

**ABDUL JANMOHAMED**  
**"THE ECONOMY OF MANICHEAN ALLEGORY:**  
**THE FUNCTION OF RACIAL DIFFERENCE IN COLONIALIST LITERATURE" (1986)**

JanMohamed argues that much criticism on colonialist literature "restricts itself by bracketing the political context of culture and history" (78). What he calls "humanist closure" (78) requires the critic to "avoid an analysis of the domination, manipulation, exploitation, and disenfranchisement that are inevitably involved in the construction of any cultural artifact or relationship" (78). This is true of critics of colonialist literature as varied as Molly Mahood and Homi Bhabha. Such theorists / critics ignore "Fanon's definition of the conqueror / native relation as a 'Manichean' struggle--a definition that is not a fanciful metaphoric caricature but an accurate representation of a profound conflict" (79). The "manichean allegory" (80) is the "central trope" (80) of an entire colonialist "economy" (80) of representation that is based on a transformation of racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference. Though the phenomenological origins of this metonymic transformation may lie in the 'neutral' perception of physical difference (skin colour, physical features, and such), its allegorical extensions come to dominate every facet of imperialist mentality. (80)

Some of the works of even the "most enlightened and critical colonial writers eventually succumb to a narrative organisation based on racial / metaphysical oppositions" (80) that are flexible to accommodate "any situation" (80).

JanMohamed begins by offering a "brief appraisal of the social, political, and economic ambience of colonial society" (80) in which such "duplicitous tropes" (80) are generated and of the "function of colonialist fiction" (80) within this ambience. Sounding a Marxist note, he argues that the "perception of racial difference is . . . influenced by economic motives" (80), even though ultimately not reducible to these: prior to colonialism, Africans were "perceived in a more or less neutral and benign light" (80) whereas afterwards, they came to be characterised "as the epitome of evil and barbarity" (80). Colonial societies are, he contends, deeply "pathological societies" (80) because of this. JanMohamed distinguishes between the "dominant" (80) phase of colonialism (stretching from the earliest European conquest to independence) and the "hegemonic phase of colonialism (or neocolonialism)" (80), that is, the period since independence. The "moment of 'independence'--with the natives' obligatory, ritualised acceptance of Western forms of parliamentary government--marks the formal transition to hegemonic colonialism" (81).

JanMohamed also distinguishes between the "material practices" (81) of colonialism and its "discursive ideological practices" (80). During the dominant period, "European colonisers exercise direct and continuous bureaucratic control and military coercion of the natives" (80). At this stage, the "indigenous peoples are subjugated by colonialist material practices" (81), such as "policies of population transfers, gerrymandering of borders, and forced production" (80). However, "colonialist discursive practices, particularly its literature, are not very useful in controlling the conquered group at this early stage" (81) because the "native is not subjugated, nor does his culture disintegrate, simply because a European characterises both as savage" (81). By contrast, during the hegemonic phase, the natives accept a version of the colonisers' entire system of values, attitudes, morality, institutions, and, more important, mode of production. This stage of imperialism does rely on the active and direct 'consent' of the dominated, though, of course, the threat of military coercion is always in the background. (81)

The process of "internalisation of Western cultures begins before the end of the dominant

phase" (81), the nature and speed of which depending on "local circumstances" (81) and the emphasis placed on "interpellation by various colonial policies" (81) (i.e. the degree to which the coloniser is intent upon fashioning the identity of the colonised in the image of his own). JanMohamed's interest is colonial discursive practices during the dominant phase and, particularly, in colonialist literature produced therein, rather than the Post-colonial literature of the hegemonic phase.

Alluding not just to Fanon and Hegel but also to a psychoanalyst called Jacques Lacan (and, in particular, his notions of the 'imaginary' and the 'symbolic'), JanMohamed summarises the colonial situation as follows:

If every desire is at base a desire to impose oneself on another and to be recognised by the Other, then the colonial situation provides an ideal context for the fulfilment of that fundamental drive. The colonialist's military superiority ensures a complete projection of his self on the Other: exercising his assumed superiority, he destroys without any significant qualms the effectiveness of indigenous economic, social, political, legal, and moral systems and imposes his own versions of these structures on the Other. By thus subjugating the native, the European settler is able to compel the Other's recognition of him and, in the process, allow his own identity to become deeply dependent on his position as a master. This enforced recognition from the Other in fact amounts to the European's narcissistic self-recognition since the native, who is considered too degraded and inhuman to be credited with any specific subjectivity, is cast as . . . a recipient of the negative elements of the self that the European projects onto him. This transitivity and the preoccupation with the inverted self-image mark the 'imaginary' relations that characterise the colonial encounter. (85-86)

However, the "gratification that this situation affords" (86) is impaired by the European's "alienation from his own unconscious desire" (86).

JanMohamed accordingly distinguishes between the "covert and overt aspects of colonialism" (81). The covert purpose is to "exploit the colony's natural resources thoroughly and ruthlessly through the various imperialist material practices" (81). The overt aim of "colonial discourse" (81), "embedded as an assumption in all colonialist literature" (81), is to "'civilise' the savage, to introduce him to all the benefits of Western cultures" (81). In colonialist texts, there is a "vociferous insistence, indeed . . . a fixation, upon the savagery and the evilness of the native" (81) and an attempt to "demonstrate that the barbarism of the native is irrevocable" (81). Such a focus ought to alert us to the "real function" (81) of such texts: "to justify imperial occupation and exploitation" (81). There is, accordingly, a "rigorous subconscious logic" (81) defining the "relations between the covert and overt policies and between the material and discursive practices of colonialism" (81). Focusing on the dominant phase of colonialism, JanMohamed contends that the "ideological functions of colonialist fiction" (81) must be understood less "in terms of its putative or even real effects on the native but in terms of the exigencies of domestic--that is, European and colonialist--politics and culture" (81-82). Accordingly, the "function of racial difference, of the fixation on and fetishisation of native savagery and evil" (82) in colonialist literature must also be mapped in terms of those exigencies and ideological imperatives" (82).

JanMohamed then turns his attention to the "relation of the individual author to the field of colonial discourse" (82). He points out that the:

dominant pattern of relations that controls the text within the colonialist context is determined by economic and political imperatives and changes, such as slavery, that are external to the discursive field itself. The dominant model of power- and interest- relations in all colonial societies is the manichean

opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native. This axis in turn provides the central feature of the colonialist cognitive framework and colonialist literary representation: the manichean allegory--a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilisation and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object. (82)

Even writers "highly critical of imperialist exploitation" (82) are sometimes sucked into the "vortex" (82) of this model because s/he is "easily seduced by colonial privileges and profits and forced by various ideological factors . . . to conform to the prevailing racial and cultural preconceptions" (82). Some Post-colonial writers (e.g. V. S. Naipaul) are also seduced in this way, JanMohamed claims.

JanMohamed turns his attention next to the question of representation and the reception of imperialist fiction. He argues that

since the object of representation--the native--does not have access to these texts ([primarily] because of linguistic barriers . . .), imperialist fiction tends to be unconcerned with the truth-value of its representation. In fact, since such literature does not so much re-present as present the native for the first time, it is rarely concerned with overtly affirming the reader's experience of his own culture and therefore does not really solicit his approval. Just as imperialists 'administer' the resources of the conquered country, colonialist discourse 'commodifies' the native subject into a stereotyped object and uses him as a 'resource' for colonialist fiction. The European writer commodifies the native by negating his individuality, his subjectivity, so that he is now perceived as a generic being that can be exchanged for any other native (they all look alike, act alike, and so on). Once reduced to his exchange-value in the colonialist signifying system, he is fed into the manichean allegory, which functions as the currency, the medium of exchange, for the entire colonialist discursive system. . . . Within such a representational economy, the writer's task is to 'administer' the relatively scarce resources of the manichean opposition in order to reproduce the native in a potentially infinite variety of images, the apparent diversity of which is determined by the simple machinery of the manichean allegory. (82-83)

There is, as a result, a "profound symbiotic relationship" (83) between the discursive and the material practices of colonialism in that the "discursive practices do to the symbolic, linguistic presence of the native" (83) what the material practices "do to his physical presence" (83). The writer "commodifies him so that he can be exploited more efficiently by the administrator who, of course, obliges by returning the favour in kind" (83).

JanMohamed contends that colonialist literature is an exploration and a representation of a world at the boundaries of 'civilisation,' a world that has not yet been domesticated by European signification or codified in detail by its ideology. The world is therefore perceived as uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable, and ultimately evil. Motivated by his desire to conquer and assimilate, the imperialist configures the colonial realm as a confrontation based on differences in race, language, social customs, cultural values, and modes of production. (83)

Faced with an

incomprehensible and multifaceted alterity, the European theoretically has the option of responding to the Other in terms of identity or difference. If he assumes that he and the Other are essentially identical, then he would tend to

ignore the significant divergences and to judge the Other according to his own cultural values. If, on the other hand, he assumes that the Other is irremediably different, then he would have little incentive to adopt the viewpoint of that alterity: he would again turn to the security of his own cultural perspective. Genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his own culture. . . . [However,] this entails in practice the virtually impossible task of negating one's very being, precisely because one's culture is what formed that being. Moreover, the coloniser's invariable assumption about his moral superiority means that he will rarely question the validity of his own or his society's formation and that he will not be inclined to expend any energy in understanding the worthless alterity of the colonised. By thus subverting the traditional dialectic of self and Other . . . so important in the formation of self and culture, the assumption of moral superiority subverts the very potential of colonialist literature. Instead of being an exploration of the racial Other, such literature merely affirms its own ethnocentric assumptions; instead of actually depicting the outer limits of 'civilisation,' it simply codifies and preserves the structures of its own mentality. (83-84)

As a result, the "surface" (84) of colonialist literature "purports to represent specific encounters with specific varieties of the racial Other" (84) while the "subtext valorises the superiority of European cultures, of the collective process that has mediated the representation" (84). This is why colonialist literature is "essentially specular: instead of seeing the native as a bridge toward syncretic possibility, it uses him as a mirror that reflects the colonialist's self-image" (84).

For this reason, JanMohamed argues that colonialist literature is divisible into two broad categories: "imaginary" (84) and "symbolic" (84) texts. The former's emotive as well as the cognitive intentionalities . . . are structured by objectification and aggression. In such works, the native functions as an image of the imperialist self in such a manner that it reveals the latter's self-alienation. Because of the subsequent projection involved in this context, the 'imaginary' novel maps the European's intense internal rivalry. The 'imaginary' representation of indigenous people tends to coalesce the signifier with the signified. In describing the attributes and actions of the native, issues such as intention, causality, extenuating circumstances, and so forth are completely ignored; in the 'imaginary' colonialist realm, to say 'native' is automatically to say 'evil' and to evoke immediately the economy of the manichean allegory. The writer of such texts tends to fetishise a nondialectical, fixed opposition between the self and the native. (84)

In other words, a strict binary opposition is set up between self and other, coloniser and colonised with no 'in-betweenity' being allowed. 'Imaginary' texts include the works of writers like Joyce Cary.

On the other hand, JanMohamed argues, writers of 'symbolic' texts are more aware of the inevitable necessity of using the native as a mediator of European desires. Grounded more firmly and securely in the egalitarian imperatives of Western societies, these authors tend to be more open to a modifying dialectic of self and Other. They are willing to examine the specific and cultural differences between Europeans and natives and to reflect on the efficacy of European values, assumptions, and habits in contrast to those of native cultures. 'Symbolic' texts . . . thematise the problem of colonialist

mentality and its encounter with the racial Other. . . . (85)

'Symbolic' texts (JanMohamed's real focus in this essay) can in turn be sub-divided into two categories: one kind, represented by E. M. Forster's A Passage to India and Rudyard Kipling's Kim, "attempts to find syncretic solutions to the manichean opposition of the coloniser and the colonised" (85) and overlaps in so doing in some ways with the 'imaginary' text: those portions of such symbolic texts "controlled by cognitive intentionality" (85) are "structured by the rules of the 'symbolic' order" (85) while those portions "organised at the emotive level are structured by 'imaginary' identification" (85). Such texts are "conceived in the 'symbolic' realm of intersubjectivity, heterogeneity, and particularity" (85), JanMohamed argues, but are "seduced by the specularity of 'imaginary' Otherness" (85) and, as such, "better illustrate the economy and power of the manichean allegory than do the strictly 'imaginary' text" (85). The second type, represented by the novels of Joseph Conrad and Nadine Gordimer, "realises that syncretism is impossible within the power relations of colonial society because such a context traps the writer in the libidinal economy of the 'imaginary'" (85). By rigorously examining the "'imaginary' mechanism of colonialist mentality, this type of fiction manages to free itself from the manichean allegory" (85).