

## Politics of Representation and Resistance: A Reading of Aeschylus's *The Persians* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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### Abstract

The colonial project presupposes the existence of a binary between the colonizer and the colonized, master and slave. This binary is actually a form of hierarchy where the colonizer is pitted against the colonized which is similar to the traditional conflict between good and evil, rational and irrational and so on. The alliance between empirical knowledge and power creates a discourse where the colonized people are 'otherised' and represented by the colonizer. The fragmented empirical evidence and the existence of the native cultural and political system have problematized the issue of representation. This discursive colonial representation is challenged by the politico-cultural resistance on part of the colonized. This resistance takes multiple forms since it occurs on the political, cultural and linguistic plane. Language is an important medium for both representation and resistance, since it is manipulated by both the colonizer and the colonized to serve their own purpose. Postcolonial narrative adopts the strategy of 'abrogation' and 'appropriation' to trace the biased representation in the colonial discourse and attempts to rewrite the politico-cultural history of the colonized which is hitherto excluded. To bring out my point, I shall focus on Aeschylus's *The Persians* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

**KEYWORDS:** Representation, Resistance, Knowledge, Language, Discourse, Rewriting.

The colonial project is founded upon the Manichean binaries as discussed by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* where West is associated with white, good, beauty, purity, God, reason, truth, nobility, civilization etc and East with black, bad, ugliness, sin, Satan, emotion, error, baseness, savagery etc. The Occident always tries to vindicate their supremacy over the Orient through their empirical knowledge which gives them authority to represent the Orient as the exotic land of savages. Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* wrote: "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (27). The alliance between knowledge and power creates a web like structure where everything belonging to the 'margin' is regulated and ideologically constructed by the 'centre'. So, every representation becomes a part of this discursive practice. It is guided by the idea of imposition and exclusion with the purpose of legitimizing the supremacy of the West over the east and to subject them to endless exploitation. Leela Gandhi in *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* wrote: "Discourses are, in point of fact, heavily policed cognitive systems which control and delimit both the mode and the means of representation in a given society" (77). Louis Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970) also focuses on the ideologies that lie behind consciousness and that they are "systems of meaning that install everybody in imaginary relations to the real relations in which they live" (Macdonell 27). The

colonial ideology gives birth to a monolithic discourse about the Orient where all differences are ruled out and it is politically propagated as the only empirical truth. The Orient is exoticised, otherised from the Occidental viewpoint. Therefore in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* Egypt is portrayed as a land of all exotic charms, merriment, gratification of senses which is in sharp contrast to Rome which stands for order, moral rigidity, reason etc. In the famous 'Cydnus' passage, Cleopatra in her barge represents in Rana Kabbani's words "the orient for the Western created gaze" (20), a prototype of the feminine femme-fatale who lures the Western explorer. Thus the Eurocentric discourse very shrewdly upholds the supremacy of the West over the East. Language is an important medium in the hand of the colonizer to textually construct the orient. The colonizer's language upholds the norm and essentialist assumptions that pose a threat to the value system of the colonized who are compelled to internalize the language and culture of the empire. Postcolonial literature takes into consideration the application of fragmented empirical evidences and dynamics of power that constitutes the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. It has emerged as a creative domain for the colonized to challenge the essentialist view of the Orient and the colonial process of marginalization of the culture and the people of the so called uncivilized countries. Its project is to subvert the essentialist constructs and imperialist assumptions.

The way Egypt is represented through the jaundiced lens of the occident in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, the similar thing happens for Persia in Aeschylus's *The Persians* (472 BCE). *The Persians* was written to gratify the natural pride of the Athenians in their victory at the battle of Salamis over an Asian country, Persia. There is not a single Greek character in the play which apparently may indicate Aeschylus's faithful and objective representation of the Orient but ironically the Persian characters converse and behave in the manner in which west wants them to behave. They merely conform to the discursive strategy of the Occident. Philip Vellacott wrote: "... it is reasonable to suppose that the effect of this play was enhanced by a lavish variety of oriental costume and by an attempt to represent the manners and perhaps the speech of the defeated enemy - an entertainment for victors such as Shakespeare provided in King Henry V" (18). The glory of the Greco-Roman civilization was challenged by Persia and the play shows the pathetic emasculation of vengeful Persians in order to keep the colonial glory intact. The west represents here the masculine valour and the east feminine grace and subjugation. The words, for example, 'lament', 'weep', 'cry', 'grief' are repeated like refrain, as if, the stage is flooded with the tears. The male characters including the chorus, messenger, and even Xerxes are represented as shedding profuse tears:

Chorus: weep and lament! our dead  
 Are made the ocean's spoil,  
 Tossed on the restless bed,  
 Their folded cloaks spread wide  
 Over the drowning tide. (Aeschylus 273-277)

Thus the male characters are turned out to be effeminate and whole ambience is saturated with lamentation. Edward Said in *Orientalism* wrote: "... To Asia are given the feelings of emptiness, law and disaster that seem thereafter to reward Oriental

challenges to the West, [...] Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant. Aeschylus represents Asia, makes her speak in person of the aged queen Xerxes's mother" (56-57).

Persians are represented as superstitious people who blame on Gods for their defeat, "Messenger: ...The result shows with what partial hands the gods / weighed down the scale against us, and destroyed us all" (Aeschylus 345-346). The small Greek army has defeated the huge Persian army through their shrewd tactics which may be compared with the battle of Plassey in India. It is the West's politics of expediency that makes them triumphant. In this respect the Persians are otherised as less intellectual, sentimental and despotic. H.D.F. Kitto says, "...the self-discipline of the free Greeks is contrasted with the situation of the Persian captains, who went into battle under the despot's threat that any who flinched would have his head cut off;..." (42). Further exoticization of the east is made by the incantation of the chorus and the consequent arrival of the ghost of Darius in oriental robe. The most interesting fact is the ghost's ultimate utterance of warning to the chorus which has imperial design, "...Even if your force be thrice as great / Never set arms in motion against Hellene soil / You cannot win; the land itself fight on their side" (Aeschylus 789-791). This proves the fact that Orient is a construct as politically and culturally motivated by the Occident.

Aeschylus's representation is biased as he has only foregrounded the destructive activities of the Persians. The colonized is justly punished for its 'pride and godless insolence' (Aeschylus 145). Their killer instinct is almost associated with animals and this Manichean binaries are kept intact. Henry P. Colburn wrote: "Aeschylus depicts the Persians as slavish, decadent, and emotional in stark contrast to the free and rational Greeks. Hall argues that this depiction is the construction of an 'other' that serves Greek self-identification rather than accurately reflecting the lived reality of the Persians themselves" (95).

Postcolonialism is an attitude which emphasizes on resistance to colonialism which imposes its authority and power by using several ideologies and devices like language. According to Michel Foucault language can be an important medium to hold power. It not only constructs but also can be used to marginalize, to constrain others. Bill Ashcroft, et al. wrote: "Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' became established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective Post-colonial voice" (The Empire Writes Back 7). So the project of a Postcolonial writer is to use the colonizer's language as a weapon to pay him back in his own coin by adopting the strategy of 'abrogation' and 'appropriation'. Whereas 'abrogation' insulates the colonizer's language from their own, 'appropriation' of language by the colonized people resists discursive formations and helps them to create their own space as Fanon wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "[A] man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (18). John Thieme considers 'rewriting' as the way of 'writing back' to challenge the Eurocentric discourse of the Orient where the voice of the colonized is marginalized, excluded to the extent of non-entity. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is almost a rejoinder to the racial representation of the Congo people in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In an essay entitled 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness' Achebe wrote: "Heart of Darkness protects the image of Africa as 'the other world', the antithesis of

Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (206-207). So the Orient cannot be represented by the west. Their representation is in Plato's term twice removed from reality.

In an essay entitled 'Folklore and the African Novelist: Achebe and Tutuola' William Ferris wrote: "Writing in the wake of colonialism and its cultural de-Africanization, the role of the African writer is two-fold. He must describe the full horror of colonialism and he must help resurrect the cultural traditions of his people" (27). Achebe's objective portrayal of the Igbo people and their culture challenges the colonial hegemony. Just as Yeats talks of the 'gyres of anarchy' in the Western civilization due to lack of religious faith, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* records the gradual uprooting of age-old customs and cultural practices of the African Igbo community because of its confrontation with the colonizer's religion and culture. Achebe has shown that the Igbos are not totally impervious to logic. They have their own value system and order of things. There are variations and binaries within the community. Though everyone is considered to be the part of the community, it is interesting that each has his/her personal god- 'chi' who is supposed to conform to his/her activity.

The Igbo people are very hardworking and practical. They depend on the agrarian economy. They have their own ritual of fertility rites which suggests order in their daily lives. In some respect they are even wiser than the Europeans. Obierika is rational in his approach towards the white man's disrespect: "We cannot leave the matter in his hands because he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his" (Achebe 139). This attitude suggests that the Igbos are more liberal than the Europeans who only cherish hatred for the 'other'. Obierika also questions the illogical law which harshly punishes Okonkwo for an unintentional crime: "Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently'...He remembered his wife's twins, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?" (Achebe 91). In this way Achebe has subverted the Manichean binaries.

Achebe also mocks at the empirical knowledge and essentialist assumptions of the Occident to represent the Orient. In reply to Okonkwo's question of whether the white man understands their custom Obierika says:

How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; ...The white man is very clever. He came quietly peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (Achebe 129)

This indicates the imperialist strategy of the white men and their politics of expediency. The District Commissioner's decision to incorporate only a chapter or a paragraph on Okonkwo in his book suggests the colonial misrepresentation and their politics of exclusion and imposition. Achebe has given agency to Okonkwo whose belief in masculinity suggests the collective unconscious of a tribal community which considers masculinity as a power of survival and resistance. But in spite of this,

Okonkwo also represents the conflicting aspects of strength and weakness. His relation with the whole community is like diverging and converging lines. We can raise the question whether Okonkwo can be a true representative of the community. The Igbo community has its diverse and even conflicting aspects. Okonkwo is one with the community till to the moment his line of ideas converges with that of the community. At first they believe in the armed uprising against the white as Fanon says in *The Wretched of the Earth*: ‘Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon’ (35). But their lines diverge and the gap between Okonkwo and the community widens gradually till to the climactic moment of his suicide. For Okonkwo, the whole community has become effeminate. “He mourned for the clan which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women” (Achebe 133). For his excessive manliness Okonkwo hates Unoka’s shameful laziness. His own clansmen could not share his views of manliness with such exaggeration. They opt for peaceful negotiation against his violent attitude.

Okonkwo’s suicide marks the death of the last resistance. His body hanging down from the tree suggests the final uprooting of the native culture by an alien one. It is very interesting that title of the district commissioner’s book, ‘The Pacification of the primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger’ echoes the rationale behind Kurtz’s final utterance for the ‘International Society for the suppression of savage customs’. What comes to the fore is the emasculation of the Orient by the Occident. The District Commissioner intends to keep the Manichean binaries intact at any cost. “He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness” (Achebe 134). In order to apply it they took the help of spectacular punishment like the wiping out of the clan of Abame or the punishment meted out to Okonkwo and others at the white man’s court. Okonkwo could not tolerate this colonial encroachment. He is the sole figure of resistance who is like a Hegelian slave cannot be indifferent to his cultural identity. Therefore we find his continuous vituperation against the converted people who have a mixed feeling of desire and hatred towards the white. Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* wrote that the Negro “wants to be like the master. Therefore he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. In Hegel the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns towards the master and abandons the object” (221).

Chidi Amuta in an essay entitled ‘The Materialism of Cultural Nationalism: Achebe’s Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God’ (1989) traced the economic exploitation as an offshoot of colonial usurpation. The masculine valour and community feeling of Igbo community are the very basic principles of their agrarian economy which came under serious blow with the emergence of the white men. So the church is not allowed to erect its building on a fertile land. Amuta wrote: “consequently a primary source of conflict between the indigenous societies and their British invaders is the question of land” (403). Achebe has exposed the trading interest and economic exploitation that is followed by the colonialist assault. “The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price much money flowed into Umuofia” (Achebe 126). In this respect Okonkwo’s revolutionary anti-colonial stance can be understood. Jean Paul Sartre in his ‘Preface’ to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* wrote: “When the peasant takes a gun in his hands, the old myths grow dim and the prohibitions are one by one forgotten ... to shoot down a

European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time: there remain a dead man, and a free man” (Sartre 19). Any form of colonial usurpation and ‘otherization’ should be followed by resistance. Language plays an important role to form an alternative discourse and to excavate one’s own identity. In John McLeod’s words, “It is also a process of overturning the dominant ways of seeing the world, and representing reality in ways which do not replicate colonialist values” (Beginning Postcolonialism 22).

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