

A Reflection on Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Criticism

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Abstract. The British Empire, like the colonial empires of the other European powers, came to an end when independence was granted to previously colonised countries. But many of the values, preconceptions, and cultural stereotypes associated with the imperial world-view have been bequeathed to us. The reasons for this are not hard to determine. A plethora of books dealing with the British imperial experience, as well as television, films and the resources of other media, have contributed to preserving the glories of the imperial past in Britain's cultural memory and to constructing highly standardized images by means of which the British Empire continues to be remembered.

Introduction

The Age of Empire lies in the past, but its ambivalent heritage is still very much with us. The British Empire, like the colonial empires of the other European powers, came to an end when independence was granted to previously colonised countries. But many of the values, preconceptions, and cultural stereotypes associated with the imperial world-view have been bequeathed to us. The reasons for this are not hard to determine. A plethora of books dealing with the British imperial experience, as well as television, films, and the resources of other media, have contributed to preserving the glories of the imperial past in Britain's cultural memory and to constructing highly standardized images by means of which the British Empire continues to be remembered. Moreover, a host of novels, plays, and poems, many of which reflect a persistent imperial world-view, testify both to the fascination that the British Empire still has for authors and to the great importance that imperial heritage continues to have for the way Britain sees itself. It is largely due to culture that the perceptual and ideological fictions that form the conceptual matrix of imperialism live on as an integral part of what has been called "cultural memory" and "collective identity." Referring to popular boys' adventure stories, Susan Bassnett has pointed out that "the values of those stories, however we may wish to repudiate them on the grounds of racism, sexism and xenophobia generally, are encoded into our thought patterns" (71). This, of course, has nothing to do with a people's genes, but is the result of the discursive practices of cultural transmission.

Our project in this article will be to explore some of the issues that are of crucial importance for anyone trying to come to grips with the logic of the fictions which provided the ideological backbone of British imperialism. If one agrees with Hobsbawm and Said that "the Age of Empire cries out for demystification" (Hobsbawm 5) and that "fictions have their own logic and their own dialectic of

growth or decline” (Said, *Orientalism* 62), one is faced with the question of how such a revisionist project of exploring and demystifying the fictions of British imperialism is to be undertaken. We will suggest some issues which might be helpful for that enterprise, but which have mostly been neglected by scholars as yet. One way of approaching the demystification of the Age of Empire is to take a revisionist look at the role that literary fictions have played in nurturing “the sentiment, rationale, and above all the imagination of empire” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 12) and in helping to create “imperialism’s consolidating vision” (288). By making use of some insights of narratology, we will try to show ways to explore the fictions of empire and the relationship between literature and the complex process that Mangan has called “making imperial mentalities” (1). Though the works of such authors as Tennyson, Rider Haggard, Kipling, Conrad, and Forster have already been interpreted as examples of colonial discourse, we will focus on the question of in how far a narratological analysis of such fictions of empire can serve to shed light on the making, and unmaking, of imperialist mentalities.

Fictions of Empire and the Empires of Fiction

The title of this essay contains the key concept of Fictions of Empire, and one might as well begin by explaining what that phrase can mean. According to one of the standard works on the subject, “Empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society” (Doyle 45). Although “empire” refers, in the present context, to Britain’s overseas colonies or “possessions,” the British Empire’s “diverse character” needs to be stressed. The empire was, as John M. Mac Kenzie has emphasized, “at least four separate entities. It was the territories of settlement [...]. It was India [...]. It was a string of islands and staging posts, a combination of seventeenth-century sugar colonies and the spoils of wars with European rivals, China and other non-European cultures. And finally, Empire was the ‘dependent’ territories acquired largely in the last decades of the nineteenth century” (“Introduction” 1). This diversity makes it next to impossible to identify a single, consistent attitude among the contemporary British that could explain their actions. Politics did not help conceiving the Empire as a unity, because, as Charles Wentworth Dilke admitted in 1890, “[n]o country can be less homogeneous than a nation which includes within its territories the Oriental despotism of British India and States as democratic as Queensland” (583). In 1883, one of the foremost “makers” of fictions of the Empire, the historian John Robert Seeley, wanted to change the as yet sceptical view of the Empire, which was difficult to reconcile with the ingrained belief in the English love of liberty (cf. V. Nünning “Daß Jeder seine Pflicht thue”). For him, the failure to realize the vital importance of the Empire was “one of those monsters [...] which are created not by imagination but by the want of imagination!” (Seeley 356). At least in one respect, Seeley was right; to think of Great Britain and her numerous dependencies all over the world as a unity indeed demanded an act of imagination. To conceptualise the co-existence of quite a number of different ethnicities in places geographically and culturally remote from England as an entity was not a matter of reflecting reality; the Empire of the mind had to be created. Much more so than the loaded word “empire,” “fiction” is an ambiguous term which can easily generate confusion. On the one hand, the word can designate “[t]hat which, or something that, is imaginatively invented” or, more specifically, “[t]he species of literature

which is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters,” viz. “[a] work of fiction; a novel or tale” (Oxford English Dictionary). On the other hand, “fiction” refers to any “supposition known to be at variance with fact, but conventionally accepted for some reason of practical convenience, conformity with traditional usage, decorum, or the like” (ibid). In this latter sense, fictions are used in law, for instance, with the fiction that a corporation is a person separate from its members being a case in point. Such legal fictions are theoretical constructs or rules that assume something as true that is clearly false or at variance with fact, but that is highly useful in dealing with complex phenomena and shapes our thinking as well as our actions. The title of this essay is thus deliberately ambiguous, self-consciously alluding as it does to the double meaning of “fiction”: “the meaning of ‘fiction’ as literary, nonreferential narrative and its meaning (often [...] in its plural form) as theoretical construct” (Cohn 18). This double meaning is essential for the questions that the article tries to answer in that we are concerned with the interplay between works of narrative fiction that deal with the British Empire and those theoretical and ideological constructs which constituted the imperial idea. First, then, the phrase “fictions of empire” simply refers to those literary narratives that focus on the British Empire and that deal with the experience of the empire. Nineteenth-century travel writing, the adventure fiction of such authors as Frederick Marryat, Robert Ballantyne, G.A. Henty and H. Rider Haggard, Kipling’s stories and poems, and Conrad’s novels not only constructed the imperial subject, but also immensely popular and influential fictional models of imperialism and of the empire. But such a limited definition does not adequately account for the complexity of the issues involved in the relationship between culture and imperialism.

In a broader sense, the title of this essay also refers to the diversity of ideological constructs which the colonial discourse has projected. These constructs can also be called fictions since they were clearly at variance with fact. Such conceptual and ideological fictions can be defined as recurring images of the empire, of the imperialist, of what he regarded as his mission, and of the colonized, the “Other.” Such fictions consist of predispositions, biases, values, and epistemological habits which provide both agreed-upon codes of understanding and cultural traditions of looking at the world. The fact that those who make use of them are usually not conscious of the fact that they are “mere” fictions and at variance with the facts does not detract from their influence; indeed, it might make them all the more powerful because they shape our thoughts without our critically reflecting upon them. In their entirety these fictions constitute that culturally sanctioned system of ideas, beliefs, presuppositions, and convictions which constitutes imperialist mentalities. Such ideological fictions are closely connected with literary fictions because they find their most succinct expression in conventional plot-lines, myths, and metaphors that support and legitimize the imperial project.

It is this second meaning of fiction that Said has in mind when he calls Orientalism a “system of ideological fictions” (Said, *Orientalism* 321) and when he equates that phrase with such terms as “a body of ideas, beliefs, clichés, or learning” (205), “systems of thought,” “discourses of power,” and with Blake’s famous “mind-forg’d manacles” (328). Moreover, most of what Said says about Western conceptions of the Orient is equally relevant for understanding the structure and functions of the ideological fictions of the British Empire. Just as “the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West” (5), the British empire can also be

understood as a set of ingrained and largely unconscious beliefs, ideas, feelings, and values.

What this article, then, mainly attempts to explore are manifestations of the imperial idea, as reflected in or constructed by what we have designated as fictions of empire, which served to create their own empires of fiction. As John Mac Kenzie has demonstrated in his seminal work *Propaganda and Empire*, in the late nineteenth century an ideological cluster of ideas known as the “New Imperialism” took shape and forged new links between imperialism and patriotism. It was compounded of Social Darwinism, militarism, and Christianity, and it fostered and led to the propagation of the belief that empire was an adventure and an ennobling responsibility. Moreover, Mac Kenzie argues that there was an extraordinary continuity in this system of ideas from late Victorian times until well into the twentieth century and that it was of central importance to British self-perception and pride.

The ideological fictions that constituted the New Imperialism were not just reflected in or produced by the canonical works of “high culture.” On the contrary, from the late nineteenth century to the second world war, nationalist and imperialist ideas were conveyed through various popular genres and media, e.g. boys’ stories and other fictions for young people, the music hall, popular art, school books, postcards, packaging, cinema, exhibitions, parades, and a broad range of other genres and media. However, for the purposes of this essay the focus will be on narrative fictions and their contribution to fostering, challenging or even deconstructing the imperial idea. Instead of assuming that imperialism was merely reflected in literary works, we argue that narrative fictions, just like patriotic poetry, boys’ stories, history books, travellers’ tales, and a host of overtly propagandistic genres, played an active and constitutive role in making imperialist mentalities. Moreover, literary as well as nonliterary fictions of empire have arguably not only given the imperial idea form, and thus also reality and presence, but they have also secured the empire a lasting and significant place in Britain’s cultural memory. The ideological fictions of empire which such genres helped to create served as a filter through which the imperial experience came into the British public consciousness.

Conclusion

What are the most important ideological fictions of empire that constituted the conceptual backbone of imperialism and that determined contemporary perceptions of the Empire? One of the dominating fictions of British imperialism was the ingrained belief in English superiority and the concomitant conviction that the native peoples in the colonies were in need of elevation and civilization. Said even goes so far as to locate “the essence of Orientalism” in “the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority” (Said, *Orientalism* 42). Because of what Said has called “the structures of attitude and reference” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 62, 73, 89, 114, 134, 157) that constituted the imperial world-view, this fiction went hand in hand with another assumption fostered by Social Darwinism, viz. the ingrained belief “that subject races should be ruled, that they are subject races, that one race deserves and has consistently earned the right to be considered the race whose main mission is to expand beyond its own domain” (62). Said’s choice of words already indicates the unholy alliance between imperialist fictions and religion that developed during the late nineteenth century, when the discourses of Christianity

and imperialism became closely entwined, and the hand of Providence was held to be responsible for territorial expansion.

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