

The Construction of Other Images in British Literature from a Postcolonial Perspective

Jing Hu

Sichuan University Jinjiang College, Meishan 620860, China

Abstract: *This paper is based on the core concerns of postcolonial criticism theory, and conducts a systematic and in-depth exploration of the construction, evolution, and inherent power relations of the "other" image in the long evolution of British literature. The research aims to penetrate the surface of literary aesthetics and reveal the intricate conspiracy and tension between narrative behavior and imperial politics. The article first clarifies the essence of the "other" as a philosophical and social construction category in postcolonial theory, and demonstrates the unique efficacy of literary writing in naturalizing and emotionalizing this political construction. Subsequently, the paper outlines the macro picture of the evolution of the image of the other with the rise and fall of the empire's fate from a diachronic perspective: from the exotic wonders of the Age of Discovery, to the hierarchical mirror projection serving civilization and education during the colonial peak, to the mixed and contradictory representations arising from identity anxiety in the post imperial era. The core of the research lies in a detailed typological analysis of several paradigmatic Other images in classic British literary texts, including the silent aesthetic object under Orientalist discourse, the existence of historical subjectivity deprived in barbarian narratives, the gendered Other as a dual projectile of desire and fear, the marginalized groups defined within the empire to consolidate central identity, and the rebellious Other with deconstructive potential that vaguely emerges in discourse gaps. This article ultimately points out that the literary construction of the image of the other is a continuous and dynamic process of power practice, which not only shapes the understanding and rule of colonies in history, but also profoundly influences identity negotiation and ethical relationships in global cultural politics in the post colonial era. A critical examination of this process is an essential dimension for understanding the entirety of British literature and its connection to world history.*

Keywords: Postcolonial criticism; English literature; Other image; Imperial narrative; Discourse construction; Cultural representation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The glorious hall of British literature is deeply rooted in the complex geological structure of China's global colonial history. Literature is not just a reflection of national emotions and artistic genius in centuries of interaction. It is a powerful practice of imagination, construction, and defense in participating in the modern world order, especially the imperial order centered on Europe. Among them, the literary expression of the "other" system is the main part of cultural and political engineering. The term 'other' referred to here does not refer to objective cultural diversity or individual differences, but rather to a set of discourse practices interwoven with knowledge production, aesthetic taste, and power will, shaping the image and category that is opposed to the 'self' (which is generally assumed to be a rational, civilized, male, white, European normative subject), of different qualities, and often in a subordinate position. The emergence of postcolonial theory has endowed our analytical work with a very detailed critical weapon, allowing us to peel off the ideological operation mechanisms hidden beneath literary images that appear natural and somewhat exotic. This article attempts to conduct an in-depth textual archaeology, questioning a series of interconnected issues. In the complex narrative context of British literature, how are colonial residents, the Eastern world, women, and marginalized groups constantly written about and endowed with relatively fixed cultural meanings? What discourse logic and aesthetic rules govern the shaping of these images? How did they make strategic adjustments and changes along the trajectory of the rise and fall of the British Empire? More importantly, what kind of interaction and collusion exist between the otherization operation in literature and the real colonial rule, racism, and gender oppression? By exploring this issue, it is not only to reinterpret literary classics and discover their colonial unconscious obscured by the romanticism halo, but also to understand how narrative itself, as a powerful technology of power, shapes perception, weaves history, and naturalizes unequal relationships into eternal stories. Therefore, it is a dual journey through text and historical fog, and its endpoint is not a simple moral condemnation, but a more sober and critical cultural consciousness to deal with the "other" construction drama that still frequently appears in the world today and takes on new forms [1].

2. "OTHER" AS A CATEGORY OF PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

To conduct a thorough analysis of the image of the Other in British literature, it is first necessary to clarify the specific meaning of the concept of the 'Other' in postcolonial theory. Its philosophical roots can be traced back to Hegel's dialectics of self-awareness relying on the recognition of the "other", and later phenomenology and existentialist philosophy constantly questioned the relationship between the "other" and the "self". In the philosophical speculation of the other, 'the other' is a necessary condition for self determination of boundaries and self reflection. But the driving force of postcolonial theory lies in its historicization, politicization, and concretization of this abstract philosophical relationship. From the perspectives of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and others, the production of the 'other' in the colonial context is a unilateral and violent 'discourse requisition'. Colonial power does not passively face an established, external 'other', but actively and systematically constructs an 'other' that meets its own governance needs. This construction process relies on a rigorous binary opposition coding system, where reason corresponds to irrationality, civilization corresponds to barbarism, progress corresponds to stagnation, men correspond to women (or feminization), adulthood corresponds to immaturity, and history corresponds to the eternal and unchanging present. European colonizers placed themselves in a superior position in the former category, while groups such as colonized people, Easterners, and indigenous peoples were placed in a lowly position in the latter category. Its purpose is to essentialize and grade cultural differences, and turn accidental historical power relations into inevitable natural order. Therefore, the Other from a postcolonial perspective is not primarily an ontological fact, but an epistemological event that provides a knowledge-based construct for the legitimacy of colonial rule. It deeply penetrated into public consciousness through academic works, geographical surveys, language research, racial classification, and especially influential literature and art, causing the image of the world in the eyes of colonizers to be mistaken for the world itself. The sinister aspect of construction lies in its frequent appearance in the form of objective description, scientific classification, or aesthetic appreciation, thus concealing its inherent power will and interest drive[2].

3. THE HISTORICAL CHANGES IN THE NARRATIVE OF EMPIRES AND THE IMAGE OF OTHERS

3.1 Outline of Primitive Exotic Scenery in the Adventure Chronicle Text

The systematic portrayal of the 'other' in British literature can be traced back to the tumultuous explorations, navigation logs, and early travel literature of the Age of Discovery. During this period, Europe's global expansion had just begun, and the unknown world sparked endless imagination and pursuit. The image of 'other' in the text is associated with 'novelty', 'strangeness', and 'unnamed'. Whether it is John Mandeville's fantastical travelogue (although its authenticity is questionable), Sir Walter Raleigh's enticing and erroneous report on the "Golden Country" of Guyana, or early navigators' accounts of the lives of residents along the African coast and in the New World of America, they all exhibit a tendency to sensationalize exotic cultures. The physical characteristics, decorative customs, religious rituals, and social structure of local residents are examined and depicted in front of the only mirror of European civilization, resulting in a distorted reflection with a strong self-centered color. They are sometimes portrayed as innocent and noble savages living in a natural state, sometimes as idol worshippers and eccentric monsters, and sometimes seen as immature or backward due to different material cultures (lacking the European concept of "property" or political organization). Early representations did not yet form the rigorous ideological system of the 19th century, often carrying sincere surprise, considerations of commercial interests, passion for preaching, and fear of the unknown. But its basic epistemological framework has been established, which is to measure and define all other groups of people in the world using European experience, values, and classification systems. The thinking mode of quickly transforming differences into differences and ranking them in order laid the foundation for a more systematic colonial ideology in the future. These texts not only brought geographical knowledge about the world to European readers, but also shaped the initial boundaries in cultural imagination coordinates, drawing the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' both geographically and psychologically.

3.2 The Civilization Level Mirror Reflected by Literature during the Colonial Flourishing Period

With the completion of the Industrial Revolution and the formation of a global colonial network, Britain reached the peak of its imperial power in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Correspondingly, literature during this period became the central cultural field of imperial ideology, especially the hierarchical order of civilization. The shaping of the image of others has reached a very conscious, typified, and politicized level during this period. In Charles Dickens' cartoonish satire of colonial immigrants, in Rudyard Kipling's nostalgic and admonishing Indian stories, in Joseph Conrad's deep exploration of the dark agenda of colonialism, and in numerous "boy adventure novels" (works by R.M. Barantan and G.A. Henty) aimed at the public, a clear picture of world civilization is repeatedly outlined. In this context, the Anglo Saxon race and culture hold a paramount position, endowed with the

"civilizational mission" of bringing light, order, law, and the Christian gospel into those races that are still in their "childhood" or "darkness". Literary narrative cleverly constructs a binary symbol system, with tropical jungles symbolizing chaos, barbarism, and conquering natural forces, while European cities representing rationality, cleanliness, and technology are its opposite[3]. The depth of skin color has become a direct measure of moral and intellectual level, and the so-called "Eastern" authoritarianism, laziness, and cunning are used to highlight the superiority of Western democracy, diligence, and honesty. The colonial people did not acquire a complete personality and inner world. They were either honest and obedient "good barbarians" (Friday) who obeyed the arrangements of their white masters, or cunning and vicious "bad barbarians" who proved their despicable humanity, or numerous, boundless background groups waiting for the tide of history (i.e. Western civilization) to engulf them. Literary representation has a strong disciplinary effect. On the one hand, it forms a universal sense of national superiority and destiny in the center of the empire, providing moral impetus for colonial expansion. On the other hand, it attempts to "educate" the colonized into objects that accept their subordinate status. Even in works that expose colonial atrocities, such as Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," he remains a silent, contextualized presence, with the moral crisis of the colonizers at the center of the story, a self-centered gaze.

4. A TYPOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE IMAGE OF THE OTHER IN CLASSIC BRITISH LITERARY TEXTS

4.1 The Silent Object Woven by Orientalist Imagination

Edward Said conducted an in-depth analysis of "Orientalism" in his groundbreaking work "Orientalism", which became the key to interpreting a large category of other images in English literature. Orientalism is not a grasp of the true knowledge of the East, but a discourse system constructed by the West to govern, reshape, and authoritarian the East. In English Romantic poetry, the East (the Near East, the Middle East) is often regarded as a dream world with exotic atmosphere, mystery, sensual indulgence and tyranny, Türkiye in Byron's Pagan, and the fantastic mood in Coleridge's Kublai Khan. This aestheticized East satisfies Europe's romantic imagination of diversity, but fundamentally it fixes the East in an eternal past, depriving it of its historical development and dynamic changes. In Victorian literature and travel literature, Eastern images became even more complex, serving the ideology of the empire. It is a stage for European adventurers and gold miners to fulfill their desires and ambitions, as well as a chaotic place that needs to be regulated by European rationality, science, and Christian order. Eastern characters have been flattened, they are cunning eunuchs, resentful women in deep chambers, mysterious wise men, or loyal servants. Their existence only serves to highlight the bravery, intelligence, or moral confusion of Western protagonists. There is little possibility for self-expression in such narratives in the East. They are all 'objects of discussion' rather than 'subjects of conversation'. Said believed that the power of Orientalist discourse lies in its creation of a seemingly objective, systematic, and even "sympathetic" set of knowledge, which essentializes the East as a silent object that can be studied and displayed[4]. British literature popularizes and emotionalizes this academic discourse through vivid stories and characters, allowing European readers to unconsciously internalize a power dominance relationship as a natural way of understanding the world while enjoying the literary pleasure of Eastern adventure. The tradition of constructing the East as the 'other' has continued to this day, and it also invisibly influences Westerners' cultural imagination and political judgments towards Asia, the Middle East, and other regions.

4.2 The existence of stripped humanity under the discourse system of barbarians

Unlike the 'civilizational' imagination of the East, British literature often uses a more direct and crude 'barbarian' language when depicting the indigenous peoples of Africa, America, and Pacific islands. This discourse places these people at the bottom of the ladder of human civilization evolution, even dehumanizing them. There has always been a narrative style that links colonial peoples with "animality," "primitiveness," "ignorance," and "violence," from Shakespeare's "The Tempest" depicting them as ugly, despicable, and attempted to rape Miranda, to Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe," where they are portrayed as cannibals who can be slaughtered or saved at will, to the horror depictions of Africa's "dark continent" in many adventure novels of the 19th century. Their society is a chaotic state lacking laws, government, and rationality. Their religion is superstitious idol worship or witchcraft, and their bodies, customs, and cultural practices are displayed as wonders or negative examples. This is a set of representations driven by extremely clear colonial logic. Firstly, it legitimizes or even sanctifies colonial violence (enslavement, plunder, genocide), as it does not require adherence to the ethical norms of civilized society for "non-human" or "subhuman" individuals. Conquering them is like conquering dangerous beasts in nature or cultivating wastelands. Secondly, it reinforces the notion of the "civilizational mission" that Europeans did not come to exploit, but to "save" these people from their barbaric state and guide them towards what Europe considers

to be civilization. Even if romantic images such as "noble barbarians" appear, their "nobility" is due to their uncontaminated nature that has not been "corrupted" by civilization. This purity is set as fragile and will inevitably tragically perish in contact with civilization. The mournful narrative also erases the historical subjectivity of the barbarians' own choice of development path, fixing them as a museum like existence destined to disappear. Barbarian discourse is the most blatant expression of racist literature, systematically depriving a certain group of human dignity and historical status through literary means[5].

4.3 Female Other as a Dual Projection of Desire and Fear

There is a profound isomorphism and collusion between the construction of others and gender politics. In imperial narratives, colonies are likened to a female, passive, waiting to be explored, named, and conquered space. Correspondingly, in literature, colonial women and often feminized colonial men have become complex projection objects of colonial male desires and fears. On the one hand, they are extremely sexualized and objectified. The imagination of Eastern harem beauties in romantic poetry, as well as the exotic and sexy descriptions of mixed race women and indigenous girls in colonial novels (such as the ambiguous Eastern atmosphere of Miss Adela Quixote in E.M. Forster's "Journey to India" and the prototype of the "Dark Venus" in many novels), are all expressed through their bodies to depict the pleasure of conquest and the temptation of foreign lands. They are gentle, mysterious, and have sensory appeal, making them the target of sexual exploration for white male adventurers and the basis for establishing their masculinity. On the other hand, once women show initiative, strength, or a desire to control white men, they are demonized. They become deadly 'snake scorpion beauties', evil witches, or hysterical madwomen, representing the uncontrollable, devouring, and subversive dangerous forces of the colonies. In some Gothic Empire novels, mixed race women are often depicted as vengeful ghosts who threaten the purity and peace of white families. The representation of contradiction is both an object of desire and a source of fear, and also reflects the deep anxiety of colonizers' psychology, that is, they want to possess and assimilate the heterogeneous 'other', but are afraid of being polluted, weakened, or even destroyed by it. At the same time, white women are also in a special "othering" position in the imperial narrative. They are generally regarded as protectors of civilization, morality, and racial purity, and are the spiritual pillars of the empire's male expansion in the rear. Their sexual loyalty is seen as an important means of maintaining colonial racial hierarchy, so all emotional or sexual relationships between them and colonial men are considered serious taboos and pollution. The control and representation of women's bodies, whether colonial or white, has become an essential symbolic domain for maintaining colonial patriarchy and racial purity. Linking gender order with racial/colonial order, literature strengthened many power networks of imperial rule.

5. CONCLUSION

Through a detailed analysis of the long lineage and multi-layered texture of the construction of the "other" image in British literature, this article finds a relationship between literary narrative and imperial politics that is both conspiratorial and inherently tense. The exploration of the wonders of the unknown world during the Renaissance, the philosophical classification of barbarians during the Enlightenment, the hierarchical mirror production serving the mission of civilization during the peak of the Victorian Empire, and the contradictory representation of identity fragmentation and cultural hybridization in the post imperial era have all appeared in an elusive image in different historical periods of Britain, reflecting Britain's imagination and concerns about itself, the world, and power in various periods. This is not a passive reflection process, but a positive constructive behavior, which is a power practice of using discourse to order and level the world.

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