



CULTRE OF IMPERIALISM IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

A study in relation to Orientalism

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Abstract: Imperialism was and is an oft used term and concept in the present and present academic circle. It has as we all know, a long history. It can generally be defined as a way of capture and domination of nations and people for economic and political and other purposes. But mere political or military prowess would not be adequate to sustain an empire; specially an empire of the proportion and longevity as that of Britain. What was also needed for the purpose was the consent of the both at home and abroad. In other words along with political and military domination hegemony was needed. it is with this hegemonization that this paper deals with. My aim will be to show in what way British ruling class secured or failed to secure consent for the Empire from the different social classes in Britain.

Index Terms – Imperialism, Orientalism, Culture, Britain

I. INTRODUCTION

Imperialism was and is an oft-used term and concept in the past and present academic circles. It has, as we all know a long history. It can be generally defined as a way of capture and domination of nations and people for economic, political or other purposes. That Imperialism has an economic, political and military dimension is clear from this definition. But mere political or military prowess would not be adequate to sustain an empire; especially an empire of the proportion and longevity as that of Britain. What was also needed for the purpose is consent of the people, both at home and abroad. In other words, along with political and military domination what was also needed was to use Antonio Gramsci's words, "Hegemony" to be achieved by means of culture. It is with this hegemonisation that this paper deals with. My aim will be to show in what way British ruling class secured consent for the Empire from the different social classes in Britain.

However, it needs to be kept in mind that hegemonisation is far from being a sudden event. It is a continuous process, which undergoes changes over time. Therefore, I intend to make this study in context of Edward Said's path breaking work "Orientalism". Published in 1978, the book is regarded as an important breakthrough in post structural academia. It has been regarded as being of key importance in unmasking the underlying ideological mechanism behind colonialism and imperialism. It has provided a site where the voice of and voice for the marginalized can be heard. It has raised marginality itself to the status of a discipline. Pathbreaking though the work is, it suffers from a number of methodological and historical limitations. My paper will explore the extent of Said's applicability in Imperial culture of nineteenth century Britain. I will try to analyze in what ways the process of hegemonisation did or did not conform to Said's formulations.

II. ORIENTALISM

Said defines Orientalism as Europe's way of coming to terms with the Orient or the East consisting largely of her colonies. It has its basis in an ideology of difference or distinction. Orientalism supposes such distinction to have existed between the Orient and the Occident. He gives three definitions of Orientalism The third regards it as an institution of dominance. It is a "western style of dominating, restructuring and having an authority over the Orient".[1] It is therefore, to use Michael Foucault's words a "discourse" by which the West "produced" the Orient. A more innocent definition is one in which defines it a study about the Orient. The last definition thinks Orientalism to be a thought based on "ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident". For Said, the very fact of identity of the West is dependent on "creation" or "Orientalization" of the

Orient. The strength and identity of European or Western culture was derived from creation of the Orient as the “other”. This idea of otherisation of the Orient runs through the length and breadth of Said’s work. Orientalism for him is the way in which the West “represents the “Orient”. He exemplifies this by Aeschylus’s play “The Persians” in which Asia is represented by grieving Asian women.

III. HISTORIOGRAPHY

To what extent the imperial mission of Britain was reflected in the contemporary cultural pursuits, or, in other words, whether the nineteenth century cultural activities in Britain exhibited “Orientalism”, has been a matter of immense debate among the scholars. While some have found traces of it, others have denied any exhibition of Orientalism whatsoever in contemporary art and literature.

The latter group assumes a separation between imperial missions abroad and domestic cultures. No public support they argue, existed for the imperial policies. Bernard Porter strongly makes this argument. He shows in his work that nineteenth century British people were little, if at all with the empire. Hence the Empire found no place in art and literature of the time.[2] Art and society in his opinion were at odds with one another. Intellectuality was looked down upon by both the aristocracy and the working classes, championing the cause of ‘common sense’ and ‘practicality’. On their part the contemporary novelists, nurtured a disdain for the middle classes. Empire, Porter argues was disliked for the same reason; it was an arena of action and not of thought. He shows, by means of contemporary cultural forms like literature, songs, theatre, art etc. that they cannot be in any sense, be regarded as overtly imperialistic. They do make references to colonies, but they are not obsessed with those. Imperial themes according to him, come to surface only in times of war or diplomatic crisis. I will later examine the validity of such assertion.

A very different view is held by scholars like John Mackenzie. He begins by making an important qualification. He argues that while speaking of an Imperial culture, it should be kept in mind that fissures existed within this culture both “vertically and horizontally”. [3] The cultures of the aristocrats, middle classes working classes, each differed from the other. So did cultures of different nationalities within United Kingdom-English, Welsh, Scots and the Irish. But Mackenzie thinks that Imperialism was present in varied forms within these varied cultures. In other words, he does not regard references to Empire and colonies as mere incidental ones; they did hold significance in context of their time. He even distinguishes in cultural representation of colonies in pre and post 1857 period. Imperial themes in his view did possess the ‘market’ the existence of which is explicitly denied by Bernard Porter.[2] To exemplify his case he speaks of war artists and painters who secured popular support for the wars of the Empire in late nineteenth century. Moreover, their work possessed all the qualities which popularized imperialism to the wider public-hero worship, sensational glory, adventure and sporting spirit.[4] Simon Denith speaks of the role of epic poetry in cultivating a culture of native heroism. Another scholar cites justification of Empire in late Victorian literature which regards domination of strong over the weak as ‘natural’ [5].

IV. EDWARD SAID AND NINETEENTH CENTURY IMPERIAL CULTURE: AGREEMENTS

I now come to the main part of my paper. My aim in this section will be to analyze whether or not the cultural pursuits of nineteenth century England conform to Said’s formulations. In doing so, I will focus on the main cultural activities of the period viz. literature, painting, theatre, music halls, popular songs etc.

To begin with literature, as already seen scholars like Bernard Porter would regard them to be essentially non imperial. He thinks that the imperial allusions which Edward Said finds in two famous novels ‘Mansfield Park’ and ‘Great Expectations’ are overdrawn.[2] I have no qualms in agreeing with him that every novel need not be looked for with the aim to find an imperial overtone; they are capable of varying interpretations. But I intend to argue that the imperial dimension and the portrayal of the ‘other’ in these novels can neither be overlooked nor be regarded as being of minor importance. Porter himself hints at it when speaks of imperializing the world not only militarily and politically but ‘conceptually’ as well. In this idea of conceptual imperialism, in my opinion is to be found the roots of Said’s Orientalism. For, this would lead the west to conceptualize the Orient in its own way, or to use the words of Said ‘to produce’ the orient ideologically. If we define Orientalism as Said does as west’s perception of the Orient, then this is definitely Orientalism. The adventure novels for the boys replete with adventurism and references to the exotic are cases in point. Bernard Porter argues that references to the exotic did not depend on the Empire. However; I feel that this very idea of the exotic was a kind of ideological stereotyping which in turn, is a key feature of Orientalism. In western perception the ‘exotic’ was always associated with the Orient. Then again the novel ‘Coral Island’ by R.M Ballantyne features a black missionary hero who speaks of some pirates being “more blameworthy even than the savages”. For Porter, this has no imperial dimension as it thinks that the savages should be civilized, ‘but not necessarily imperially’. Her again, the use of the word ‘savage’ is not value neutral. The use is motivated by an imperialist perspective. The West regards its ‘other’ as ‘savage’. This otherisation and inferiorisation again testifies to the existence of Orientalism. Similar stereotyping is founding the thrillers wherein the villains were mostly oriental.[6] Representation and stereotyping of the Bengali ‘Babu’ is found in the pulp magazine school stories for British boys, where a rich Hindu was shown as speaking English in a particular manner. Again taking Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, Porter thinks that its message is not imperial. But he himself speaks of its cheap ‘chapbook’ version where a naked Friday was shown as bowing before an imperious Crusoe.[2] The intention in each of these cases, I will argue was to reinforce the superiority of the ‘civilized’ Occident over the ‘primitive’ Orient’. This kind of ‘Orientalism’ however found its real strength in Rudyard Kipling who has been described by many as the ‘Bard of the Empire’. His belief in differentiation and otherisation, the key feature of Orientalism, expressed itself in his poems... ‘East is East and the West is West and never the twain shall meet’. Also Bengalis were caricatured in his novels. Exposition to the ‘primitive other’

also bred fear. Novels like “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” by R.L Stevenson, the picture of Dorian Grey, ‘Count Dracula’-all revealed a fear of corruption among white upper classes as they came in contact with the ‘other’.

The representation of the Orient as dominated was also found in the various visual arts. A painting by David Wilkie for example depicted General David Baird discovering the body of Tipu Sultan.[4] The oriental characters were stereotypically presented as exotic in the pantomimes. Music halls, a theatrical form of the late nineteenth century developed in the working class areas. One of the poems sung in the music halls speaks of the “dusky sons of Hindoostan”, which again is a reflection of stereotyping.

John Mackenzie thinks the Revolt of 1857 to be a turning point in the evolution of an Imperial culture. For, the murder of British men and women shocked ‘Victorian Sensibilities’. It also convinced the British of the rejection of policies of western assimilation by the Indians. The revolt shook the very foundations of the Empire; Indian being the most treasured and prosperous of her colonies. It created urgency for the Empire to strive toward survival. Hence the racial and ideological stereotyping of the ‘other’ already seen in the earlier period became more tangible in the era. This was reflected in the Imperial Exhibitions. Colonial villages like the African village model were exhibited. The natives were seen as inhabiting their supposedly traditional dwellings while displaying craftsmanship, cooking and sports etc. Here again, the intention was to represent the colonized ‘other’ and their lifestyles as ‘backward’. To use the words of Said again, the west in these exhibitions ‘produced the Orient ideologically. The Somali people for example were represented as martial in the exhibits of Somali villages. The Exhibitions were geared to strengthen the superiority of the West over its ‘primitive other’. The subjugation of the ‘other’ was also reflected in the exhibits of plundered artifacts from the colonies.

V. IMPERIAL CULTURE AND ORIENTALISM: EXCLUSIONS

Having demonstrated the applicability of Said’s theory in the various forms of Imperial culture, I now intend to consider some of the complexities. To begin with, every section of the people in Britain did not participate in or approve of the Orientalist project. In other words, was not inclusive in its grand imperial vision. These social exclusions and divisions within the Imperial country finds no place in Said’s theory. British women, to begin with were not part of the mission of dominating the orient. Though some women were sent to the colonies as teachers and governesses, they were single women seen as troublemaker in Britain. The general trend in late nineteenth century Britain was to emphasize the idea of separate spheres for men and women. The public world belonged to men who must act to defend the nation. The literary treatments of the legends of King Arthur for example, accused women of distracting men from their public duties. The books for girls sought to imbibe in them womanly values like modesty gentleness truthfulness etc. Their duty was thought to be to play supportive roles so that the men could run the Empire efficiently[2].

The British working classes similarly did not participate in dominating and ‘producing’ the orient. To begin with, the toils of their daily lives left little spare time for them to idealize about the empire. Moreover the curriculum designed for them in their schools took care not to imbibe imperial pride in them lest it culminated in arousing in them a sympathy for the oppressed of other countries. The radical weeklies of the working class mainly dealt with industrial and political agendas, franchise reforms, trade unions, and evils of capitalism making only brief references to the events of the colonies. The newspapers published for them by their ‘betters’ though mentioned the colonies did not accord them any importance to them. They instead sought to cultivate in the working class the values of self-control and loyalty, values which would serve the interests of the ruling classes. Some ‘sensational sheets’ published for the working classes though sometimes reflected racial stereotyping (for example ‘Indian barbarity’, cannibalism in Polynesia, aboriginal superstitions of Australia), yet the mostly spoke against such stereotyping. In a story named ‘Barbarous murder in New Zealand’ the criminal was a European, not a Maori. A report named ‘Torture in India’ was critical of the torture inflicted on native criminal suspects by British officials in Madras. Again the English were made responsible for the Revolt of 1857 and blamed for their cultural insensitivity. Often the Africans were portrayed as doctors’ great military men and philosophers. This is indicative of a degree of sympathy among the British working classes for the exploited in the colonies. It was only from the 1870s and 1880s when Britain encountered competition from other Imperial countries abroad and size of the electorate had increased with the inclusion of the working classes, that the ruling classes thought of using the Empire as ‘social adhesive’. Such social exclusions and complexities had not been taken account of by Said.

VI. CONCLUSION

The above analysis shows that Said’s theory had a degree of applicability in Imperial culture of nineteenth century Britain. This not to imply that all forms of culture in the metropolitan countries were governed by principles of Orientalism. In fact, the chief flaw of Said’s theory is that he perceives both the orient and occident as monolithic. Social fissures existed in both. Also as some scholars have pointed out, there was no unified imperial culture. The cultural depictions of the orient as seen above varied with different social classes. Each and every class in Britain definitely did not intend to ‘produce’ the orient ideologically. It is also not my aim to argue, as Said does that Imperialism is solely cultural. In fact, the strengthening of ideological and racial stereotyping of the ‘other’ had much to do with the decline of British economic prowess. British manufactures encountered competition from cheap produce of Australia and Caribbean. Also, by this time, the most prosperous of British colonies, India had become poor, thereby reducing its viability as captive market. Also British industry faced competition from other industrialized nations which sought to protect their local produce by imposition of tariff walls. Edward Said had not considered such economic motivations behind West’s attitude to its supposedly ‘primitive other’. As for myself, I have not delved into such details as my intention was to show that even within the cultural dimension of Imperialism Said cannot be accepted uncritically.

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