Mapping Colonial Stereotypes in the Selected Diasporic Novels of the New Millennium: A Critical Examination

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Abstract:

The contemporary Indian English (diasporic) writers, by tracing the roots and routes of the colonial discourses, fabricate the 'diasporic imaginary' to disseminate truth and testaments about their 'homelands'. The global reception of such lopsided projection functioning in post-colonial Indian terra firma, linked to the common Western premises on the Orient—philistine, cantankerous, and unprogressive or the 'other'—promulgates that the West still seizes authority of representation over the ex-colonies like India. Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Mask (1952), Aimé Césaire's Discourse on Colonialism (1955) in general, and Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), in particular attempt to divulge the latent leitmotif of Europeans' use of stereotypes on the African, South Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Delving deep into South Asian territories (especially the Indian subcontinent), Salman Rushdie's cutting-edge novel Midnight's Children (1981),

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which dismantles the entire discourse of Indian writing in English, is considered to be the first seminal text, popularly known for peregrine projection of India. The use of exoticism in the novel not only invites the attention of global scholars but also paves new paths for emanant authors. Consequently, the inclinatory ideas of India after the post-1981 'Rushdie affairs', reinforces the practice of 'colonial stereotypes'. Thus, the present paper, conjoining the ideas of Said, intends to extrapolate colonial stereotypes in Indian English fiction with special reference to two novels—Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss (2006) and Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger (2008) as both the works, embracing substrata of India, reanimate the use of colonial image.

Introduction

The relationship between the Occident and the Orient, defined as, "(the) relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Said, 1978/2001, p. 5) displays the exploitation of not only temporal and terrestrial plenitudes but also of its people, culture and society. This relationship, throughout the history of colonialism, can be sensed from two different standpoints —the first from where the third world is observed as the strange, servile, or the 'other'/oppressed and the second, the first world is seen as the 'oppressor'. After the extirpation of the Empire in the mid-twentieth century in India among the other third world nations, the *modus operandi* of colonialism is metamorphosed into new ones. The stereotypical images about the orient as irrational, lethargic, sexually promiscuous and impoverished in the newly independent colonies "acknowledges

that the material realities common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonisation" (McLeod, 2017, p. 33). This signifies the colonial semblance in the post-colonial era as the natives of the former colonies are disdained by the Europeans through the colonial lenses. Ania Loomba (1998; 2018) appropriately asserts that, "Britain and the US started advocating the need for 'a new kind of Imperialism' spearheaded by the US" (p. 6) against the backdrop of the heinous terrorist attack of 9/11 at the turn of the new millennium, which re-ignited the stereotypical notions of non-westerners, particularly 'Muslims' as the 'other' in the 'psyche' of the western people. The unnatural death of George Floyd, of late, due to police insurgency in America also resuscitated the colonial trauma of the Afro-Americans and sparked criticism and condemnation across the globe by the humanists, activists and ideologues including I. J. Bailey (2020) who strongly proclaimed that, "White Supremacy flows through this country's DNA…" (39) which has also been substantiated by Narnolia and Kumar that, "blacks are still considered second class citizens in America because of the notion of white supremacy". (Narnolia and Kumar, 2021, p.2).

Amides the 'new kind of imperialism' a new form of representation, superintended and 'cultivated by the Orientals themselves' is also being enacted where 'brown sahibs' who deterritorialised their land for some better pecuniary prospects and settled in the European countries (including the sojourner writers) represent their people, place, culture and race through their proclivity. Pavan Kumar Malreddy (2012) has manifested those forms of 'orientalism' in the contemporary scenario—Military Orientalism,

American Orientalism, Internal Orientalism, Parallel Orientalism, Travelling Orientalism, Pulp Orientalism, Techno-Orientalism, Counter-Orientalism, and Economic Orientalism (p, 235-236). Subsequently, a revitalization of colonial platitude, carried out by the oriental writers, thinkers, and other aesthetic artists is referred to as "new-Orientalism" (Shivani, 2006), "re-Orientalism" (Lau, 2009) and "internal Orientalism" (Malreddy 2012), etc. Dwivedi and Lau, in the said context, argue that "the depiction of 'Dark India' by writers like Amit Chaudhuri…Jeet Thayil, Manil Suri, Pankaj Mishra, Rohinton Mistry…have made *such kinds of* representation… as a source of profit" (Dwivedi and Lau, 2011, p. 3; emphasis ours). The legitimacy of such portrayals in literary productions is a matter of critical inquiry. Therefore, this paper examines Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), hereafter *IL* and *WT* respectively, which cover a period of approximately thirty years (from the 1980s to the present day) and narrate India's imperfection as compared to the so-called western perfection. Both the novels, thus, provide sequential details about India in the international literary world and are part of the Indian Booker prize winning novels which present "a succinct overview of … the issues that are only related to India and Indians living and settled in India and abroad" (Tiwari and Chaubey, 2018, p.4). The importance of the Booker can be surmised from the fact that "mere shortlisting apparently raised British sales of *The Inheritance of Loss* to 500 per week" (quoted in Allington, 2014, p 23). Since the present paper is a modest attempt to trace the trajectory of the colonial stereotypes in contemporary Indian Diasporic literature in general, and in *IL* and *WT* in particular, a synoptic survey of the term 'stereotype' alongwith its genesis and application in Indian English

fiction is commensurable.

Colonial Stereotypes in the Present Context:

The word "stereotypes" has its origin in psychology but it has been comprehensively used in diverse disciplines since its genesis in 1990s and "even today, this phenomenon exists in the broader society as well as within new organization across the globe" (See Brink & Nel, 2015, p.1). The term, derived from the French adjective '*stéréotype*', is defined in the Oxford English dictionary as a "fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality". The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English delineates "stereotypes" as a 'belief or idea of what a particular type of person or thing is like'. Further, it asserts that stereotypes are often unfair or untrue what C. Stanger (2009) says, "stereotypes are problematic because they are negative, inaccurate, and unfair..." (p. 2). Thus, it is drawn that 'stereotype', multidisciplinary in nature, is a set of ideas or characteristics, exhibiting a prejudiced attitude against an individual or the entire community, with certain kinds of fabricated agendas.

Colonial discourse has been practicing stereotypes as its major discursive tactics "[T]hrough racist jokes, cinematic images, and other forms of representation the colonizer circulates stereotypes about the laziness or stupidity of the colonized population" (Huddart, p. 24) and such stereotypes are extensively used as a strategic discourse to impose practical control by 'othering' the colonized. "The objective of colonial discourse", as Bhabha expostulates (1994), "is to construct the colonized as a population of de-

generate type on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration" (p. 70). It is further argued that the Occident constructed binaries, promulgating the "ideal" image of the Occident and apocryphal images of the Orient are filtered through their colonial gaze. Michael Pickering (2007), in this context, affirms that "the practice of stereotyping…act(s) as a means of validating…cultural hierarchy" (p, 1). Accordingly, European's dissemination of such apprehensions among the colonizers have both justified their subjugation and expanded their cultural hegemonic operation on the Orient by categorizing them as static, epicene, and languid, etc. because "[T]he feeling of inferiority of the colonized is correlative to the Europeans' feeling of superiority" (Fanon 1952/1967, p. 69). However, the cultural domination by germinating diffidence in the ruled "can never be complete or effective without mental control" (Thiong'o, 1987, p. 30). Therefore, polymorphic ontological and ideological tools were articulated to 'colonise the mind' and the British were trained "to fit into the culture of the ruled and to assimilate them thoroughly into the native way of life" (Viswanathan, 1998, p.28). In the case of India, the infamous 'Education Act of 1835', to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste", replaced Sanskrit and Arabic to English which became the media of instructions in the Third World countries in general and the Indian subcontinent, in the particular.

A Critique of the Indian English Fiction

After the 'enforcement' of 'Macaulay's Minute' the Indian languages, literature, and the other cultural forms were intrigued by English language,

the language of subversion and supremacy. Sake Dean Mahomet's *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1794), the first travel narrative written and published in English[1], advanced the journey of this colonial language, via England, followed by the works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Dhan Gopal Mukherji, and 'The Big Trio,' etc. who through their versatility and literary craftsmanship, exhibited their existence in the entire world. Today, the contours of Indian English fiction interspersed with new novelistic forms; fresh linguistic experiments; multifaceted themes and issues, with the world's most prestigious prizes and the wider readership, according to Rushdie, "is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the '16 official languages' of India" (Cited in James, 2006, p. 131). The thematic heterogeneity of Indian English writings, with no qualm, followed by exorbitant eulogies in the literary sphere, witnesses a discursive turn. But, the Man Booker Prize to *Midnight's Children* in 1981 deconstructed the impression of the Indian English literature for the reason that the exogenic exposition of India in the novel, along with novel narrative norms, expressive styles and magic realism, embarked on creating a niche in the entire body of Anglophone fiction, compartmentalising it into two major segments: the pre-Rushdie era and the post-Rushdie era, popularly termed as the 'Rushdie affair'. "The West's discovery of Indian fiction since *Midnight's Children*", avers Francesca Orsini (2002), "has served to obscure rather than illuminate some of the most interesting aspects of Subcontinental literature" (p. 87). Certainly, Rushdie set a yardstick in the history of Indian English Literature and his recondite rendering of India posited an unconventional trend for emerging authors who, at the later

stage, ensued their own style and consciously tackled the Western model due to "their love for tradition, poverty, and wedding scenes, burning widows, rebirths, and talking monkeys, among other things" (Joseph, 18 Jan 2012). It is also contended that such negative portrayals mostly emerge in writers with stronger overseas links, with highly transnational careers and with much looser personal connection to India. The texts by the new millennial diasporic writers have not only gained widespread visibility in the West, but have also reinforced common western assumption of India and, by extension of the Global South collectively (See Goh, 2011, p. 331; Rajan, 2014, p. 81). Lisa Lau (2009), on the other hand, observes such reinforcement of 'stereotypes of India' as a form of re-Orientalism wherein the Indian Diasporic writers are reconstructing, deploying and, perpetuating their Orientalist conception about their 'homeland'. There is conformity in their parochial perception about the twenty-first century India and the oriental stereotypes have been substantiated and devised as a new narrative to control the authority over Indian English literature.

In this context, these texts—*IL and WT*—orientalise India and concurrently rekindle the colonial stereotypes. Desai's *IL* represents India of the 1980s while *WT* is set in the India of the new millennium and deal with poverty, exploitation, corruption, economic and social inequality, casteism, and racism, etc. The image of India in the aforementioned novels invited some unpleasant and unfavourable reviews that lambasted the global media headlines overnight[2]. *IL*, denounced for delineation of Kalimpong town, the locale of the novel, as well as for contriving the details of the Nepalis communities who "were… against the book (and), against those who praised it for an authenticity…" (Allington, 2014, p. 131). Desai is

attributed to reinforcing the colonial formulaic image of Indians (especially Nepalis) who have been projected in the book as "petty criminals, too stupid to do anything … as labourers and "transient interlopers". Even, Desai's aunt, a medical practitioner in the town, affirms the aforementioned critique of the Nepalis and offends at Desai's 'dark picture of India'. (See Randeep Ramesh 2006; Banerjee, 2006; Mazumdar, 2006).

Adiga's *WT*, as compared to *IL*, is more chimerical in its approach towards India and its people through the story of survival in an essentially ungovernable state and offers a paradoxical notion of India as the 'India of darkness' and the 'India of light' which in turn seem to be an illusory identification. . "The novelist", dissuades Amitava Kumar (2008) "seems to know next to nothing about either the love or the despair of the people he writes about" (para, 13). Amardeep Singh (2008), in a similar vein, comments, "I haven't been able to shake the sense that *The White Tiger*, despite its topicality and its readability, is something fundamentally fake" (para, 3). Both Kumar and Singh consciously critique the novel and inherently expose Adiga's 'intentionalities.'[3] Therefore, an impartial textual premonition of the novels *IL* and *WT* will corroborate the point as to how far Desai and Adiga unearth stereotypes and re-orientalize their land, people, and culture. The analysis will also essay to examine the "new-fangled object of "exoticist discourses" against the backdrop of the 'peregrine projection' of India.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss:* The Inheritance of Stereotypes[4]

Kiran Desai, since the publication of her first novel (1998), has been criti-

cally read and reviewed for exoticising and reinforcing India "by presenting 'a kaleidoscopic picture of Indian culture, tradition and ethos which down the ages have attracted the attention of the West'" (Qadeer, 2008, p. 174) and "juxtaposes underprivileged diasporic subjects in India and the USA in both the colonial past and the global present…*in IL*…" (Sabo, 2012, p. 375; emphasis added). Desai disentangles the issues of illegal immigration in America (through the story of Biju, the protagonist); political and social turmoil, violence, and insurgency (through the story of Gyan); colonial hangover in the postcolonial world (through the story of Jemubhai Patel); class privilege and master/ slave relationship (through the story of Cook); and fine-tuning in human bonding (through the story of Sai).

The amalgamation of immigrant experience and regional sensibilities make it the novel of struggle and resentment which coalesces both the trivial and the astringent concerns of the characters who grapple with their personal issues like existential concerns; global issues like the East-West encounter, the aftermath of colonialism, nostalgia, and globalization, etc. However, the novel departs from the 1980s Gorkhaland movement demanding demarcation of the West Bengal for a new Gorkhaland for the Gorkhas, is used to capture the essence of India by rejuvenating the memory of Gorkhas in the present time. The Nepalis have always been portrayed as loyal to India but now in their own country, the country they fight for, they are treated like slaves (p. 159). Desai writes, "[I]n 1947...the British left granting India her freedom, granting the Muslims Pakistan, granting special provisions for the scheduled castes and tribes ... EXCEPT US …they [Indian] spit on us… in our own country, the country we fight for, we are treated like slaves" (p. 158-159). The dichotomy of slave/master and "fixed/static image" of

Nepali diaspora as morally corrupt and barbaric in their 'ghost town' (Kalimpong), as Namrata Chaturvedi, avers, "is close to the stereotypical images of utter chaos, meaningless violence, of a third world nation unable to hold itself together in the face of secessionist movements, terrorism, poverty and harsh weather" (Chaturvedi, 2011, p. 3). Such topsy-turvy in the town not only glorifies the insurgency but also invites a serious communal provocation as Desai contends, "Kalimpong was transformed into a ghost town, the wind tumbling around the melancholy streets, garbage flying by unhindered...even one man's anger, in those days, seemed enough to set the hillside alight" (*IL*, p. 281).

Desai exemplifies the colonial legacies through the dismayed life story of the anglophile judge who "eats chapatis, puris and *parathas* with knife and fork" (*IL*, p. 176; emphasis original) and his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, who as victims of forlorn and forfeiture, lack Indianness and its sense and sensibilities as the former "loathed Indian" (p. 119) and the latter "could speak no language but English… (and) could not converse with anyone outside her tiny social stratum" (p. 176). Rositta Joseph Valiyamattam (2020), in this case, rightly remarks that, "[o]vershadowed by her anglophile grandfather, Sai grows up as a Westerner with little connection to the native culture" (p. 86). This displays the 'loss of inheritance' in the novel which can be seen as an emanation of "an anachronistic Anglophile elite" (Sabo, 2012, p. 383).

In addition to the above, Desai's acknowledgement of both corruption and superstition in Indian administrative system and Indian people respectively is reflective in the story of cook. The incident when the judge sends him to

report robbery (p, 10) underscores the presence of dishonesty in law enforcing organisation. Desai's use of prototype of colonial formulaic images, after Said's dichotomy of 'science' and 'superstition' for the occident and the orient respectively is expressive in the following quote from the novel when the cook, narrating his incident to the police, claims that,

> I (the Cook) wasn't bitten, but mysteriously my body swelled up to ten times my size. I went to the temple and they told me that I must ask forgiveness of the snakes. So, I made a clay cobra and put it behind the water tank, made the area around it clean with cow dung, and did *puja*. Immediately the swelling went down. (P, 13)

In this context, Ragini Rao appropriately asserts that "...authors of the diaspora still continued in the trail of V. S. Naipaul's *Mystic Masseur* with exotic stories that featured regular Indians with supernatural abilities and spices with healing powers" (The Curious Reader, 25 Oct, 2019). Desai's heresies of developed/underdeveloped by discovering the frailties and fallacies in India is also enjoined by Adiga, in his novel, *WT*.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: A Chronicle of India's Rooster Coop

Adiga's *WT*, having provided momentum to such writings, seizes to promote 'Slum tourism' (Selinger and Outterson, quoted in Barbara Korte, 2010/2011, p. 295) in India which exasperates the Indian readership. This study finds that the novel is full of multiple instances where Adiga employs colonial stereotypical images as a tool to highlight dismal and dissi-

pating depiction of India and its people. The opening remarks on India, in the novel, portrayed as a country without "drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality" (*WT*, 4) —manifest Anna Christina's view that "his [Adiga's] "reality" [is] *strategically* inauthentic..." (Mendes, 2010, p. 184; emphasis original). Adiga's eidetic truth, sans empirical experiences, engenders 'absurdity' and his ulterior motive to be a true representative of the locale, presented in the text.

Balram Halwai and his naiveté about English homogenously maintain the binaries of ignorance and intelligence but he writes to Wen Jiabao, the then Chinese Premier, in English and this asymmetry between the truth and reality "permits the entry of the complexity and multifacetedness of Balram" (Ratti, 2018, p. 9). Adiga germinates the discourse of East/West, good/bad, civilized/uncivilized, educated/uneducated, master/slave binaries and invokes the common cliché—the East is inferior to the West which vacillates in his mind when he rationalizes the British rule in India, "the day the British left—the cages had been let open and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and the jungle law replaced the zoo law" (p. 38).

The antagonism between the ruler and the ruled showcases Adiga's ambivalence and questions the dignity of the Indian's 'collective consciousnesses' for being a hapless creature like 'rooster coops'. The class conflict between "Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies" (p, 64) reproduces social history of 'class struggle' in which Balram, being a proletariat and oppressed, incites the people to detonate the Rooster Coop to rebel against bourgeois. To quote Adiga,

> Go to Old Delhi…and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages…The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel…The very same thing is done with humans beings in this country (pp. 173-174).

Adiga's such misconceptions about the poor and servitude is a reinstatement of the Western model which demeans India as she has been denigrating the spiritual values of the pilgrimages like Varanasi, Allahabad (now Prayagraj), and Haridwar, etc. are "dark places" because "[e]verywhere this river [the Ganga] flows, that area is the darkness" (p. 12). He perforces that the "stories about rottenness and corruption are always the best stories *to be told*" (p. 50, emphasis added). Thus, "from Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* to Roy's *God of Small Things* postcolonial novels, *like Desai's IL and Adiga's WT* returns to the cultural bridge of colonization" (Khair, 2011, p, 157, emphasis added) and their conception of the 'Orient' is tantamount to the concept of "Orientalism" which Said critically postulates that, "making statement about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it and above all, ruling over it" (Said, 2010, p. 3). In this manner, what the colonizers did to the colonized is practiced by the Indian diasporic literary aesthetics.

Besides, the novel underpins orientalistic practices by being detrimental to the Nepalese. Deepak Adhikari, in his article "Adiga's *White Tiger* and Nepali Identity" records that the readers might come to identify Nepali men with wily security guards and Nepali women with those who sell sex for

livelihood (http://deepakadk.blogspot.com/2009). The two instances form the novel—the first when Balram utters, "[A] sly, slant-eyed Nepali with a white moustache peered at me through the bars of the gate" (p, 59) and the second, when Balram goes to brothel and comments, "…a blue door opened, and four light-skinned Nepali women, in gorgeous red petticoats, looked out" (p, 58) — testify Adiga's dystopic vision which resurrects the conventional colonial images of the orient.

Conclusion

Summing up, the aforementioned critical analysis stands out as a testimony of the fact that both the novels are validated chronicles which, as Nivedita Majumdar (2014) adduces, "...choose to focus on the darker side of the neoliberal turn, the rupture of the social fabric by class and caste divisions, the suffering of the indigent majority and the failure of the postcolonial state" (p. 73). The connecting strand between both the novels is a lopsided and fragile representation of India, where the authors reinforce and mitigate the stereotypical colonial notions that have been propagated for ages. Thus, it has also been observed that the more the Indian English writers represent the doleful Orientalist conceptions; rather "mis" conceptions in an attempt to break the orientalist hegemony; the more acclamation they receive from the western readers; the 'Occidents' who treat and read these novels not only to buttress the Western consciousness in the entire globe but also to promulgate it.

Evidently, the objectifying of the so called "reality" through such literary works synchronically exhibits the still existent colonial notions in the

postcolonial era. Further, this incommensurable vision of India through the lens of Indian diasporic writers and "their skill in simultaneously inscribing and deconstructing orientalist codes" (Shivani, 2006, p. 3) has put aside the concept of 'shining India' and has rather satiated the 'Occident's quest for the portrayal of 'Orient' as inferior and devoid of any intellect.

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Notes:

1. For more details see <https://scroll.in/article/731244/the-book-that-indian-writing-in-english-began-with-in-1794>

2. Plethora of articles and reviews has been written on the sordid portrayal of India presented in both the novels. For example, Randeep Ramesh (2006) has written two articles on Desai's portrayal of the town in her novel *IL*—"Book burning threat over town's portrayal in Booker-winning novel" (Nov 2), and "Another Booker winner angers subjects" (Nov 3). Similarly, Higgins and Satish, address the issue of visual presentation in Adiga's *WT*—"Villainous tales of modern India wins £50,000 prize" (Higgins, 2008) and "We are tired of stereotypical presentation of India (in *WT*)" (Satish, 2008; emphasis added).

3. The term 'Intentionality' refers 'the nature of thought' or a personal perception about an object. Edmund Husserl, in his book *Logical Investigation* (Published in two volumes in 1900 and 1901 respectively), developed this notion.

4. The subtitle is borrowed from the commentary written by Namrata Chaturvedi, published in Himal South Asian. For more details, visit the link: https://www.himalmag.com/the-inheritance-of-stereotype/

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