

## **Unearthing Colonial Politics: Reading R.K. Narayan's *Bachelor of Arts* as an Exercise in Inscribing Indianness**

**Debottama Roy**

M.Phil, English  
Assistant Teacher, English, Higher Secondary Section  
Kamala Chatterjee School for Girls  
Kolkata, India  
debottama\_roy@rediffmail.com

---

**Abstract:** Colonialism was a hegemonic process. Its success depended upon manipulating the history, identity and culture of native peoples and subtly presenting them as inferior. The process of decolonization involved not only political freedom but also understanding the politics underlying the colonial situation and the retrieval and re-inscription of native history, culture and identity. Narayan realizes that history is discursive and articulates the need for an Indian version of history through Ragavachar in this novel. As a hegemonic process colonialism established the 'inherent' superiority of the colonizer's history and culture. Narayan, here attempts to show the complete uselessness of European ideals in Indian soil and tries to build a distinct Indian identity by celebrating elements of Indian tradition. This Indianness that Narayan celebrates helps in imagining the Indian nation.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, hegemony, resistance, discursive history, identity, Indianness

---

"The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. Obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic, they follow the principles of mutual exclusivity. No conciliation is possible...."

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

This extract highlights the unbridgeable gulf between the colonizer and the colonized in any colonial situation. It is this Manichaeian situation that compels the colonized natives of a country to resist colonial domination. To quote Ania Loomba, "Historically speaking anti-colonial resistances have taken many forms, and they have drawn upon a wide variety of resources....Anti-colonial struggles therefore had to create new and powerful identities for colonized peoples and to challenge colonialism not only at a political or intellectual level, but also on an emotional plane...."<sup>1</sup> In this article I will attempt to study the patterns of resistance in R.K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts*.

The *Bachelor of Arts* has a deceptively simple storyline: Chandran, a young man, graduates from college, falls hopelessly in love with a girl he sees by the river, fails to marry her, leaves home as an ascetic only to return after realizing his folly and eventually settles down after finding a suitable livelihood and marrying the girl his parents choose for him. But behind the façade of this apparent simplicity, Narayan attempts something that is complex and potentially dangerous for a man who wished to make his living as a writer in British India.

In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon articulates the need of a different history that is not written by the colonizers: "...But I too can recover my past, and give it a value or blame it for my subsequent choices....If a white man disputes my human nature, I will show him, by making his life bear all my manly weight, that I am not the Y a bon banania that he still imagines....I am not History's prisoner....It is by overcoming what has been historically given, the instrumental, that I start the cycle of my freedom."<sup>2</sup> One finds Narayan expressing the need of resisting the British version of Indian history and creating a purified Indian history in his handling of the Historical Association. Colonial rule, which was hegemonic, depended heavily on the ability to hide from native Indians true historical facts, and also on the ability to distort historical events to suit their

purposes. In the novel, Ragavachar is a representative of that class of Indians which recognized the importance of a purified, national history in the struggle for independence. In his inaugural speech, Ragavachar makes it clear that the Historical Association has the aim of dispelling the darkness surrounding historical matters: "Great controversial fires were raging over very vital matters in Indian History. The public went about their business as if nothing was happening.... But he only wished to convey ... what a state of bloody feud existed in the realm of Indian History. True History was neither fiction nor philosophy. It was a hardy science.... If he were asked what the country needed more urgently, he would not say Self-Government or Economic Independence, but a clarified, purified Indian History."<sup>3</sup> Ragavachar significantly defines true history as a science, throwing light on the fact that history must deal with bare, raw facts. This history would bring self-knowledge and knowledge about the true nature of British rule at the same time, thus rendering Indians capable of self-government and economic independence.

Very significantly, the principal of Chandran's college is a white British man who apparently is on benevolent terms with his colleagues and students. However, very subtly we find Brown manipulating the minds of young Indian students in order to keep them from discovering the politics of imperialism. On the same day when Ragavachar delivers his speech, Brown also addresses the audience with a seemingly humorous but deeply calculating speech: "Like art, History must be studied for its own sake: and so, if you are to have an abiding interest in it, take it up after you leave the university. For outside the university you may read your history in any order; from the middle work back to the beginning of things or in any way you like, and nobody will measure how many facts you have rammed into your poor head. Facts are, after all, a secondary matter in real History".<sup>4</sup> From Mr. Brown's words it is clear that he advocates reading history as a pastime. He discourages a systematic reading of history so that his ideas seem to indicate a hidden agenda of keeping the Indians away from the truth, from real facts, from a realization of the true nature of British rule. According to him, facts are of secondary importance in real history. He clearly apprehends the danger that could arise due to a consciousness of real facts. The important role played by heads of institutions like Mr. Brown in British colonies is obvious from this example: wielding great power over the minds of thousands of students for several years, they had the ability to surreptitiously condition students in such a way that the status quo was maintained. Mr. Brown's role as guardian of British power is further evident in his reaction towards the paper that Veeraswami reads before the association entitled 'The Aids to British Expansion in India'. Narayan writes, "On a fateful day, to an audience of thirty-five, Veeraswami read his paper. It was the most violent paper ever read before an association. It pilloried Great Britain before the Association, and ended by hoping that the British would be ousted from India by force. Ragavachar, who was present at the meeting, felt very uncomfortable. Next day he received a note from Brown, the custodian of British prestige, suggesting that in future papers meant to be read before the Association should be first sent to him."<sup>5</sup>

In his keynote essay 'Of Mimicry and Man' Bhabha states that "the menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority".<sup>6</sup> In order to ensure its perpetuation, the colonized system required the colonized to mimic the colonizer. Yet as they were not European or white there was always a hybridization of the meanings thus produced. This subtle difference served as a site for resistance. Ania Loomba states that "...anti-colonial movements...drew upon western ideas and vocabularies to challenge colonial rule and hybridized what they borrowed by juxtaposing it with indigenous ideas...and even using it to assert cultural alterity...."<sup>7</sup> In the novel, Chandran's father attempts to mimic a medieval warrior in his attempt to catch the flower thief who turns out to be a sanyasi. The result is a hybridization of identities and ideals that serves to celebrate Indianness. Narayan's depiction is significant: "He behaved like a medieval warrior goaded by his ladylove into slaying a dragon. Father dropped a hint that the flower thief would be placed at her feet next day, alive or dead."<sup>8</sup> The Indian ideal of renunciation is pitted against the western ideal of chivalry and its total redundancy in Indian culture is evoked. While medieval chivalry had the objective of gaining the ladylove's favour and fame, Eastern asceticism was based on the ideal of selfless renunciation. A superb anti-climax subtly renders European ideals of gallantry absurd. On discovering the man to be a sanyasi, Chandran's mother insists respectfully that he be let off. Chandran's father's chivalric efforts are rendered purposeless when the ideals of chivalry and asceticism are juxtaposed, when the very nature of the theft itself is called into question. The sanyasi says: "As

for stealing flowers, flowers are there, God-given. What matters is whether you throw the flowers on the gods or I do it. It is all the same.”<sup>9</sup>

In *The Twice Born Fiction*, Meenakshi Mukherjee writes, “The fulfilment of oneself, however desirable a goal according to the individualistic ideals of Western society, has always been alien to Indian tradition....Sexual love and personal happiness, those two prime concerns of the Western novelist, do not have such central importance in the Indian context.”<sup>10</sup> Chandran falls obsessively in love with Malathi so that he is temporarily oblivious to the claims of his family. Malathi's parents refuse the match because their horoscopes do not match, and frustrated and angry, Chandran leaves home and becomes a sanyasi. However, for Chandran, asceticism becomes almost an antidote to romantic love. It liberates him from the cycle of desires and wants. He is able to recognize his selfishness and resist and reject his desire for Malathi as something alien to his cultural values. The author writes: “He railed against the memory, against love. There was no such thing; a foolish literary notion. If people didn't read stories they wouldn't know there was such a thing as love. It was a scorching madness.... And driven by a non-existent thing he had become a deserter and a counterfeit.”<sup>11</sup> It is his personal realization that love is illusory and non-existent. Having realized this he returns home to his parents, willing to start afresh. The total rejection of the selfish pursuit of romantic love, as something alien to his cultural values, comes a little later when he realizes that: “Love is only a brain affection; it led me to beg and cheat; to desert my parents; it is responsible for my mother's extra wrinkles and grey hairs, for my father's neglect of the garden....”<sup>12</sup>

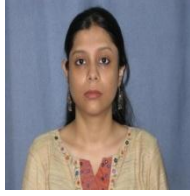
His choice of career, after his rejection of Malathi, is significant. Instead of going to England, he takes up the agency of a newspaper called ‘The Daily Messenger’. A reliable source describes the paper to his father as ‘non-party’ and ‘independent’. The novel closes with Chandran's arranged marriage to Susila with which Narayan celebrates Indianness, which can also be construed as a means of resisting English cultural imposition. The details of the wedding are noted with great care: the saffron touched paper, the gold-edged invitation cards, the fragrance of jasmine and sandal paste, the smokiness of the sacred fire.

To end I quote from Fanon: “After the conflict there is not only the disappearance of colonialism but also the disappearance of the colonized man....”<sup>13</sup>

#### **REFERENCES**

- [1] Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Post Colonialism*. Oxon: Routledge, 2005.155. Print.
- [2] <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/poldiscourse/fanon/escapes3.html> Accessed on 15th March, 2011
- [3] Narayan, R.K. *The Bachelor of Arts*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1999.36-37. Print.
- [4] *Ibid.* p38
- [5] *Ibid.* p45-46
- [6] <http://www.plectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/bhabha/mimicry.html> Accessed on 15th March, 2011
- [7] Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Post Colonialism*. Oxon: Routledge, 2005. 146. Print.
- [8] Narayan, R.K. *The Bachelor of Arts*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1999.41. Print.
- [9] *Ibid* p43
- [10] Mukherjee, Meenakshi .*The Twice Born Fiction*. New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1974. 28-29. Print.
- [11] Narayan, R.K. *The Bachelor of Arts*. Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1999.112. Print.
- [12] *Ibid* p124
- [13] <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/poldiscourse/fanon/escapes3.html> Accessed on 15th March, 2011

**AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**



**Debottama Roy** graduated with English Honours from Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata. She did her post graduation and M.Phil in English from the University of Calcutta. She qualified the State Eligibility Test for lectureship (SET) and has been enlisted in the present merit panel (English) of the West Bengal College Service Commission. She is working in the capacity of Assistant Teacher, English, in the Higher Secondary section of Kamala Chatterjee School for Girls (Govt-Aided), Kolkata. Her areas of research include postcolonial studies and Indian writing in English.