

UNDERSTANDING THE TERM COLONIAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to understand the term 'Colonial Discourse', which during the British rule in India served as a medium of communication between the government and the people. It was intended to attract the attention of the rulers towards the people's problems to enable them to devise proper conciliatory measures to assuage the hurt feelings of the masses and to take corrective measures to address their grievances. It was as a result of this that the British Government was able to understand the problems and psyche of the Indian people, which led to the passage of various regulations against the social evils like female infanticide, child marriage, sati, etc..

Keywords

Colonial Discourse, Colonialism, Colony, Human Resource, Social Evils, Gender Discrimination, Indigenous, etc.

Of late the colonial discourse has become a popular subject of study, which among others implies the critical study of a piece of literature produced by indigenous writers and others writing about India of the colonial period to express their views on various political and socio-cultural issues, including the state of women. The purpose of such a study is to examine as to how effectively the writer concerned has been able to raise the particular social, political or other relevant issues of the time so as to create on one hand a consciousness among the people, while to attract the attention of the rulers towards them on the other, serving as a discourse between the people and the rulers to help the latter to formulate their policies accordingly. In India the colonial question became quite relevant when the British government, by initiating the caste based census meticulously, made the caste system legally rigid. The British not unduly thought that caste was the essence of the Indian society through which they could understand the Indian psyche well and use their human resources properly in their larger interest. This was the reason why the colonial government codified the caste system, which was though a Hindu societal custom. In fact, by way of this the “British rulers were able to subjugate the Indian peoples based on the caste they belonged to. By this action, men’s superiority over woman of a lower class was solidified in British colonial law.” (Buckley, 2015) It was also resulted into gender discrimination and oppressions of women both general as well as caste based, as the colonial government failed to avert it. Besides, it led the Indian women to be “partitioned into an even lower role in society than was previously held before colonial rule.” (ibid) However, during this period literature “was influenced by socio-religious reform movement and reflected similar concerns and limitations regarding women. The focus was on social evils and solutions were sought within domestic space.” (Gupta, 1991: 89)

In fact, the term colonial discourse is constituted by two independent words ‘colonial’ and ‘discourse’, of which the word discourse is a literary expression and denotes a discussion or a debate, while colonial means something pertaining to the period India was under the British subjugation. The term has been defined by linguists

variously, according to Hulme the colonial discourse as “an ensemble of linguistically-based practices unified by their common deployment in the management of colonial relationships...” (Hulme, 1986: 2) Elaborating the term he further says that as a study it is based on the presumption that:

During the colonial period large parts of the non-European world were produced for Europe through a discourse that imbricate sets of questions and assumptions, methods of procedure and analysis, and kinds of writing and imagery, normally separated out into the discrete areas of military strategy, political order, social reform, imaginative literature, personal memoir and so on. (2)

In this context, it is interesting to point out that the words, colonial and colonialism are constituted by the term ‘colony’, which itself is derived from the Latin root *colonia* that means “a place for agriculture”. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonialism#cite_note-1) However, as for colonialism’ it is a technical term, which has also been defined by the scholars variously. According to *Collins English Dictionary* colonialism is “the policy and practice of a power in extending control over weaker people or areas.” (Collins, Harper, 2011) The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the term as “something characteristic of a colony” and “control by one power over a dependent area or people.” (Merriam-Webster, 2010), and *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* “uses the term to describe the process of European settlement and political control over the rest of the world, including Americas, Australia, and parts of Africa and Asia. It (also) discusses the distinction between colonialism and imperialism.” (Kohn, Margret, 2006) Elaborating the term Osterhammel says:

Colonialism is a relationship between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and

implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and their ordained mandate to rule. (Osterhammel, 2005: 16)

However, in yet another definition the term has been explained in a simpler and précised manner, saying, “Colonialism is the establishment, exploitation, maintenance, acquisition and expansion of colonies in one territory by people from another territory. It is a set of unequal relationships between the colonial power and the colony and between the colonists and the indigenous population.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonialism#cite_note-1) In fact, during the period from the 1500s to the mid-1900s several European powers, particularly, Portugal, Spain, Britain, the Netherlands and France, established colonies in various parts of the world. In the beginning the aim of the colonizers was merely trade rather than agriculture, as they wanted to strengthen their home economy. However by the mid-19th century, they including the British decided to establish their political hegemony over the territories under their influence. Consequently, by the advent of World War I in 1914 the British were able to establish more than 50 colonies and protectorates in various parts of the world, including undivided India, inclusive of to-day’s Pakistan and Bangladesh. In India the British Trading company fought against the Dutch and French companies, and was eventually succeeded in establishing its superiority over them. After that the British occupants have to design and pursue specific policy to perpetuate their rule and administer the colonies effectively, and it was the same that came to be called as colonialism.

Thus, the colonialism has a long history that started with the pre-colonial African empires. However, the modern colonialism started with the discovery made by Portuguese and Spanish adventurous sailors, who were able to discover new lands across the oceans, where they built trading posts, paving the way for their respective governments to conquer larger areas of land in due course. This, in fact, triggered the

process of the Commercial Revolution, attracting the attention of the Western Europe to join the colonial venture. As a result of this by the 17th century the French, Dutch, Danish and the Dutch colonial empire came into being. In the meanwhile England also entered the field and established its overseas possessions, which was later transformed into the British Empire. Though, with the emergence of revolutionary movements in America and Latin America in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the spread of colonial empires was reduced, yet many new colonial empires were established thereafter, such as the German, Belgian, Russian, Ottoman and Austrian colonial empires. Later, Japan and the United States of America also carved out their own empires. However, after the First World War, the German and the Ottoman Empires were liquidated and were divided between the victorious allies under the mandates of the League of Nations and were placed into three categories, keeping in view as to how quickly they would be ready for independence. Accordingly, there began a continuous process of decolonization, which sustained tremendous boost with the emergence of independence movements across the world, including the ones like Indian National Movement. Accordingly, even if under the colonial subjugation, India at the time was “poised on the threshold of the ‘modern’ age,” which with its rising nationalist consciousness, was “trying to come to terms with its political subjugation on one hand, and its problematic negotiations with the ‘colonial modernity’ on the other.” (Roy, 2012)

As a result of this, in India women’s participation in public activities including the National Movement took place in a big way, which also led them to raise voice against the injustice done to them under the patriarchy. It, as reflected in the literature of the time, introduced a change in the social narrative, though “it is an open question whether it advocated any fundamental change in mentalities and attitudes regarding women.” (Gupta, 1991: 89) Nonetheless, there is no denial to the fact that women’s question invariably received attention of both, the social reformers as well as the contemporary writers, which in the process invited the attention of the colonial rulers serving as a medium of dialogue between the two and the same is therefore came to be dubbed as the

‘Colonial Discourse’. Here it also needs to be pointed out that women and their issues form the integral part of the ‘Colonial Discourse’, hence, while deliberating upon the state of women in the colonial era as portrayed in the contemporary literature, it is imperative to understand what the term ‘colonial discourse’ is all about. Thus, in the Indian context the colonial discourse aims at examining the literature produced, particularly by the native writers, during the colonial era, which are available in the form of fiction, poetry, and non-fictional prose, letters, diaries, memoirs, etc. While examining the texts the emphasis should be on recording the responses of the Indians towards various socio-cultural and political issues raised therein with special focus on some or the other of them. In fact, the importance of colonial discourse lies in the fact that there is great need of making a critical study of these so called anti-colonial texts, as not much effort has so far been made in this direction.

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