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The Discursive Resistance to the British Imperialism: Writing Back the Colonial Discourse of Violence in Hyder's *River of Fire*

Abstract

This paper analyses the discursive representation of the Indian natives' resistance to British imperialism in Hyder's River of Fire. The violent resistance to British Empire by Indian natives has been termed as 'mutiny' by imperial discourses whereas postcolonial discourses term it the heroic 'war of independence'. In the backdrop of postcolonial theory and the concept of counter discourse, the discursive representation of violent resistance to British Imperialism is highlighted. Hyder has portrayed the events of 1857 as a heroic response of vibrant culture to the cunning rulers of the British Empire.

Key Words: Colonial Discourse, Counter Discourse, Discursive Representation, Hegemony, Postcolonialism, Violence, Writing Back

Introduction

This paper explains the nature of discursive resistance to imperial discourses in River of Fire. The concept of discursive resistance has been termed as counter discourse by many Imperialism and colonialism, as George Lamming famously put it, have had a direct and major impact on over three-quarters of the modern world. Although it is clear how profound an impact this had on twentieth-century social and political structures, as well as contemporary international affairs, it was less clear until recently how deeply it shaped the perceptual frameworks of the vast majority of people alive today. The influence of European discourses influenced the daily lives of colonised peoples to a large extent. However, contemporary art, ideologies, and literature in postcolonial societies are not simply adaptations or continuations of European patterns (Tiffin, 1987).

The breakdown of European codes, as well as the postcolonial subversion and appropriation of dominant European discourses, were all part of the creative and literary colonisation processes. This has frequently been coupled with a need for a wholly fresh or fully recovered 'reality,' free of colonial taint. Given the harshness and cultural denigration that characterise the colonizer-colonized relationship, such a demand is both desired and unavoidable (Tiffin, 1987). River of Fire is an example of a book that responds to imperial discourses on colonial resistance. Hyder has consciously responded to the imperial discourses by developing a postcolonial discourse that foregrounds the resistance to imperialism both as political resistance and discursive writing back. At the level of political resistance, the war of independence in 1857 is presented in full detail. At the discursive level, the constructed image of the colonized community in colonial discourses is deconstructed and written back.

Background

Resistance to imperialism and imperial/colonial discourses has been viewed by many theorists of postcolonial paradigm variously. The resistance is seen in the backdrop of imperial domination. Said (1993) talk about the political and cultural dominance and resistance to it. The victory of guns according to him does not ensue the cultural victory. Battle lost in the armaments is fought back through books. Gandhi (1998) has called it a battle of guns and books.

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Resistance to imperialism can be traced back to Gramsci's hegemony thesis. Gramsci's (1971) notion of cultural hegemony, which he defined as the dominant classes' success in presenting their vision of the world in a way that the other classes should accept as "common sense" (p. 173). This view has influenced postcolonial theory very much. This way of just seeing the world as historical truth, according to Gramsci, is similar to White supremacist ideology, which permits dominant civilizations to essentialize their superiority over other nations. Edward Said (1995) is one of the postcolonial theorists who has challenged to the dominant discourse's fixity in his classic, *Orientalism*. Said writes and speaks to transform people's perceptions of the East-West split. Said argues that European imperialism's actions have a considerable impact on the Orient-Occident link, which he represents in his thesis. Said proposes the postcolonial discourse as a response to imperialism. The colonial narratives are embedded in fictional narratives of colonizers about colonized communities. He discusses the novels of Jane Austin and Charles Dickens in this regard. In his view, these narrations privilege the imperial discourses about colonies (Said, 1995).

Said (1995) investigates how the West came to understand the Orient and the ramifications of this understanding. "The Orient was almost a European invention," Said writes, "and had been a realm of romance, strange beings, haunting memories and landscapes, astonishing experiences" since antiquity (p. 42). He also criticises how European tourists visiting the Orient become disillusioned when the Orient is not represented in Europe. According to Said, the Orient shaped Europe's "deepest and most recurrent ideas of the Other" (2003). (p. 42).

According to Said (2003), orientalism's descriptive and literary achievement has been so outstanding that entire periods of the Orient's cultural, political, and social history have been dismissed as simply responses to the West (pp.108-9). In this perspective, Said shows how the West has been labeled as active while the Orient has been coded as inert (p. 109).

A key theme in the backdrop of this colonial encounter is the violence that occurs due to the unequal relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. A number of theorists in the postcolonial paradigm have talked about violence. This violence is both physical and discursive. At the physical level, it appears as armed political resistance against the colonizers. At the discursive level, this appears as violent solutions and radical views on the postcolonial situation.

In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1963) explains how colonizers and colonized interact in the wake of postcolonial encounters. In his view, "[t]heir first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together – that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler" (p. 36). In the first half of Fanon's thesis, the colonizers are the source of violence. Hence the colonized are justified in responding with violence as well. This radical view of Fanon is a political response to imperial dominance. It is supposed to be justified as the only way of recovering precolonial cultural outlook.

Other theorists have furthered this idea of violence. According to Memmi (2013), violence initiates the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In his view, people who have been enslaved by colonialism are denied human rights, and they are forced to exist in a state of suffering and ignorance that Marx would properly define as subhuman. (p. xxiv). It is this state of affairs that pushes the natives to develop political as well as discursive resistance.

Furthermore, Césaire (1984) opined that when colonisers and colonised meet face to face, we see force, brutality, cruelty, sadism, and strife. There is no normal human interaction, but there is a relationship between power and submission. (p. 21). It is quite logical that such a colonial encounter breeds hatred and violence. This hatred and violence are reflected both in armed resistance and discursive response to imperialism.

In this backdrop, Hyder, in *River of Fire*, described the violent resistance of the colonized Indians in 1857. The narrative portrays this resistance discursively, writing back to the British discourses on the 1857 violent encounter. In the western narratives, the imperial discourses code the incident as mutiny. While *River of Fire* presents it as a brave move of the native men and women to resist British imperialism and win their freedom back. This point of view is a discursive response to imperial narratives. The following analysis highlights this writing back through analysis of the text.

The Discursive Resistance to the British Imperialism in River of Fire

The beginning of British imperialism in the subcontinent is introduced dramatically in the novel. In the

early part of the novel, the historical significance and cultural richness and diversity of India are established by describing the Hindu period and Muslim period in the Indian subcontinent. Hyder has constructed a discourse of pluralism and tolerance as a significant feature of the indigenous civilization. In the earliest phases of the Hindu civilization, the society was marked by a unique openness and intellectual capacity to engage and adjust the difference and variety. The arrival of Muslims in India did not disturb this unique feature. Muslim conquerors settled here and adjusted themselves to local cultural traits. In spite of religious and cultural differences, they did not look down upon the local community. Over time, they got fully assimilated into the indigenous colours and the resultant new culture was Indo-Islamic culture. However, the arrival of the British disturbed this harmony which was a fruit of centuries of tolerance, plurality and peaceful co-existence. It is in this backdrop that Hyder has introduced the arrival of Britisher's colonizers.

Describing the early stages of colonization by British Imperialism, Hyder develops a powerful discourse of resistance to British imperialism. The English ambassadors had to stand in the audience "before the Mughal Emperor in the Diwan-e-Khas at Agra and Delhi. They were not considered worthy enough in the rank to sit on a chair like subedars, generals, and other dignitaries of the Empire" (140) from Jehangir's time. This shows that India was rich land which did not deem the British equal to themselves. With the introduction of the East India Company, the English's position of insignificance gradually shifted, and a moment came when English people started considering the native rulers "benighted and inefficient" (144). Gradually the rule of the East India Company is established across the land and Mughal rule shrunk to the suburbs of Delhi. It is the moment when natives start a military resistance to the new political power of colonizers.

Hyder describes the mutiny "that broke out in Meerut Cantonment on May 9, 1857" in great detail (156). Following Bahadur Shah Zafar's incarceration, Queen Hazrat Mahal, General Bakhat Khan, and others launched a war against the Company. Muslims and Hindus joined hands. So much so that "the women soldiers died fighting in the battle of Sikandar Bagh" (161), according to one source. Maulvi Ahmad Ullah Shah and other brave warriors fought without fear. "was killed in Shahjehanpur on June 5, 1858. His body was torn to pieces and burnt..." (162). Even English generals agreed he was a great patriot because he was such a valiant soldier (162).

The British Empire's battle to subdue India is shown in this story of resistance. This energy is in stark contrast to imperial discourse's characterization of the colonised people as passive and effeminate. In imperial and colonial discourses such as that of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, the colonized's manliness is seen as mimicry of the coloniser. Hyder, in response to this, depicts not only the actual manliness of the colonised warriors but also the idea that even Indian women were not passive participants in the fight.

Through the story of Nawab Kamman, Hyder highlights the atrocities of British imperialism and the discursive hegemony they aspired to impose. Nawab Kamman constructs a discourse of Muslim courage and Indo-Islamic culture's superiority while speaking with Gautam babu. He claims that the British are still terrified of Sultan-i-enormous Alam's popularity (165). Nawab Kamman informs Gautam that imperial officials are striving "as a debauch" to defame the King (165). Gautam defends the imperial story by arguing that "our polygamy and harem habits appear strange to Europeans" (165). Nawab Kamman responds by accusing the British of hypocrisy, alleging that "There are mistresses and bastard children over there. Even a *dasi-putra* has certain inheritance rights "(165) in India. Nawab Kamman portrays the imperial forces' brutality and the people's bravery in great detail:

"Anyway, they occupied Lucknow, and Sikhs, Gurkhas and 93rd Highlanders sacked the city. Begum Kothi and the Imambaras were plundered; the colossal chandeliers of Imambara Hussainabad now lighted the new *girjaghars* of Lucknow. In their frenzy, the English razed half the city. The Imambara Asafi was turned into military barracks... (165)."

This account portrays imperial forces as destroyers, demonstrating that imperial forces did not respect even the conquered India's religious sites. Nawab Kaman also recounts the valour of Raja Hanuwant Singh, who, despite the capitulation of his army, refused to surrender because he was a man of royal lineage. According to Nawab Kamman, "*These men were Surajvanshi and Chandervanshi Rajputs of Oudh,*" (162). When Gautam mentions the theory of evolution, Nawab argues that these statements are metaphorical and mythological and that westerners simply literalize them. The idea of

a discussion at the level of equality is developed through this contrast, which is constantly denied to colonial people in imperial discourse.

A rival discourse on the events of 1857 is established in a discussion between Gautam and Nawab Kamman, which questions and counters the imperial discourse of mutiny common in the West. The savagery of Imperial armies is horribly depicted by Nawab Kamman. The English troops completely destroyed and pillaged Delhi. Thousands of individuals were executed by hanging. The account of Nawab Kamman creates a striking sense of imperial forces' callousness.

"They remind me of corpses dangling from roadside trees. When I came back to India, the hanging mela was in full swing. Twenty-seven thousand Muslims were hanged in Delhi. Thousands of Hindus and Muslims were sent to the gallows in Cawnpore, Allahabad and other places. In Lucknow, they installed the gallows in a row on a roadside. Forty to fifty persons per day was usual for the hangmen, and the corpses were kept dangling till the next batch was brought. Many were executed on the mere suspicion of being rebels and lots of distinguished men were tied to cannons and blown up." (166)

The word hanging mela is used in this passage to describe the pleasure imperial armies derived from the execution of locals. Although the number given by Nawab Kamman is well-documented, the narrative paints a vivid picture of how the massacre was carried out. It wasn't a covert act of cruelty. The gallows were erected on the side of the road by Imperial forces. Even "a few aged women...and a young courtesan...who had fought as a soldier at Cawnpore" were executed by imperial forces (167). This suggests that even prostitutes fought valiantly against the British empire. This demonstrates how colonised India fought back tenaciously for their independence.

Nawab Kamman's voice quivers as he recounts the horrors committed by the English soldiers. Gautam is troubled by his suffering, believing that "the depth of his anguish" (167) is unfathomable. He believes Nawab Kamman "has lost an entire civilisation, and yet he is in the dock as the culprit." (167). It is at this time that "the version of the Mutiny which the English press of India had published" is voiced through Gautam's loud thinking narrative (167). This version of events in 1857 is not the same as the one told by Nawab Kamman. It extols "the heroism of British generals and soldiers" (167) in the imperial capital and the Anglo-Indian community, resulting in literary legends. There are accounts of "the massacre of English families...the treacherous drowning of boats carrying English women and children... all of which was true, too." (167). Gautam recalls "reading rooms of Calcutta's public libraries" (167), where he found a plethora of books about the 1857 incident. By publishing essays, memoirs, and autobiographies about the experiences of the English Community in India, a complete narrative of the events was developed:

"Bookshelves were full of novels, poems and general reminiscences coming out from England. In the smoking rooms of exclusive clubs, in drawing rooms of the Civil Lines across the country, in the mess bars in cantonments, civilians and war veterans narrated their horrible experiences." (167)

As a result, two parallel discourses concerning the events of 1857 arose. One focused solely on the tribulations and sorrows of colonised people, particularly colonised Muslims, while emphasising the colonisers' harshness. The imperial perspective on the event was articulated in the other discourse. Both discourses are mutually exclusive. The narrative reconstructs the language of the events of 1857 as a polyphonic expression of history by putting them together. The imperial discourse, which always emphasises the voice of the centre, is written back by this discursive tactic and the multi-voicing of the narrative.

The tale emphasises the importance of poets and the press in the anti-imperial struggle by showcasing the resistance of colonised Muslims. The imperial discourse was clearly and indirectly opposed by the poets of the day. After the establishment of British control in India, poets like Sauda, Mir, Nazir, and Insha wrote: "overtly political poetry" (167). In one of his couplets, Mus-hafi directly condemned British imperialism: "How cunningly the Firangis have taken away the glory and wealth of Hindustan!" (167). These were the imperial center's hushed tones. In addition to the poetry, the story emphasises the opposition of the Urdu press, which championed the native warriors and demonised the imperial armies. Newspapers like *Sirajul Akhbar* were the voice of the liberation fighters, articulating their viewpoints to the public. "In July '57 the paper's title was changed to *Akhbarul Zafar – News of Victory*" (168). The story develops the picture of resistance of the colonised Muslims of the time through the press of the time. The press and political articulation fuelled widespread resentment

of the English people. A passage from the *Akbbarul Zafar* reflects the emotions of the people towards the instant defeat of imperial forces;

"Some English men disguised themselves as lehnga-clad females and got into a bullock cart (at Jhajjar). How are the mighty fallen! These were the people who did not even nod in acknowledgement when a native salaamed them..." (169)

This was how the Urdu press celebrated the rebels' victory and the colonisers' loss. The colonisers were despised by the common populace because "they were arrogant and insulting" (169). A lot of things contributed to this animosity, forming a close bond between colonisers and colonised. "Cartridges with cow's fat and pig's lard" were apparently the source of the discontent (169). Other factors, however, prompted the indigenous population to fight back against the imperial army:

"Economic exploitation, high taxation, dethroning kings and chieftains which made for general unemployment, the missionaries' insensitive verbal attacks on the religions of the people...the resentment had been building up over the years. The pent-up anger exploded in the macabre catastrophe of 1857 – it all boiled down to 'Kill the Firangi and save your Din and Dharma'." (169)

The story here examines the different reasons that influenced the colonised Indian Muslims, focusing on religious, social, economic, and political motivations. The narrative emphasises the colonists' treachery as a counter-discourse to the imperial narrative. In this regard, the narrative of Maulvi Mohammed Baqar, the editor of *Delhi Urdu Akhbar* at the time, is recounted. When an enraged mob sought to attack an Englishman, Taylor, the principal of Delhi College, protected him and forced him to "disguise himself as an Indian woman" (169). Taylor handed Baqar some documents to give to "the first Briton" (169) he encountered. When the English seized Delhi in March 1858, Maulvi Baqar kept his word and turned over the papers to a British colonel. "Maulvi Mohammed Baqar did not try to save my life," Taylor had written in Latin (170). Maulvi Baqar was "shot by a firing squad" as a result of his treason (170). The story emphasises the duplicity of conquerors who governed India in the name of civilising it in this way.

It's worth noting that Hyder's account not only emphasises the bravery and valour of the colonised Muslims who fought back but also the slavishness of some of the colonised Muslims who "began penning down odes to governors and viceroys" (170). The narrative voice concludes the conversation between Gautam and Nawab Kamman by rejecting imperial discourse about the events of the time:

"Some of the stories of native brutality against Englishwomen and Children later proved to be false or vastly exaggerated, but the savagery of English revenge was mind-boggling... they indiscriminately executed whomever they could even before the natives began slaying them; now the British authorities were saying that the Muslims went to the gallows with pride and derision and the Hindus looked indifferent, as though they were going on a long journey." (171)

This comparison of the two discourses spelled out by Gautam, a Hindu audience member of Nawab Kamman's story who chooses the Muslim narrative of colonial experience, reveals Muslims' intense resentment of colonisers and love for a golden past. In colonial discourses, this attitude is considered infatuation with the past. However, put in the right context it seems fully justified. "For the first time, Gautam felt he understood the native rebels' feelings, and the point of view and trauma of people like Nawab Kamaluddin Ali Reza Bahadur of Neelampur" (171). Furthermore, this narrative paints a picture of English colonisers, saying, "... the English are a fine people in their own country, they become a different species as soon as they cross the Suez." (171).

After 1857, the Muslim resistance to imperialism is portrayed primarily as a political and ideological battle in Hyder's *River of Fire*. With the passage of time, the violent aspect fades away, and Hindus and Muslims begin to drift apart, eventually leading to India's partition. The story portrays separatist tendencies as belonging to the developing middle class and a few feudal lords who insist on a distinct Muslim identity from both Hindus and British. Even after the partition, this strong separation can be seen among the imperial center's exiles. At a deeper level, the people's separatist is nearly imperceptible, and they appear unable to process the anguish of partition.

Conclusion

The analysis of the text clearly shows that Hyder has portrayed the violent resistance to British

imperialism as a counter discourse and a clear position is taken in this respect. The discursive frames of the narrative write back to the imperial representation of natives as an unruly mob. In counter narrative, the colonizers are presented as illegal occupants who violate all moral and social codes. Imperialism is presented as committing atrocities and violence against the natives who valiantly respond to the challenge. In the battle on the war field and the battle of books, in both cases, imperialism's claims are false. The colonizer is presented as a coward who cannot face the warriors but wins the battle through treachery. In a nutshell, *River of Fire* is powerful counter discourse against British Imperialism in the Indo-Pak subcontinent.

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