

The Deconstruction of Imperialist Discourse in the Siege of Krishnapur

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Abstract: As Jonathan Culler notes, deconstruction can be regarded as “a philosophical position, a political or intellectual strategy, and a mode of reading” (Culler, 1982, p. 85). By using deconstruction as a mode of reading, this paper tries to explore how J. G. Farrell deconstructs imperialist discourse in *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) with a post-colonial context. Farrell vividly describes the siege of the British in a fictional town, Krishnapur, which gives him the freedom to imaginatively deal with historical facts in this novel that is based on the Indian Rebellion of 1857. I argue that Farrell has successfully deconstructed imperialist discourse by inverting assumed inviolable binaries of ethical Western superiority/ native barbarism, the “self”/ the “other”, and civilized/ degenerated subjects between the colonizers and the colonized.

1. Introduction

Farrell appropriates the colonial history of the empire and comically reforms it to invert the binary opposition of Western superiority and native barbarism between the colonizers and the colonized in order to deconstruct the “beleaguered” imperialist discourse in *The Siege of Krishnapur*. At the beginning of the novel, the uncivilized India that is short of bricks, the symbols of civilization, is depicted. For example, “in either case, there is no comfort here, nothing that a European might recognize as a civilization...Bricks are undoubtedly an essential ingredient of the civilization” (Farrell, 1973, pp.1-2). According to this imperialist discourse, the colonizers are always one step ahead of the colonized, and the binary opposition of the “advanced” and the “backward” or Western superiority and native barbarism is established. However, what the travelers find later is that “the plain is not that quite deserted, as one might expect” and there are “tiny villages here and there” (Farrell, 1973, pp.3-4). In this way, Farrell’s description of the travelers’ misunderstanding of the landscape in India has mimicked the take-it-for-granted objectivity of imperialist discourse. Ryan D. Fong contends that this scene reveals the “gaps and fissures in Britain’s pretensions to superior knowledge”, and Farrell warns readers that they cannot read this text from the traditional Mutiny perspective, which privileges the western perspective (Fong, 2017, p.327). Farrell undermines ideological conventions that support imperialist discourse in a way by questioning their so-called superior knowledge and supposed objectivity.

Farrell reconstructs a certain vision of imperial history to reveal the sham of commerce,

civilization and Christianity. For example, the Padre tells the children that the products in the Great Exhibition are made by “someone with far greater knowledge than us, in other words...By God” (Farrell, 1973, p.116). In Padre’s view, the objects in the Exhibition not only stand for the empire’s economically and technologically superiority but also symbolize the faith of God. John Mcleod notes that Farrell sees the economic exploitation of the colonized by the colonizers, which underlies the veil of Christianity (Mcleod, 1994, p.122). In other words, Farrell points out the embrace of Christianity and capitalism in colonial activities during the siege of the Residency. Furthermore, the civilization that the colonizers declares to bring to the colonized is fatal. For instance, “the heads, perhaps not surprisingly, the most effective of all had been Shakespeare’s; it had scythed its way through a whole astonished platoon of sepoy” (Farrell, 1973, p.308). The objects in the Residency are used as missiles to kill the sepoy because of the lack of ammunition. As Chemmachery quotes from Goonetilleke, “even the trivia of Western civilization can be as fatal, lethal, as gun powder” (Chemmachery, 2018, pp.97-107). In this web of absurdity, the symbols of civilization are fatal rather than helpful for the sepoy, and this farce has strongly impinged the “Victorian mission”. Finally, like the Padre, the Collector has lost his faith in the “progress”. For instance, “culture is a sham. The Collector said simply. It’s a cosmetic painted on life by which rich people to conceal its ugliness” (Farrell, 1973, p.317). After suffering from the siege, the Collector asserts that culture is just a way to conceal the greed and ugliness of the colonizers. By revealing the failure of white man’s burden and the sham of capitalism, which is under the legitimization of Christianity, Farrell deconstructs ideological notions that support imperialist discourse with the help of reformulating the colonial history of the empire.

2. Degeneration of the “Self”

Farrell deconstructs the binary opposition of “the self” and “the other” between the colonizers and the colonized that supports imperialist discourse by the gradual degradation of the “self” represented by a pet spaniel, Chloë. At the beginning of *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the binary opposition of the “self” and the “other” between the colonizers and the colonized is established through different descriptions of Chloë and pariah dogs. The spaniel Chloë that is bought by Fleury has the same superior features as the colonizers, the “self”. Even the sepoy, salute “the pallor of the faces they glimpsed in the dim interior of the carriage (not to mention Chloë gilt curls)” (Farrell, 1973, p. 45). Due to its golden tresses, which are perceived as the symbols of superiority, Chloë has the equal treatment as its master, and it even sleeps “under the servant’s umbrella” (Farrell, 1973, p.62). On the contrary, pariah dogs are described as inferior animals. For instance, “hideously thin, fur eaten away by mange to the raw skin, endlessly and uselessly scratching, timorous, vicious, and very often half-crippled” (Farrell, 1973, p.168). The descriptions of pariah dogs are all negative words that form a sharp contrast with those of Chloë. In this way, the colonizers-centered binary opposition of “the self” and “the other” is established through the sharp contrast between the descriptions of Chloë and pariah dogs.

However, through the descriptions of the degradation of the “self” represented by the spaniel, Chloë, Farrell successfully undermines imperialist discourse. For example, “since he had last set eyes on her Chloë’s golden curls had grown foul and matted and in places, mange had already begun to remove them; a cloud of flies followed her and every few yards she stopped to scratch” (Farrell, 1973, p.324). Because of the shortage of food, Chloë wants to eat away the dead sepoy’s face. As Goonetilleke puts it, given the same situation, Chloë regresses to the same single level with pariah dogs, and there is no breed, birth, or border (Goonetilleke, 2003, p.419). Chloë’s golden curls that stand for superiority have been matted. Besides, like the degeneration of Chloë, the British suffer from the shortage of food, and they have lost their nobility and superiority during the siege.

For example, Miriam Lang, the spaniel's owner, searches the floor for the pearls that "she had dropped", and her hands are dirty (Farrell, 1973, p.72). Miriam gets down on the ground to look for the pearls that are scattered all over the floor with her dirty hands. Fong argues that the degeneration of Chloë and the soiling of the white body indicate the illusion of the continuity of the British rule (Fong, 2017, p.323). The degeneration of white bodies, which are used to justify the supremacy of the British blurs the boundary between the "self" and the "other" between the colonizers and the colonized.

3. Non-Representation of the "Other"

The silence of Indian people in *The Siege of Krishnapur* is an effective strategy to deconstruct the binary opposition of "the voiced" and "the voiceless" between the colonizers and the colonized within the imperialist discourse. The only individualized native, Hari, is depicted as a mimic man who has accepted the western education and addicted to "advanced" western products. As John Mcleod indicates, Farrell provides "the counter-hegemonic thought, a perspective critical of colonialism voiced from within the institutions of colonial power" (Mcleod, 1994, p.130). The non-presence of the native is a strength rather than a weakness. Moreover, Farrell critiques colonialism within its power, and he provides the counter-hegemonic thought with the help of the non-representation of the "other". For example,

"the Prime Minister was singing softly to himself when the collector came in and continued to do so all the time he was there...He realized that there was a whole way of life of the people in India which he would never get to know and which was totally indifferent to him and his concerns...All our reforms of administration might be reforms on the moon for all it has to do with them" (Farrell, 1973, p.249).

Compared with the mimic, Hari, Farrell takes pains to depict the Prime Minister as an opaquely exotic man. The Prime Minister who cannot speak English is silenced from the beginning to the end, and he never acts in a way that renders himself less impenetrable. He is the enigmatic embodiment of an inaccessible Indian culture because he is not affected by the colonial activities in India. The Collector finds that he cannot understand the exotic culture of India, and this establishes the colonizers as the "other". Ross demonstrates that the silence of colonized people may be one of the ways to resist and challenge the colonizers, and it also can be regarded as a kind of refusal to be included in the metropolitan discourse (Ross, 2005, p.63). The non-presence of the Indian people can be regarded as a strategy of articulating the voice of their own from the perspective of themselves.

The Indians who entertain themselves by witnessing the sufferings of foreign intruders are put in a higher position. For example,

"during the daytime, it had become the custom for a vast crowd of onlookers to assemble on the hillslope above the melon beds to witness the destruction of the Residency...This cheerful and multifarious crowd assembled every day beneath awnings, tents and umbrellas to watch the feringhees fighting for their lives" (Farrell, 1973, p.209).

In this novel, most Indians do not have names, and even for those who have their names, there is always something demeaning or degrading in their names, such as ram, monkey and ant. The passage quoted above vividly depicts the reaction of those Indians who cannot have their voice when the voiced, the British are under siege. The colonizers are surveyed through the perspective of the Indians that are put in a higher position at this moment, and in this way, the dominant imperialist discourse has been deconstructed.

4. Conclusion

J.G. Farrell successfully deconstructs three binaries of Western superiority/ native barbarism, the “self” and the “other”, and civilized/ degenerated subjects between the colonizers and the colonized that underpin imperialist discourse with the help of incorporating historical facts and reformulating them for new ends in *The Siege of Krishnapur*. Farrell reveals the economic factors behind imperialism and colonialism, and he also points out the hypocrisy of Christianity that is used to cover up the greed of capitalism by the colonizers. Then, through the degeneration of white bodies, which are used to justify the superiority of the colonizers, Farrell deconstructs the binary opposition of the “self” and the “other” between the colonizers and the colonized. Finally, the non-representation of the colonized in this novel can be regarded as a way of resisting and challenging the dominant discourse.

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