than Kipling the political man in the text and this is what makes *Kim* an intriguing novel. What remains of great interest within the focus of my essay, however, is the way Kipling describes this strained “hegemonic” relationship between the British imperialists and the natives from a new, and sometimes controversial, perspective.”

Kipling viewed imperialism as a deeply held moral, spiritual and political belief, even to the extent of considering it a “moral responsibility” that the British had to carry out. He dismisses the Mutiny of 1857 as mere “madness” when a soldier says “a madness ate into the Army, and they turned against their officers.” Interestingly, right at the beginning of the text, Kipling writes: “The Curator smiled at the mixture of old world piety and modern progress that is the note of India today”. Therefore, even though Said ultimately says that ‘Kim’ is “a rich and absolutely fascinating, but nevertheless profoundly embarrassing novel”, it cannot be just dismissed as such. While it conveys Kipling’s pro-imperialist attitudes, it also conveys Kipling’s own love for the traditions and people of India. Klara Sumberova says in her paper on the novel: “Kim is, above all, a unique celebration of the native culture of India. Kim sums up this attitude in his declaration that his home is “this great and beautiful and” crowded with Indians, “his people”, who are brought to the reader incarnated as numerous little figures meeting the main characters and contributing to an original

atmosphere of the book.” The readership would probably have been fascinated by the portrayal of the exotic Orient, the land of romance and adventure.

### Conclusion

Victorian age is a time when colonial activity reached its zenith. It was a very popular jargon that “British sun never sets.” A major portion of the world was exploited and administered by the English rulers. As a result its impact was seen vaguely or distinctly in the writings of erstwhile Victorian epoch. The impression of British defiance and impertinence can be traced in the writings. And it is reflected in every craft or genre of literature. So it is true that there is an amalgamation between brutal and gloomy scenario of colonialism as well as the literature. The pungent flavour of colonialism occasionally numbs our senses while we go through the literature. And hence it can be a very interesting and introspective study to delve deep into the interrelationship between Victorian literature and colonialism.

**Source :** a) History of English Literature by Legouis and Cazamian  
b) A Critical History of English Literature by David Daiches  
c) An Introduction to the study of English Literature by W.H. Hudson  
d) The Short Oxford History of English Literature by Andrew Sanders

