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POSTCOLONIAL READING/REREADING AS DECOLONISING EMANCIPATORY PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, an attempt is made to study the postcolonial ventures on biblical studies as a critique of the existing knowledge discourses of Bible which the colonizers introduced to the colonized. This attempt is necessitated due to the understanding by the scholars from the Third World that Bible is/was used as a tool to serve the interests of colonial powers, both European as well as the native colonising powers. In this article, the European colonial powers are identified as the forces which served to stabilise the powers in the colonised geography through economical and cultural means; the native colonial powers are understood as the forces from within which colonised the minds of the native through the hegemonic discourses of caste, gender, language, religion, etc. Postcolonial criticism is a style of enquiry as it provides a platform for the widest possible convergence of critical forces, of multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural, in order to assert the denied rights of the colonized. In this context, postcolonial project of decolonisation gets a radical humanist face; decolonisation itself is understood as a platform for the transformative politics against any sort of discrimination, carried out in the name of gender, caste, race, religion, colour, etc. Postcolonial criticism, in this sense, offers the convergence of many such localised issues, but universally addressed as a venture against discriminatory practices involving knowledge, power and practices. A re-writing often implicates the reader as an active agent in determining the meanings made possible by the dialogue between the source-text and its re-writing, according to the postcolonial reading/rereading strategies.

Key Words: Postcolonialism, Reading, Criticism, Biblical studies, Decolonisation

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonialism is a discipline where everything is contested from the standpoint of the oppressed and the colonized. Having begun in 1960s after the demise of formal European colonialism, it denotes a condition of no longer being what one was, in a colony, as a colonized. Post-Colonial means the particular historical period after



colonial period. But Postcolonial (without hyphen) does not mean historical periodisation but it refers to different forms of representation, reading practices and values that characterise the style of enquiry.

Before analysing the postcolonialism, one needs to understand what we mean by colonialism. Colonialism is different from Imperialism. Imperialism is a strategic form which is associated with Capitalism. It aims for profitable trade and enrichment of one's country by exploiting the natural resources and the low cost labour power of a foreign land. But colonialism is one of the ways in which imperialism operates. It is about capturing the foreign land for market for Western goods. Colonialism is one form of the imperial ideology. We can safely say that colonialism is a practical aspect of the imperial ideology.

Within the postcolonial studies, we could find 3 layers of its development. First, it started as a movement to transcend the exclusion or discrimination of non-western literature in academic department of the West in the post-world-war period. During the 1970s and 80s, having been influenced by the literary criticism of that time, it extended its scope as a tool for literary criticism to study the production of colonial text. After the 1980s, having been influenced by the critical theory of neo-left, it spread beyond the confines of literary analysis into other disciplines.

In this way, it did not stop with the analysis of colonialism but it claimed itself as a political practice. Crossing the colonial boundaries, now the postcolonial studies identify itself as a theoretical practice against all kinds of discriminations. However, it does not have any coherent theory, but its theoretical model is a combination of many strands of critical theories like feminism, Marxism, literary criticism, subaltern studies, racial studies, anthropological studies, etc. It marks the cultural turn in the philosophical analysis of reality. In that way it works as a critic of colonial ideology and Euro-centrism and imperialism.

In this paper, an attempt is made to study the postcolonial ventures on biblical studies as a critique of the existing knowledge discourses of Bible. This attempt is necessitated due to the understanding by the scholars from the Third World that Bible is/was used as a tool to serve the interests of colonial powers, both European as well as the native colonising powers. In this article, the European colonial powers are identified as the forces which served to stabilise the powers in the colonised geography through economical and cultural means; the native colonial powers are understood as the forces from within which colonised the minds of the native through the hegemonic discourses of caste, gender, language, religion, etc.

POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

Postcolonial criticism is a style of enquiry as it provides a platform for the widest possible convergence of critical forces, of multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural, in order to assert the denied rights of the colonized. In this context, postcolonial project of decolonisation gets a radical humanist face; decolonisation itself is understood as a platform for the transformative politics against any sort of discrimination, carried out in the name of gender, caste, race, religion, colour, etc. Postcolonial criticism, in this sense, offers the convergence of many such localised issues, but universally addressed as a venture against discriminatory practices involving knowledge, power and practices.

Earlier postcolonialism was considered as a literary genre and as a collective name for the creative literatures emerging from the third World; but now it is understood as a method or instrument for analysing the social and cultural aspects of reality. It is not a theory but a style of enquiry. Postcolonial enquiry is productive and it tries to transcend the limitations of Enlightenment's modernizing project. Due to the West's overarching colonising intentions, the Enlightenment ideals were brought to the colonised but they did not treat the colonised the way they preached. It can be termed as criticism rather than theory. It would assert that the East has its own rationality on a par with the West, though such rationality is different from that of the West. Western rationality fixes the reality mostly through the written forms; but the rationality of the East is mostly expressed in oral narrative form. In prose, intellect will be dominant but in oral narration emotion will come along with intellect.

When we produce knowledge through critical enquiry, it leads to more humanised reality. It enriches the life because it opposes tyranny (absolute power), domination, and abuse. Criticism is always secular and varied context to context. Though Postcolonial criticism emerged in the academic departments of the Western universities, such a critical practice has its antecedent in the anti-colonial writings which were the products of the non-academic intellectuals. Postcolonial studies always try to decolonise the inheritance discourse given by colonial masters. The process of decolonisation happened historically in three different epochs. 1) America achieved independence in the 18th century; 2) The settler countries like Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand attained independence status, detaching themselves from their mother countries. 3) After the Second World War, most of the colonial countries got liberation after a long indigenous struggles against their colonial masters.

McLeod clarifies that starting from 1980s, Commonwealth literature (This term was used in 1950 to mean literature written in English from selected country which were having colonial history. It was understood that they have certain shared universal values and concerns with the West) were begun to be called as Postcolonial literature. Postcolonial readings and textual analysis have 3 different forms. The first variety of the reading practice is about the rereading of the colonial texts which talks about colonial practices directly as well as latently, in order to know the colonising strategies and representations. Influenced by the post-structuralists such as Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, the second form of analysis re-read the colonial texts that were not merely literary in nature. In the third of reading we find the application of critical theories to the situation of postcoloniality. Here we find the emergence of postcolonialists like Homibaba, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, Bill Ashcraft and others (JML 2010: 11).

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POSTCOLONIAL READING STRATEGIES

The understanding of the text has undergone wide-ranging implications since the emergence of the discipline of hermeneutics. Roland Barthes, a French literary critic, in his seminal article, *The Death of the Author*, made a radical pronouncement that “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the author”. While referring to the story written by Balzac, *Sarrasine*, he raises a pertinent question about the authorship of the voice of the text. In this story, Balzac speaks through the character of a castrato representing the voice of the woman, and writes about the woman thus: “It was Woman, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive fears, her unprovoked bravado, her daring and her delicious delicacy of feeling.” Now the question is whose voice

it is? Is it that of the author, or that of the castrato, or that of the woman who is represented thus? Is it the author's personal experience of the philosophy of woman or is it the universal wisdom or is it romantic psychology produced within a cultural discursive practice? Barthes says, "It will always be impossible to know, for the good reason that all writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and that literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes". Further he says, "a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture" (RB). The celebrated pre-modern notion of the author-god or treating the author and his/her text as similar to the antecedent relation of the father to his child has completely yielded way to the multiple but non-discernible sources of authorship of a text. No author can claim the sole 'ownership' of the text (except for the market perhaps!), as the text is understood as the voice of multiple dimensions in which the identity of author has been trapped.

Especially Paul Ricouer, a French hermeneutic phenomenologist, brought to light the interpretative layers of the texts where the text becomes the source for multiple meanings and interpretations. He underscored the non-ostensive references, which the reader produced while reading the text, which the author never intended while producing the text (PR 1973: 91-117). In the pre-modern understanding, the text was considered as 'closed' with the privileged position of the author over the reader. With the shift of significance from the author to the reader in the modern period, text is never understood as a monolithic and singular narrative, though the author's intended meaning is one among the layers of multiple meanings that the text has in-itself. The multiple layers of the text become possible with the changing socio-historical conditions and the cultural settings in which the text is produced and reproduced.

Foucault, a French postmodern philosopher, made the inter-relation between knowledge and power explicit within the discourses of the text. Rather we may say that postmodernism seeks to relate the non-philosophy of philosophy in the constitution of the knowledge discourses of modernity. In other words, it traces the genealogy of the modern grand narratives and celebrates the discursive practices that led to the constitution of such met narratives, whereas modernity celebrates met narratives. With the influence of performance and ritual studies, the notion of text was further diversified to include the possibility of an act or a performance to be studied as a text.



Orientalism, Edward Said's *magnum opus*, was published in 1978 in this context. It is an irony that using such Western tools of understanding of the text, he reversed the gaze on the West. The West was gazing at the Orient as the exotic and the irrational through its pre-modern literatures as well as the texts that were produced in the modern colonial era. Said deconstructed the very notion how the Orient was represented by the West in its textual practices, with the strength and co-relation of the colonial institutions.

Hence, it is understood that the varieties of colonial experiences, the various modes of colonizing practices, the cultural specificity and the historical context in which the colonialism was encountered, and the divergences in reading practices aided by theories on literary studies and hermeneutics made possible the divergences in postcolonial discourses on colonialism. The intellectual travel from colonialism to postcolonial discourses needs to be understood in this context.

As discussed earlier, postcolonialism, as a field of contesting cultural practice, builds its momentum on the fact that colonial residues remain even after the end of formal colonialism; so, that needs to be decolonized. What it means to be decolonized? Decolonization is understood sometimes as 'writing back' as in the case of the book *The Empire Writes Back*; it is also explained as 'gazing back' or reversing the gaze.

But essentially, postcolonialism means 'rereading' the texts which were produced with the Orientalist gaze and during the colonialist exegesis. "The act of reading in postcolonial contexts is by no means a neutral activity. *How* we read is just as important as *what* we read... the ideas we encounter within postcolonialism and the issues they raise demand that conventional reading methods and models of interpretation need to be rethought if our reading practices are to contribute to the contestation of colonial discourses to which postcolonialism aspires. Rethinking conventional modes of reading is fundamental to postcolonialism" (JML 2010: 33-34).

This rereading approach is explained by Edward Said as *contrapuntal reading*. He defines contrapuntal method of reading as a reading practice which is simultaneously aware of "both metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (EWS 1994: 59). In this way, the rereading does not devalue the original text in anyway; but it contextualises the text along with other texts that counters the claims of the dominant discourse. In this way, rereading leads to rewriting without eliminating or devaluing the source-text.

Postcolonial readings and textual analysis have 3 different forms. The first variety of the reading practice is about the rereading of the colonial texts which talks about colonial practices directly as well as latently, in order to know the colonizing strategies and representations. Influenced by the post-structuralists such as Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, the second form of analysis re-read the colonial texts that were not merely literary in nature. In the third of reading we find the application of critical theories to the situation of postcoloniality. Here we find the emergence of postcolonialists like Homibaba, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, Bill Ashcraft and others.

The rereading or rewriting as a decolonizing strategy of postcolonialism does not attempt to erase its colonial context of the production of the text. But it tries to operate within the 'in-between-space', accepting at times the hybridity that emerges within the encounters of different cultures.

While summarising the possibilities of rewriting the text, McLeod postulates the following four aspects (JML 2010: 168):

1. A re-writing does much more than merely 'fill in' the gaps perceived in the source text. Rather, it enters into a *productive critical dialogue* with the source-text.
2. A re-writing takes the source-text as a point of inspiration and departure, but its meanings are not fully determined by it.
3. A re-writing often exists to *resist* or *challenge* colonialist representations of colonized peoples and cultures perceived in the source-text and popular readings of it. In this way we might consider a re-writing of a 'classic' text as 'postcolonial'.

A re-writing often implicates the reader as an *active agent* in determining the meanings made possible by the dialogue between the source-text and its re-writing, according to the postcolonial reading/rereading strategies.

POSTCOLONIAL BIBLICAL CRITICISM AND THE THIRD WORLD

Postcolonial Biblical criticism attempts to understand the historical emergence of the application of postcolonial studies for the interpretative venture of Bible from the standpoint of the colonised. Though the method of postcolonial Biblical criticism derives from the reactionary derivative discourses of postcolonialism, it has its roots in Biblical criticism too. While describing the emergence of postcolonial Biblical criticism, Fernando F. Seganova identifies four paradigms: 1) the historical criticism of the early 19th century to the third quarter of 20th century, 2) the rise and development of literary criticism from the mid-1970s, 3) the volcanic eruption of

cultural studies in 1980s and 1990s, and 4) the result of competing discourses within the discipline of cultural studies which defined itself as crossing the rigid boundaries of academic disciplines. Within the last paradigm, there was fundamental transformation of the reading strategies which yielded to the 'real reader' who is a localised, contextualised and interested reader, opposite of the 'universal reader' who claim to be objective, scientific, impartial and de-contextualised. This fuelled the transformation of faces and concerns of critical Biblical practices, from the male and Euro-American faces and concerns towards the infusion of Western women, of the men and women from outside the West and of the non-Western minorities in the West, according to him (R.S.S. 2006: 34-35)

One of the early critical literatures of postcolonial overtures, in the domain of postcolonial biblical criticism, can be witnessed in the writings of Akiki Nyabaongo's *Africa Answers Back*. Here the gaze is turned back on the empire and its accomplices, the Christian missionaries, using the same text, Bible, with which the cultural domination was carried out by the colonialism and the missionaries. The hero of the novel, Abala Stanley Mujungu, encounters the English missionary, Hubert, using and subverting the meanings of the European teachings of the Bible. In the course of the novel, Mujungu asks Hubert raising his doubts about the birth of Jesus to Virgin Mary. Mujungu asks, "Sir, How could the seed of a man get into the womb of a woman without intercourse?" Hubert replies that Mary had two husbands, God and Joseph; for which Mujungu says, "You won't baptize the children of men with two wives, yet John baptized Jesus", in an obvious reference to the missionaries' practice of denouncing the Africans engaged in polygamy. Using the forms of satire and sarcasm, the native African reverses the gaze against the Western knowledge discourse using the medium of Englishman's book, Bible, in order to assert his own culture. Further in the course of the novel, Mujungu accompanies Hubert, as an interpreter to different churches, as a punishment for his asking some disturbing questions on biblical writings. But Mujungu uses his existential experiences in his mission school to reclaim the listeners of Hubert, warning his fellow Africans that Hubert's 'new ways' would result in disrespect to their elders and their culture. Being unable to speak in native language, the missionary accepts his defeat and announces the end of further evangelisation. Instead of engaging in dialogue, the missionary uses homiletical denunciation of the native dismissing them that "There is no hope for you. I shall pray for you". While Mujungu still engages himself in dialogue with Hubert, pointing out the weaknesses in his biblical interpretations and the distortive discursive practices of biblical verses by the Westerners in Africa, Hubert uses his authority to silence the voices of the native dismissing them as illiterate, ignorant, irrational and exotic. This novel, though published in 1930s, has the potential postcolonial readings and rereading of the bible from the native standpoint, against what the West preached as truth, in order to

assert their own culture in the face oppressive cultural supremacy of the colonial missionaries (R.S.S. 2006: 12-14). This fictional derivative discourse on colonial exegesis of the Bible is an example of how the biblical reading is subverted by the Third World to reclaim its lost cultural power. Postcolonial scholars term this process as 'reversing the gaze'.

Postcolonial Biblical criticism is the cultural contestation, carried out by the colonised and suppressed, against the dominant cultural hegemony, through textual criticism and interpretation. It interrogates the colonial practices and interventions keeping the Bible and biblical reading at the centre of the discourse to show how the textual interpretation of the missionaries is implicitly interspersed with and linked to the European colonialism. The best example for such a practice comes from none other than Desmond Tutu, when he said, "When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land". This statement of Desmond Tutu clearly show the power-ridden interpretation of biblical practices of the West and the colonial powers; on the other hand, it also identifies the emancipatory potential of the biblical reading, when the gaze is reversed by the colonized. It is interesting to note that colonial interventions on the natives are used to reverse the gaze, using the same colonial tool which was used to strengthen the colonial powers.

The postcolonial biblical studies concentrated on the textual re-interpretations and identified the mis(s)-representations of the people, who were marginalised and excluded from the mainstream, through such textual practices. In Indian context, the postcolonial critical venture into addressing the questions of marginalisation can be witnessed in the emergence of Dalit theology and feminist theology, though they were influenced more by the Liberation theology of the Latin America.

CONCLUSION

Postcolonial biblical criticism is an attempt to understand the scripture by the colonized from their subjective experiences of subjugation, whether such suppression is perpetuated either by the internal colonial discourses, such as the modern-colonial discourses on caste and gender or by the external colonialism. One cannot limit the discursive paradigms of these two variants of colonial discourses either to political economy or to socio-cultural modes alone, but both the spheres intersperse to create a complex discourse.

However, there is still a gap or not much studies into how the Christianity in India and the native Christians absorbed these modern religious practices, by becoming the people of the book, through the colonial

and Euro-American missionary interventions. In the process of conversion into a foreign religion, how the native traditions were modernised and accepted and assimilated into the Christianity, though Christianity claims to be an egalitarian religion, needs to be studied yet. And, how the native Christians responded to the local issues with the help of the modern knowledge discourses introduced during colonial interventions and missionary practices, also yet to be studied largely, though such studies exists in fragments.

If we could understand colonialism as operating at two levels of discourse, such as the internal colonialism and external colonialism, it naturally follows that the postcolonialism has to address both these forms of colonialism. Hence, the postcolonial Christianity in India too cannot be simply understood as a simple monolithic discourse against either forms of colonialism. But it needs to be understood as a rather complex discourse, because during the colonial times, the Christianity challenges and at times co-opts with the two forms of colonialism, as it is a minority religious community in India. So the postcolonial Christianity has to start as the critique of both forms of colonialism, if it has to become a discourse aimed at radical democratic practice against all forms of discriminations. But the question remains whether postcolonial biblical criticism could lead to a transformative politics, as it still is a discursive practice and not a revolutionary practice. As it remains still as an academic exercise, located in universities, the discourse need to be tested and validated on the actuality too.

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Ms. Gargi Mukherjee has completed M.Phil in Christianity from Madurai Kamaraj University. Earlier, she did her under-graduation and post-graduation in Comparative Religion from the Visva-Bharati University. She has published and presented research papers in various forums on the subjects like tribal religion, environmental studies, feminist studies and biblical studies.

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