Colonization, Decolonization, and Post-Colonialism

By exploring literature from periods of colonization, decolonization, and post-colonialism, the multitude of effects from centuries of occupation become apparent. *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster takes place during the time of colonization, while *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie was written during decolonization, and *Swimming Lessons* by Rohinton Mistry during the post-colonial. Each of these texts provides a different perspective on the British influence in India and the results of the systematic oppression that is inherent of colonization.

The colonization of India by the British since the eighteenth century affected the citizens of the country in multiple ways. For centuries, Indians were dehumanized, animalized, and repressed into believing that their culture was not significant enough to maintain global importance. In her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism,* Ania Loomba describes the way that colonialism affected not only the citizens of India, but countless others: “Colonialism was not an identical process in different parts of the world but everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history” (2). Despite this—and perhaps because of it—literature expanded to encompass the themes troubling so many individuals as authors attempted to assert their position in a rapidly changing world.

The novel *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster was written in the 1920s and elaborates on the British occupation of the fictional town of Chandrapore, India. Adela Quested, a young and naïve British girl, travels to India with the hopes of experiencing the culture and visiting with those who had made the colony their home. Despite the fact that Quested believes herself to be apolitical, she plays a controversial role in the illustration of colonization and its effects on both the colonizer and the colonized. After being imputed with charges of sexual harassment against Quested, the protagonist—respected Indian doctor Aziz—is forced to question his previously amiable relationship with those in political power. While every individual colonizers’ level of involvement differs based on their social significance, there is no colonial who escapes accountability for the inhumanity and cultural destruction that occurs as a result of colonization.

As explained by Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, the accepting colonizer is one who believes in defending the cause of his mother country and is willing to participate actively in various aspects of degradation of the native peoples. Within a multitude of texts, this character is depicted as a righteous and authoritative male who asserts himself and his nation through societal, religious, or governmental influence. In *A Passage to India*, Ronny Heaslop closely resembles Memmi’s description of the colonizer who accepts: “The man is generally young, prudent, and polished. His backbone is tough, his teeth long. No matter what happens he justifies everything—the system and the officials in it” (46). Heaslop, as City Magistrate, is heartily invested in maintaining the colonial machinery and encouraging social divide. Rather than investigating the truth behind Quested’s allegation, Heaslop uses it to his advantage—either subconsciously or intentionally—to bolster his sense of entitlement and justification. This sentiment extended into the community as the colonial instrument of fear played its habituated role in racism:

They had started speaking of ‘women and children’—that phrase that exempts the male from sanity when it has been repeated a few times. Each felt that all he loved best in the world was at stake, demanded revenge, and was filled with a not unpleasing glow, in which the chilly and half-known features of Miss Quested vanished, and were replaced by all that is sweetest and warmest in the private life. (Forster 203)

As a result of this, the unfounded worries that arise in the men of the community spark racial hatred and propel the motivation to suppress native Indians by denying them any sense of legitimacy.

The animalization of the colonized becomes most apparent when Quested enters the Marabar caves. Overwhelmed with experiencing a “true India,” her senses are assaulted by the traditional scents she has been trained to hold in disdain. Although she does not directly refer to them as animals, the images from her point of view offer a highly racialized perspective:

The faint, indescribable smell of the bazaars invaded her, sweeter than a London slum, yet more disquieting: a tuft of scented cotton wool, wedged in an old man’s ear, fragments of pan between his black teeth, odorous powders, oils—the Scented East of tradition, but blended with human sweat…as if the head of the sun had boiled and fried all the glories of the earth into a single mess (Forster 257).

Although the results of colonization weighed heavily on the citizens of India, they quickly realized the importance of cultural unity in their quest to reclaim their country. By returning to conventional values such as intelligence, wisdom, and adherence to tradition, Indian people were able to regain their sense of significance in our ever-changing world. In addition, the acceptance of the natural—including those bodily fluids which are normally viewed with distaste—became an imperative means of reconstructing a national philosophy. “Effects of Colonization on Indian Thought” examines the gravity of India maintaining her prominence to not only its own citizens, but people all over the world: “To recover her true genius in a new body is the task now facing India. She needs it not only for herself but for the world, as the West is fast being sucked into its own emptiness” (Danino). Though her body had been defiled by the presence of the colonizer, India was charged with reclaiming her nationalism by congregating individuals with a unified cause.

After centuries of occupation, India was able to gain independence from her captors by reversing the modes of colonization that had been forced upon them. By invalidating the negative connotations associated with bodily refuse, authors of this time were able to take hold of their past and prescribe the cure to colonization—a complete rejection of those ideas that had been used against them. In his book *Indian Literature in English: New Perspectives*, K. V. Surendran explains the perspective of novelist Mulk Raj Anand through direct quote, “I believe that creating literature is the true medium of humanism as against systematic philosophies because the wisdom of the heart encourages insights in all kinds of human beings who grow to self-conscious through the conflicts of desire, will and mood” (2). Because literature is often representative of the time in which it was written, texts written during the time of decolonization explore the universal issues that arise as a direct result of colonization—a “systematic philosophy”. Not only do texts reflect the state of the times, but they also affect the future by inspiring those who are ignorant to the problems of colonization.

*Midnight’s Children*, written by Salman Rushdie in 1981, gives an account of protagonist Saleem Sinai as he struggles to grow and thrive in the recently-freed state. Born at the stroke of midnight on the day of India’s independence, Sinai and the hundreds of other “Midnight’s Children” experience the remnants of colonization as they determine their role in the formation of their country. Through the tropes of urination, mucus, defecation, and bodily injury, Rushdie explores the multiple modes of decolonization and the psychological repercussions of centuries of repression. In his critical text regarding Rushdie titled *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children*, Neil Ten Kortenaar highlights the way in which these physical tropes are representative of a larger issue:

The many physical manifestations of abstract or mental phenomena in the novel operate, Patricia Merivale suggests (Merivale 1999, 126), as “objective correlatives,” T.S. Eliot’s term for “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of [a] *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked (Eliot 1975, 48) (Kortenaar 51).

By actively rejecting the foundations of colonized ideals, strengthening the country’s collective unity, and placing importance on the individual, Sinai and his peers actively search to restore the pride and self-awareness of their mother country.

Previously, the colonizer would display his superiority by undermining the colonized through animalization. During Sinai’s childhood, he is exposed to the colonizer’s presence in the educational systems when his teacher humiliates him in front of the class: “Zagallo is laughing now. ‘You don’t see?’ he guffaws. “In the face of thees ugly ape you don’t see the whole map of India” (Rushdie 265). Despite the fact that he is in a position of power, Sinai’s teacher Zagallo seeks to impart his ignorant beliefs about Indians by disgracing his own student. As Zagallo is not a native of India, his prejudicial remarks are a prime example of the way the colonizer asserted psychological dominance over the colonized. Not only is Zagallo influencing the children to prolong racist intentions by referring to Saleem as an ape, but he is also demeaning the country by comparing it to the face of a child. Immediately rising to the cause of rejecting the colonizer, Saleem proceeds to let a large ball of mucus fall directly into his teacher’s hand as he is restraining him by the hair. Although he is relatively young, Saleem understands the significance of standing up against the colonizer by remaining true to his culture’s acceptance of bodily functions.

Saleem also rejects the colonizer by reiterating the purity of excrement through his omniscient sense of smell. After being drained of the mucus that had previously allowed his connection to the Midnight’s Children, Sinai is given a powerful sense of smell that often assists him in his quest for self-identification. Upon arriving in the metropolis of Bombay, he is overwhelmed by the smells of civilization and reverts to the aromas of antiquity: “…turning away from these olfactory imitations, I concentrated on the all-pervasive and simpler odors of (human) urine and animal dung (Rushdie 517). Rather than appreciating the changes that his country has undergone because of colonization, Saleem discards them as “imitations”—something that could never take the place of his traditional values. As Saleem and his peers were confronted with the task of keeping out all things foreign, they were also responsible for the restoration of India’s national pride and sense of unity.

Sinai’s live-in lover, Padma, becomes integral to the plot as she stands in for the reader in questioning Saleem’s narration. Often representative of the ideal “old world” Indian woman, Padma’s name connects the respect for the natural with India’s return to a traditional ideology. In our first introduction to Padma, Saleem explains a rather literal situation of one worshipping excrement: “Perhaps even her name: understandably enough, since her mother told her, when she was only small, that she had been named after the lotus goddess, whose most common appellation amongst village folk is “The One Who Possesses Dung” (Rushdie 20). Because it is her mother who enlightens Padma to the meaning of her name, Rushdie is acknowledging the existence of past generations as being prominent in the future identity of India. A goddess, in the most general sense of the term, exists specifically to be worshipped. Despite being associated with excrement, The Dung Goddess is a figure to be respected because she is a part of customary Indian creed. Similarly, the reference to “village folk” strengthens the implications of a return to a less technological time. Padma is given the opportunity to defend her title, saying “In my village there is no shame in being named for the Dung Goddess” (Rushdie 29). Because she does not have the same associations with dung as those who have been colonized, she does not experience the shame that is placed on her by the colonizer. By retaining faith in her culture, Padma shows that it is possible to exist in a post-colonial society while holding beliefs that were straightforwardly disallowed by the colonizer. Individuals such as Padma show the way that uncolonized minds affect the feelings of the colonized by reminding them of the validity of their history.

The period of post-colonization that occurred from 1980 to the present was marked with innovative literature that attempted to give voice to the new generation of India. After both the colonization and decolonization, there arose a need for a branch of studies to dissect the various social, economic, political, and psychological effects on the citizens of India. Post-colonial studies address this need by presenting a depiction of the modern Indian as he forges toward the future while still trying to make sense of his past.

*Swimming Lessons* was written by Rohinton Mistry in 1997 and is a collection of short stories regarding the citizens of Firozsha Baag—an apartment complex in post-colonial Bombay, India. During the time of post-colonialism, citizens of India attempted to show their autonomy while still recognizing the elements of colonization that remain present in their culture. As the animalization of individuals had been a technique of dehumanization for British colonizers, members of Firozsha Baag call attention to the damage that has been caused by elaborating on tropes of defecation. In his essay, *States of Belonging: Pluralism, Migrancy, Literature*, Ranu Samantrai explains Mistry’s reasoning behind choosing the protagonists of his stories to be middle-class Parsis: “But the stories of the families in these flats make clear the extensive presence of the West in their lives: in mundane reminders of the continuing impact of the Raj… and in the continual movement between India and North America” (Samantrai). While some may assume the lives of the middle-class to be comfortable, even those who are not financially strained experience hardships as a result of Western influence.

Although the individual colonizers may have left the country, the remnants of colonial thought persuade the colonized to maintain Western perspectives. One of the most venerated post-colonial texts is *Orientalism* by the esteemed literary theorist Edward Said. In a larger discussion about the effects of Western ideology, Said asserts that post-colonial literature has global benefits as it makes India more visible to the average foreigner: “If the world has become immediately accessible to a Western citizen living in the electronic age, the Orient too has drawn nearer to him, and is now less a myth” (26). Though the negative effects of colonization are often discussed more than the positive, post-colonial literature is a result of occupation and spreads the stories of Eastern culture to a Western audience. At the same time, Said asserts that this does not completely clarify the Eurocentrism that effects the West; the phrase “less of a myth” implies that there is an element of enigma that cannot be conquered.

This distance between perception of reality and reality itself is expressed in the story “One Sunday” as the narrator explains nature of the sewer system in the neighboring apartment complex, Tar Gully. Described as being lower in status, the residents of Tar Gully frequently spit and jeer at the residents of Firozsha Baag that pass through. Returning to the trope of feces, the narrator comments on the difference in perception of the native citizens and foreigners: “The gutters of Tar Gully were notorious for their erratic habits and their stench, although the latter was never noticed by the denizens” (Mistry 35). While the gutters are described as being well-known for their repulsive qualities, those who have been exposed to them for a significant period of time are not as offended by their presence. Rather than discarding the importance of the gutters because of their connection to the abject as the colonizer would have done, the citizens of Tar Gully accept the incorporation of these sewers because of their ultimate benefit for society.

The presence of the sewers within the short story serves to mirror colonial relationships in modern Indian class relationships. According to Bindu Malieckal, the true symbolism behind the gutters represent the refusal of the abject that had previously been ascribed to the colonizer: “For the Parisis of Firozsha Baag, Tar Gully’s inhabitants are thought to be less refined than Parsis, and Tar Gully is considered to be a place of depravity that releases only refuse” (Malieckal). In this instance, the Parsis—or the majority of citizens in Firozsha Baag—stand in for the colonizer because they permit the continuation of degradation among countrymen.

An extremely memorable story within *Swimming Lessons* is “Squatters,” in which the neighborhood story-teller regales children with the tale of Sarosh, an Indian immigrant in Canada. After having spent his entire life squatting on the traditional ground-level Indian toilet, Sarosh was unable to defecate in the foreign Western toilet bowl. Largely symbolic of assimilation, Mistry explains the all too familiar predicament: “Daily for a decade had Sarosh suffered this position. Morning after morning, he had no choice but to climb up and simulate the squat of our Indian latrines” (Mistry) 153. As explained further in the text, other Indian immigrants suffered from similar digestive problems because of their unfamiliarity with American cuisine. The use of the word “simulate” further complicates Sarosh’s position; the post-colonial Indian remains affected by colonization and still feels the need to assimilate into a culture different than their own. This simulation implies an inability to achieve any equal recognition and ultimately, a distinct personal distance from reality. Although India had been independent for nearly fifty years prior to the writing of *Swimming Lessons*, the impact of Western influence remains nearly as strong as it was during colonization.

Mistry combats Western influence by portraying defecation in a more positive, accepted light. Although the process may differ across cultures, the ability to release one’s bowels is essential to a comfortable existence. The obstacle is met by a strength of will and reliance on traditional culture: “But Sarosh did not give up trying. Each morning he seated himself to push and grunt, grunt and push, squirming and writhing unavailingly on the white plastic oval. Exhausted, he then hopped up, expert at balancing now, and completed the movement quite effortlessly” (Mistry 156). The attempt to defecate is repetitive, painful, and unavailing, despite the physical exertion that Sarosh endures during the “grunt, grunt and push, squirming and writhing.” Although this process proves trying, Sarosh relieves himself by accepting the physical demands of Eastern habitation in Western society. In fact, his ability to manipulate his actions to conform to Western tradition is described as being “expert” because he has spent a decade perfecting the imitation.

While colonization could never be viewed as a positive experience, the individuals who were charged with enduring such conditions ultimately benefitted because of their own strength of will. Centuries of repression created a society that was capable of continuously modifying both themselves and their beliefs while maintaining a sense of identity and belonging within Indian customs. Despite being dehumanized, animalized, and disgraced through the demonizing of bodily fluids, those who encountered colonial influence reversed the tropes of their oppressors and effectively recreated their senses of both nationalism and individual pride. Post-colonial literature, as a result of all that had come before it, embodies the struggle of the Indian individual in today’s global society while informing the Western audience of the damage it has caused and the authority it still holds over one of the world’s most complex, philosophical, and persevering cultures.

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