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(En)Countering Colonialism, (En)Trusting Childhood: Late 19th – Early 20th Century Short Fiction in Perspective

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Abstract

In mainstream colonialist discourse women and children have long been othered as being physically/intellectually inferior to the adult male. And the impressionable native – unlettered, fanciful, emotionally effusive, gullible and believing – has often been called feminine and/or childlike. The series of binaries that has codified the colonizer-colonized relationship has most often culminated into an adult maturity–childlike ignorance paradigm. This paper focuses on short stories by Oscar Wilde and H.G. Wells where subversion of this long-standing matrix has endowed the child/native with agency and a voice. Oft-read tales such as 'The Happy Prince', 'The Selfish Giant', 'The Young King', 'The Star Child', 'The Lord of the Dynamos', 'The Country of the Blind' and the like come to empathize with the deprived and the dispossessed, seeking to define and determine the connotations of native/outsider/exile, desire/lust/control or private/public domain.

"Fantasy in children's fiction hardly needs justification since it has always been the staple of fairy tales."

The Perishable Empire

Meenakshi Mukherjee

"The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"; thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal". But the way of enlivening the relationship was everywhere to stress the fact that the Oriental lived in a different but thoroughly organized world of his own, a world with its own national, cultural and epistemological boundaries and principles of internal coherence."

Orientalism

Edward Said

Children's tales are thought to reflect and determine the cultural contours of societies and their ideological priorities. Values and norms of mainstream/majority culture are transmitted through these tales which in turn are instilled in young minds. Thus, in the usual folk and fairy tales, the culture and values of the centre are always upheld and the periphery projected either as inconsequential or as a contrast to highlight the values of the centre. Oscar Wilde and H.G Wells in their attempts at (re)writing children's tales/fables question some of these basic assumptions. The subjugated subject is seen not necessarily as dark, impoverished, unlettered and remote, but is seen to share the same space and speak the same language with the white colonizer. And the end is not predictably in the prince's/king's (representative of the mainstream culture) triumph over the dark fiend (often representative of the colonial subject) and the latter's defeat or death (signifying territorial merger and loss of separate cultural identity). On the contrary this new generation children's tales focus on the margin, the weak and the disadvantaged. The colonized subject is not dismissed as unworthy and uncouth, but is seen to change the point of view of the central character who often represents the mainstream culture. The colonialist project is often seen as evolving out of and consolidating the capitalist-modernist viewpoint the origin of which may be traced back to early nineteenth century:

> The cultural project of modern British Imperialism in the romantic period must be seen as continuous spatial process, operating both "inside" and "outside" Britain, mediating—indeed defining—the limit and the nature of the limit between that "inside" and "outside" through the production of modern space-time, both within and without Britain…To be sure, the anti-modern other would continue to recur within the metropolitan center, but increasingly it would take the form of hangovers, nightmares and haunting—like he colonial madwoman in the attic of *Jane Eyre*—nightmares plaguing the political consciousness (and indeed constituting the political unconscious) of an increasingly pacified and modernized United Kingdom of great Britain and Ireland. But these recurrences must inhabit some other political moment (identified in literary history as the moment of Victorian realism) (Makdisi184)

And a curious merger takes place where the centre is influenced by the periphery, the colonizer by the colonized. The subversion of dominant colonial discourse is often found to be prevalent as an undercurrent in many of these apparently 'childish' tales.

In Oscar Wilde's oft-read "The Happy Prince", for example, the Prince had failed to recognize signs of poverty and injustice during his lifetime and even beyond. The inappropriateness of offering precious gold or stones to fulfill the basic needs of the poor and the ailing shows the limit of the Prince's imagination. As his indifference and ignorance were misunderstood as happiness during his lifetime, similarly his generous gesture is wasted on his subjects who cannot imagine the ruler as anything other than superior and inaccessible. So the seamstress's child is soothed by the fanning of the swallow's wings and the ruby lies unattended on the tired woman's table; the playwright is overwhelmed as he believes the sapphire to be a present from some admirer of his plays; and the little match girl runs home with the jewel crying, 'What a lovely bit of glass!'

It is worthwhile to note here that the high *pedestal* (both metaphorically and literally) on which the prince was stationed made it difficult for him to be at the same level with his subjects; the swallow as a commoner, is intimate with the suffering of people and their needs. During his lifetime the Prince's palace was surrounded by a tall wall, after his death his statue is set on a tall column. Like all sovereign colonizers his image is meant to be looked up to, admired and imitated:

> High above the city, on a tall column, stood the statue of the Happy Prince. He was gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large ruby glowed in his sword hilt.
>
> He was very much admired indeed… 'Why can't you be like the Happy Prince?' asked a sensible mother of her little boy who was crying for the moon…
>
> 'I am glad there is someone in this world who is quite happy,' muttered the disappointed man as he gazed at the wonderful statue.
>
> 'He looks just like an angel,' said the Charity Children as they came out of the cathedral… (Wilde 5)

He is beautiful, happy, larger than life. The charity children dream of him, the young boys and girls hear stories of him, the town councilors covet his position and thus, he is imprisoned in his image, represented by the golden statue. And so symbolically, his empathy with the poor and the underprivileged breaks this image and the statue is gradually bereft of its beauty with each act of kindness. One is reminded of the essential aim of the colonizer in building and projecting a superior image in front of the poor, cowed down natives who gradually come to worship and imitate the white master on the pedestal. The loss of this image, the breaking of this illusion

amounts to the bridging of this gap and the breakdown of the empire. The discourse that this story initiates helps in shattering the projected 'beauty' of the colonial master and upholds, instead, human relation based on equality. The Mayor is shocked at the shabby exposition of the metal structure withal and so, the statue of the Prince is brought down from its pedestal since it has lost its respectability as an emblem of the artistic perfection of the white/colonial England/Europe:

> Early the next morning the Mayor was walking in the square below in company with the Town Councillors. As they passed the column he looked up at the statue: 'Dear me! How shabby the Happy Prince looks!' he said…
>
> The ruby has fallen out of his sword, his eyes are gone, and he is golden no longer,' said the Mayor; 'in fact, he is little better than a beggar!'…
>
> 'And here is actually a dead bird at his feet!' continued the Mayor…
>
> So they pulled down the statue of the Happy Prince. 'As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful,' said the Art Professor at the University. (Wilde14-15)

A similar situation is presented in 'The Star-Child' where a young boy denounces his parents out of his haughty belief that he is a privileged star-child. His beautiful visage and complexion turn ugly and dark with this act of ungratefulness and he is turned out of his foster parents' home. The balance returns through a process of soul-searching, true repentance and penance; and then only can he recognize his father and his mother—the king and the queen of the land— in a leper and a beggar woman. Thus the analogy of the colonizer with the beautiful king/child and the colonized with the ugly/beggarly one continues. Yet the tales establish with apparent simplicity the superiority of the noble/dispossessed beggar to the king with his masks.

Keeping in mind the Irish origin of Wilde and the Irish national unrest brewing against the British colonizers, 'The Selfish Giant' may be read as a story on the long standing land question and Home Rule movement that made English-Irish colonial relation all the more difficult. But, apart from that, the tale is simply understood as a narrative on the colonial extension of territorial control and hunger for power. With the banishment of the 'native' children from the seat of power, i.e. the garden, the giant ushers in eternal winter and hailstorm; and the high wall that was meant to ward off the little ones decisively thwarts the entrance of birds and butterflies, and of spring. It is only with the restoration of the garden to its 'native' owners that natural balance returns, and nature blooms in flowers and fruits.

The powerful Giant is humbled by the tiny children and their simple teaching that political/legal control of a land does not necessarily signify real/cultural attachment to it. A land or a country 'belongs' to the native inhabitants in the sense that they are emotionally, culturally and historically associated with it; so the land flourishes under their supervision, not of outsiders. The process of extending colonial possession attempted to thwart this process of natural selection, distribution and development as the story suggests. But the most striking instance of beauty/ugliness dichotomy, of exile and restoration of lost identity is perhaps to be found in 'The Young King'. In this story a young shepherd boy is overwhelmed to be named heir apparent to the dying king, a repentant parent who finally acknowledges the secret marriage of his daughter to a man of undistinguished background. The young boy gets enamoured of the beauty of the rich and artistic artifacts of the palace and spends his days collecting them and enjoying their beauty. Painting, architecture, sculpture, even nature's beauty have an inordinate attraction for him. But in his thirst for beauty and perfection he overlooks the human agency involved in their production and procurement. Like all hardcore colonial masters he grows obsessed with resources to satisfy his selfish covetousness:

> All rare and costly materials had certainly a great fascination for him, and in his eagerness to procure them he sent away many merchants…some to Egypt to look for that curious green turquoise which is…said to possess magical properties, some to Persia for silken carpets and painted pottery, and others to India to buy gauze and stained ivory, moonstones and bracelets of jade, sandalwood and blue enamel and shawls of fine wool. (Wilde147)

His particular aspiration, however, centres round his coronation day raiment—the flowing robe of gold tissue, the scepter with its rows of pearl and his ruby-studded crown—an outfit he looked forward to eagerly discarding his 'rough leathern tunic and coarse sheepskin cloak'. This dream leads him on to fearful truths and unwelcome revelations. The faceless multitude of workers, bonded labourers, slaves and colonized natives confront him individually and the question of freedom/subjugation comes up again and again:

> And the weaver looked at him angrily and said, 'Why art thou watching me? Art thou a spy set on us by our master?'
>
> 'Who is thy master?' asked the young King.
>
> 'Our master!' cried the weaver, bitterly. 'He's a man like myself…'

> 'The land is free,' said the young King, 'and thou art no man's slave.'
>
> 'In war,' answered the weaver, 'the strong make slaves of the weak, and in peace the rich make slaves of the poor. We must work to live, and they give us such mean wages that we die... '
>
> 'Is it so with all?' he asked.
>
> 'It is so with all,' answered the weaver, 'with the young as well as with the old, with the women as well as with the men, with the little children as well as with those who are stricken in years…' (Wilde149-50)

He even witnesses how the young black slave dies trying to dive and bring up the perfect pearl for his scepter. A postcolonial reading brings out the essential dichotomy of the representation of the colonized world in white western literature. Whereas the European imagination gloats over Africa, India, the middle and the Far East for their riches and resources, the people of these countries are portrayed as primitive, nature-dependent, eternally suffering and in constant need of external intervention. So the personified Avarice tells Death, 'There is famine in the walled cities of India, and the cisterns of Samarcand have run dry. There is famine in the walled cities of Egypt, and the locusts have come up from the desert. The Nile has not overflowed its banks, and the priests have nursed Isis and Osiris. Get thee gone to those who need thee, and leave me my servants.'("The Young King":154). Pagan vegetation rituals and mute dependence on nature's own rhythm seem to be the fate of those colonized races who can neither manipulate nature nor extract any other country's resources. Coming from Wilde, a white European author of the late 19th century England, this concern for the colonized and neo-colonized multitudes across the globe, sounds a note of authenticity and self-recognition.

The subtle counter discourse takes note of this derogation and the young king, though denounced by those who ravish nature and exploit the natives/slaves, is finally enthroned by nature herself—with a robe woven with golden sunbeams, with a sceptre of lilies 'whiter than pearls' and a crown of roses 'redder than rubies'. If the young King resists the colonialist/ 'Orientalist' mindset in rejecting its standard of beauty and respectability, 'The Birthday of the Infanta' shows the young princess, the Infanta of Italy embodying the power of the centre to perfection. The ugly Dwarf represents the colonial subject's inordinate devotion and imperfect mimicry of the white master, quite unmindful of the comic entertainment he provides to the colonizers. The truth dawns upon him after the agonizing episode with the mirror:

> When the truth dawned upon him, he gave a wild cry of despair, and fell sobbing to the ground. So it was he who was misshapen and hunchbacked, foul to look at and grotesque. He himself was the monster, and it was at him that all the children had been laughing, and the little Princess who he had thought loved him—she, too, had been merely mocking at his ugliness, and making merry over his twisted limbs. Why had they not left him in the forest, where there was no mirror to tell him how loathsome he was. (Wilde180)

The children as representatives of mainstream culture laugh at ugliness/deviance and mimic deficiency much in the adult fashion and the children's world come to represent adult idiosyncrasies in microcosm. Yet they are quick to notice changes and register resistance as the young king does or the children in the Giant's garden.

Short stories of H. G. Wells though mostly belong to the genre of science fiction provide another perspective and insight into the postcolonial question. His fictional world is very distinctly divided into the civilized and the primitive. The early apelike grisly men, the Neandertalers, the Aepyornis, the primitive Eudena and Ugh-lomi inhabit the dense forests, cliffs and primordial grasslands of a pre-civilized universe. It is interesting to note that the peripheral world beyond the immediate orbit of the white European culture seems to vary very little from the depiction of this savage world:

> Victorian historiography and the emerging fields of anthropology and folklore also relied heavily on this paradigm. The popular historian and novelist Charles Kingsley used the cultural dogma that "races, like individuals . . . may have their childhood, their youth, their manhood, their old age, and natural death" to describe the Teutonic peoples…In comments such as these we see the pervasive influence of a cultural metaphor that uses the life of the individual to describe a course of history and a version of history to narrate the development of the individual. We also glimpse the disturbing and, indeed, staggering implications of a cultural discourse that enables comparisons between children and savages. Such comparisons were foundational to the intellectual fields and disciplines that emerged in the nineteenth century and that largely continue to organize intellectual pursuits today. This cultural paradigm is arguably still very much with us… present, for example, when adults refer to children as "little savages," or when the best-intentioned National Public Radio affiliate organizes a package tour to Kenya and invites its members to "travel back in time."(Rowland 13-14)

And the almost-human creatures emerging from dark recesses of the forest---temperamental, revengeful, without any 'proper' language and easily intimidated —resemble closely the colonized folk. They are physically powerful and fierce, without the aid of modern science, gullible, easily cowered and unconditionally faithful. The vision in these tales is inherently Eurocentric, where the white European understanding of power, beauty, intellect and language holds sway. One conforming to this standard is reluctantly adopted by the white society whereas one challenging or questioning its authenticity is effectively *othered* as dark, inferior, barbaric. Even the religious beliefs of these people are often mocked as pagan and rudimentary. In 'The Lord of the Dynamos', Holroyd's non-European helper at the factory is introduced thus:

> His (Holroyd's) helper came out of the *mysterious East*, and his name was Azuma-zi. But Holroyd called him Pooh-bah. Holroyd *liked a nigger because he would stand kicking*—a habit with Holroyd—and *did not pry into the machinery* and try to learn the ways of it. Certain odd possibilities of the Negro mind brought into abrupt contact with *the crown of our civilization* Holroyd never fully realized, though just at the end he got some inkling of them…He (Azuma-zi) was perhaps more negroid than anything else…his head, too, was broad behind, and low and narrow at the forehead, *as if his brain had been twisted round in the reverse way to a European's*. He was short of stature and still *shorter of English*. In conversation he made numerous *odd noises of no known marketable value*. (Wells 58)

The East is always mysterious, the colonized nigger ugly and in need of kicking, his language an unintelligible mass of sounds, as one is reminded by Sartre: "Not so very long ago, the earth numbered 2,000 million inhabitants, that is 500 million human beings and 1,500 million natives. The former possessed the Word, the rest borrowed it."(153) Yet through the chinks of this apparently invincible armour of colonial superiority, is visible an attempt at self-scrutiny. Holroyd with his self-proclaimed intention of 'civilizing' Azuma-zi falls a prey to the unpredictable anger of the latter and meets his death by the machine (dynamo) that obeyed him all through. Freedom gains different connotations in stories like 'The Door in the Wall', 'A Moonlight Fable' or 'Aepyornis Island'. At times it means freedom from one's own ambitions, at times from the burden of society's expectations or at times from the insistent stalking of unwelcome past. But all freedom is gained at the cost of something equally dear and precious.

And this dichotomy grows all the more perceptible in 'The Country of the Blind'. Here a man from the known civilized world of the West discovers the long-lost country of the blind and decides to play superior as he is the only person who can 'see' in a country of people who grope their way and sense through touch:

> Much of their imagination has shrivelled with their eyes, and they had made for themselves new imaginations with their evermore sensitive ears and finger-tips. Slowly Nunez realized this: that his expectation of wonder and reverence at his origin and his gifts was not to be borne out; and after his poor attempt to explain sight to them had been set aside as the confused version of a new-made being describing the marvels of his incoherent sensations, he subsided, a little dashed, into listening to their instruction…
>
> "Unformed mind!" he said. "Got no senses yet! They little know they've been insulting their Heaven-sent King and master…
>
> "I see I must bring them to reason.
>
> "Let me think.
>
> "Let me think." (Wells 77)

But to his intense surprise, he discovers the strength of their ideology and religion. His illusion of power is shattered as he watches their disciplined life, community feelings and material progress. He falls in love with a native of the place, comes to the verge of giving his eyes up and going native; but somehow recovers his 'sanity' and flees. The story ends with the colonizer looking back with immense relief to the distant colony where he was about to turn a subdued colonized subject.

Thus, these children's tales of late nineteenth century provide a counter discourse to the dominant colonialist way of looking at and analyzing the native-outsider question, the adult-child stereotype or the mysterious (barbaric) East-rational (civilized) West binary. Written at the height of British colonial expansion at the turn of the century, these stories foretell not only the future of the children and other characters who feature in them but cast a deepening shadow on the future of the Empire itself; the ethical/moral questions that they raise have already started plaguing the minds of the statesmen, the resistance and resentment they show towards economic inequality or social oppression have already found voice in the multifarious outlets of expression emanating from the far-off colonies. Meant for children, but nevertheless, like children's tales of

all ages and times, they reflect the society that condition their production and the issues/perspectives that the social consciousness negotiates with.

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