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Cultural De/Colonization in Anwar Masood's *Bunain*

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Abstract

This article addresses cultural hegemony of colonial discursive praxis and cultural decolonization in the wake of postmodern thought. Cultural hegemony entails the predominance of ruling states (colonizers) over the subordinate states (colonized). Western European states dominated colonial nations socio-culturally and intellectually for a considerable time. Cultural decolonization is a process by which colonized people challenge the superiority of the colonizer's culture and attempt to redefine and reclaim their indigenous culture in order to reassert its distinct identity. The analysis of this study is based on Anwar Masood's poetry. Anwar Masood, amusingly, tries to challenge the colonial legacy prevalent in postcolonial Pakistan in different forms. He refuses to accept the hegemony of colonial discourse, particularly in terms of western civilization as superior to the civilizations of the colonized world.

Key Words: Colonialism, Postmodernism, Cultural Hegemony, Decolonization

Introduction

Colonialism is a practice of subjugation that entails the dominance of stronger nations over the weaker ones. Broadly discussed, colonialism can be defined as the direct political intervention of one nation to another nation by deliberately imposing rules and policies on the conquered states. The purpose behind colonization is to get control of the resources of the conquered and exploit these for the benefit of the conqueror. The practice of conquering weaker nations is not a modern phenomenon. Ancient history is full of instances of one nation conquering adjacent territories and expanding its territorial domination. Thus, colonization is not time and spatial bound. It has persisted everywhere since time immemorial. Nevertheless, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, colonialism drastically transformed due to advancements in navigation.

Modern means of navigation and exploration enabled European colonizers to discover remote areas and maintain political control over the rest of the world despite geographical dispersion. Thus, modern European colonial domination expanded to America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and Asia.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, colonial practice transformed into neo-colonialism, which involved indirect forms of domination. Within the neo-colonial practice, colonial powers maintained economic, military, political and cultural domination over former colonies making them less independent and more of dependent states. Apparently, these neo-colonies were accorded political independence, but the imperialistic influence of colonial masters is evident in the socio-economic, political, and cultural spheres of these

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states as well as the minds of the people. Neocolonial practice necessitates different forms of maintaining influence in neo-colonies. For instance, the technologically advanced nations mutually collaborate with less-developed nations, through which their economic involvement ensues, and at the same time, this practice thwarts the potential for the development of these nations and works for the economic gains of advanced countries ([Parenti 2011, 24](#)). In a similar vein, the west, in general, maintains indirect economic influence in developing countries granting financial assistance through International Monitoring Fund (IMF) and World Bank. This practice of granting loans involves strict financial conditions on neo-colonies, and the imposition of such conditions annihilates the economic and sometimes political sovereignty of these states. The most important and probably the most effective of these neo-colonial practices is the cultural clash between the colonizers and the colonized.

Colonization, in any of its forms, affected the socio-political, economic, cultural, and psychological foundations of colonized people. The legitimacy of colonial rule has long been accorded theoretical disputations among colonial and postcolonial theorists. During the nineteenth century, when European colonial rule reached its height, the theoretical tension between liberal thought and colonial practice became more intense. The proponents of colonialism justify their stance on the basis that it brought civilization to colonies, among other socio-political advantages. While some scholars challenge the dominant justification of European colonial rule as it was considered against liberalism. For example, John Stuart Mill defended the normative legitimacy of European colonization of the world. His scholarship regarding the imperial rule, especially in India, highlights his sportive stance. He worked for the British East India Company from the year 1823 to 1858, which provided him firsthand knowledge of East India Company working in India and to reflect upon that. He justifies British rule in India. According to him, India is a stagnant, backward and non-progressive society, and British rule over India was in the long-

term interests of the Indian people, which provided them with a stimulant for progress. His exalted view of British civilization and its essential patronage is evident from his claim, “among the inhabitants of our earth, the European family of nations is the only one which has ever yet to show any capability of spontaneous improvement beyond a certain low-level” (224). While at the twilight of his career, Mill’s point of view transformed from Eurocentric to liberalist. He criticized the colonial project and termed it a despotic government, which could only lead to injustice and economic exploitation. Mill in *Consideration on Representative Government* (1861) asserts that European colonizers ruled colonies only for their own benefits without any consideration for the betterment of colonized. He describes the colonial rule as “of little value and maybe a mere instrument of tyranny or injustice” (8). Condemning the forceful subjugation of colonizers, he states that “the mode in which such tribes are usually brought to submit to the primary conditions of civilized society is through the necessities of warfare and the despotic authority” (54).

Another important critic of European colonization was Denis Diderot, a French philosopher and critic, who challenged the notion that European imperialism benefited indigenous people. According to him, European traders had no right to colonize an inhabited land; this forceful intervention proved them aggressive and violent. Using an analogy of tiger, he asserts that colonists are dangerous as guests. He argues, “(indigenous) people could expel and kill me I seized women, children, and property; if I fringed its civil liberty; if I restricted its religious opinions; if I claimed to give it laws; if I wished to make it my slave. Then I would be one more wild animal in its vicinity, and no more pity would be due to me than to a tiger” (XIII). He also pointed out that inequalities and injustices rooted among human beings are manmade creations; and are mainly the result of one nation subjugating another nation. In his view, European colonizers were uncivilized people who brought injustice to colonized people. ([Diderot, 1992](#))

Decolonization in the Wake of Postmodernism

Decolonization is not something against colonies; retaliating, challenging, and refuting colonial practices; rather, it is a fight against us. One way of decolonization is to reassert indigenous culture amid the influence of settler colonialism. Most postcolonial writers, especially from former colonies, emerged to advocate indigenous stance and attempted to educate people to shatter away colonial supremacy.

In his book *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o asserts that the colonial regime destroyed African civilization and cultural traditions. By replacing the language of the colonized, colonizers attempted to fascinate native people and imposed their cultural superiority, "the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition" (17). For him, language was the most important vehicle used to colonize indigenous people. It was the means of the "spiritual subjugation". Language carries the culture; by adopting the language of the colonizer, the colonized were dragged away from their culture and civilization, "language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other-selves, from our world to other worlds" (12).

Stuart Hall, postcolonial cultural critic, in *The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power* (1996), talks about the west/rest divide constructed by the colonizers. According to him, representation of colonizers in the western discourse was brought to create hegemony of the west, "Europe brought its own cultural categories, languages, images and ideas to the new world (colonized) in order to describe and present it. It tried to fit the new world into existing conceptual frameworks, classifying it according to its own norms, and absorbing it into western traditions of representation" (94)". The idea of representation that Hall gives is actually the discourse of the west to position itself against the rest of the world. Discourses are produced to represent (reconstruct) knowledge and ideology. Those who are in a position to produce discourse are reconstructing ideology between themselves and others, "Europe only discovered and produced this new identity in the

course of representing itself as a distinct, unique and triumphant civilization, and at the same time making its difference from other cultures, peoples and civilizations" (88). Ever since the discourse of the west/rest has been constructed, the west has been given a hegemonic stance in terms of culture, language, and civilization. This distinction was made intentionally by the west to assert its supremacy and at the same time to assist the rest to strive for societal ranking. Although, as an individual, we may not accept the supremacy of the west when we partake in the debate of third world countries, postcolonialism, and modernization, we position ourselves against western hegemonic discourse. One ultimate effect of colonial discourse is to "encourage the colonial subjects to mimic the colonized, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those habits. Rather, the result is a 'blurred copy' of the colonizer that can be quite threatening" (90). Mimicry is not just copying the cultural traditions of the colonizers; it is accepting the supremacy of the colonizer's culture. If this stance of colonization continues without challenging the discursive praxis of western discourse, then this discursive hegemony will start functioning as ideology.

Most of the colonies previously controlled by imperial powers are now undergoing a neocolonial phase. Neocolonialism is the cultural domination of former colonial powers over third world countries. Pakistan is a country passing through neocolonialism. Though considered as an independent Islamic state, it is still predominantly under colonial tendencies. Pakistani society is mesmerized by the cultural hegemony of Europe and America. Britain maintained its colonial hegemony in the subcontinent for over two hundred years and during its colonial reign "influenced them socially, culturally, politically, militarily, economically, and psychologically" (Shehzad, 2018). The dominant influence of colonization remains in two important domains, namely linguistic and cultural spheres. People of Pakistan are primarily suffering from an inferiority complex in relation to European cultural domination. Attracted towards western civilization, Pakistani people, especially the young lot, is inclined

towards mimicry of colonial masters. Pakistani writers – writing in both English and Urdu – have highlighted the effects of colonizers in all spheres of indigenous life.

Anwar Masood is a renowned Pakistani poet. He writes in Persian, Urdu, and Punjabi languages. He is famous for his funny poetry. His funny poetry not only pleases the readers but is also replete with universal messages.

Anwar Masood, through his poetry, tries to challenge the colonial legacy prevalent in

postcolonial Pakistan in different shapes. He refuses to accept the hegemony of colonial discourse, particularly in terms of western civilization as superior to the civilizations of the colonized world.

Through his poetry, he empowers colonial subjects and frees them from western influence and power structure. For him, colonization provided colonizers to represent and reconstruct the identity of colonized people as inferior and primitive, which needs to be questioned. This is what he does in his famous poem *Bunain*.

Original (Punjabi) Poem by the Poet	English Translation of the Poem
<i>Bunain lain janday o</i>	You go to buy a vest
<i>Bunain lay kay anday o</i>	You get a vest
<i>Panday o taypaindee nae, pay jay taylaindee nae</i>	You attempt to wear but you can't put it on; If you put it on, it never comes off
<i>Lah jay tay dojee waree paon jogee raindee nae</i>	If you take it off, it won't be fit for second use
<i>Bunain main diangaa</i>	I'll give you a vest
<i>Pao gay tay pay jaye, lao gay tay lay jaye,</i>	If you wear, you can; if you take off, you can
<i>Lao gay tay dojee wari paon jogee reh jaye,</i>	If comes off, can be worn second time
<i>Bunain meri wadia, Bunain meri top di</i>	My vest is the best, my vest is the superior
<i>Wadyan nu poree away, nikyan day naap di</i>	Fit for adults and exactly of children's size
<i>Cheez hovay asli tah mohnoh pae boldi,</i>	The real thing is always self-assured
<i>Dhoop naloon goree lagay rasee uttay doldee,</i>	Shines like sunlight when swinging on a rope
<i>Jennay waray chahoo tosee ais nu handaa loh.</i>	You can wear it as many time as you wish
<i>Fir phaven bachian da jangia banra lao</i>	And then you can make it your kid's underwear if you wish.

The poem *Bunain* (Vest) is an interesting description of two different types of the vests. He compares these two vests pointing out the differential characteristics of each. The first vest is presented as symbolic of western culture, which, according to the poet, has affected Pakistani indigenous culture. By replacing the language of the colonized, colonizers dragged away native people from their indigenous culture and civilization. Living under the western imperial regime for a considerable long time, Pakistani people are still under the influence of the cultural hegemony of the west. The second vest which the poet offers is identical to Pakistani culture.

According to the poet, this culture is easy to adopt because it is not imposed on us rather, we are born within these cultural traditions.

The poem belongs to a postcolonial society however, the topic and the discourse used to describe the culture is a source of dismantling the colonial thought. The context of the poem is local i.e. Punjab. The culture and norms of Punjab are reflected in the process of buying *bunain*. There is no glimpse of western culture in the whole story narrated in the poem. Language and vocabulary also reflect the local taste. Only one word exposes the influence of the

colonial power on the local culture top in line 8. The word top is basically an English word, but here it is used in the indigenized form, so instead of communicating colonial norms, it further enhances the local taste.

The topic itself reflects the ideology of the local Pakistani people in its pure form, which is blurred by the modern postcolonial society. The poem mirrors the society that is somehow free from the postcolonial impact. All the practices of planning, shopping and wearing of *bunain* are celebrated according to the local taste. In the age of neocolonial Pakistan, the poem reflects a decolonized aspect of society. The subject of the poem covers an aspect of the life of a common man from the lower /lower middle class of society. The values and the culture are followed by them while they buy and use clothing. They have plans for them before they are bought and after they wear out. *Bunain* is a symbol of cultural values and the attitude they have for daily life stuff.

The poem has two voices the voice of the poet and the voice of the narrator, the vendor. The voice of the narrator, who, while selling his object, exposes the ideologies and attitudes of the people. He elaborates that people do not like something that is less durable or uncomfortable. The demand for durability to that extreme is seen only in the local society where clothes have another life after they are worn out. The colonial rule in this part of the world changed the cultural values, i.e. dressing, but the poem takes us to the time which does not show the colonial impact on this aspect of life or if present, it is suppressed by the local flavor.

In the first half of the poem, the narrator depicts a situation that is not favourable (line 1-4), and in contrast to that, he presents the ideal situation (line 5 onwards). Thus, a binary is created, which can be taken as a binary of power relations. The Bunian, which is not durable and reliable, can be taken as their and the one he offers is mine/our. Now in the context of this binary, ideologies are constructed. The cultural hegemony of the colonial powers is supposed to be related to the first half of the poem where *bunain* is a symbol of the western/ colonial culture and, when brought to the local context, fails to satisfy

the cultural needs of the people of a postcolonial society. The colonial culture is taken as something alien, which is brought in lines 1 and 2. An alien culture is expected to become an integral part of the colonial society, and people who bring it in have high expectations. Another aspect is the effort that must be there to support the foreign/ colonial culture line 1 and 2 (you go with plans, and you bring the thing you went for). Something enters in a cultural setup that is unrelated and may not be needed. Now the effort is required to embrace the *bunain*, the colonial culture, after you bring it in. The colonial culture might be attractive for the locals, but it is not easy to live with it. The colonial culture, when accepted, might not merge with the society, which is different in culture. People confuse and mix up both cultures and come out to be something different (line 3, 4). The narrator stresses that colonial/foreign culture is a failure in societies that already have strong cultural norms. This can be counted as a resistance to the colonial culture in the postcolonial society. Furthermore, the symptoms of decolonization are also reflected in the lines where colonial ideas are presented as a misfit in the context of local/ indigenous culture. The first four lines are evidence of the hegemonic force of the colonial culture, which is accepted by the locals with consent. Nobody forces the audience of the narrator to buy *bunain*; instead, they go to bring it, i.e. hegemony of the foreign culture.

The next line starts with an offer from the narrator himself. The buyers were not supposed to go after it, but the seller himself offered it. This indicates the local culture, which is already present, and no effort is needed to adopt it. In contrast to the foreign culture, the local culture is easy to embrace to the people who belong to the soil. The people can never be at ease with the foreign culture, and they can never feel alien with their own culture; even if they do not like it, there is no difficulty in living with it. There are some other benefits of adopting the local norms, as people can go beyond just living with their local values. Rather they can go deep into it and make further changes to their culture while living with that culture (last line).In postcolonial societies, the culture of the colonizers is adopted as the norm, but

this poem depicts the establishment of local norms, which show the symptoms of decolonization in this work of poetry.

Conclusion

To conclude, the poem provides insight into dismantling western powers in terms of cultural supremacy over the colonized. Anwar Masood, in an

amusing manner, challenges the dominance of western culture in contrast with indigenous culture. Pakistani people have their own culture and language before the arrival of westerners which by no means was inferior to the colonizers. Using an illustration of *bunain*, he dismantles the superior stance of the colonizers and encourages the readers to accept their own culture, which is essentially their own, not inferior in any sense.

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