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Savaging the Civilised: The Burdens of Imperialism in Kipling's 'The White Man's Burden', Conrad's 'An Outpost of Progress', and Forster's *A Passage to India*

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'Every empire […] tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate'
(Edward Said)

Alongside their economic and military power, empires have often used discourse as a means of consolidating and maintaining power over their subjects, and moreover, to legitimise their rule with an ethical mandate. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said effectively identifies a particular instance of this discourse in Europe's discourse on the Orient, and critiques the role of Orientalist writers throughout history in strengthening the divide between Europe and its Eastern Other. In particular, he observes the imperialist's self-justification to rule native peoples, his self-declared "mission to civilise, bring order and democracy," using "force only as a last resort" (Said xvi). This essay examines the treatment of Said's idea in modernist colonial literature in ways that uphold such discourse and also subvert it. It argues that, while imperialist rhetoric provides a moral foundation for the coloniser's mission to civilise and educate, colonial writers do not always support this rhetoric and often seek to undermine it. As an example of a literary work that upholds the discourse of civilising the savage, this essay will briefly discuss Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden' to identify the ideals of progress and advancement that form a discursive defence of imperialist practices. It will also discuss Conrad's short story 'An Outpost of Progress' and Forster's novel *A Passage to India*, which serve as literary responses that are critical of this discourse. In this discussion, Mary Louise Pratt's term "anti-conquest" is useful to better describe the ideals of imperialist discourse, a term which she defines as the "strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (7). To aid the discussion of the given texts, this essay will draw upon the analyses of David Spurr and Homi Bhabha with regard to imperialist rhetoric and its constant need to be reasserted, and will observe this discursive phenomenon in the three texts in question.

David Spurr is a useful starting point because of his observation that an empire's "perpetual need for self-affirmation" is foremost a validation of its "presence", making its

very existence dependent on the "symbolic activity" of stating and restating its mission of filling "emptiness and disorder" (109). He further argues that such "rhetoric is deployed on behalf of a collective subjectivity", indicating that it is inseparable from the cultural context of any particular community, and is therefore subject to the assumptions and concerns of the community that employs it (110). For the purposes of this essay, Spurr's analysis is limited due to its concentration on American imperialism and its specific affirmations; however, his notion of 'affirmation' remains relevant in the analysis of critical attitudes towards imperialist morality. Spurr defends his use of the term 'affirmation' to describe this kind of discourse, calling it "the rhetorical gesture in which the subject actually constitutes itself through repetition" (110). His emphasis here is on the necessity to repeat an expression as a means of conferring authority on its speaker or writer, an idea expanded upon by Bhabha with his notion of the inherent ambivalence of authority, particularly a colonial authority.

Bhabha successfully identifies the inseparability of the "exercise of colonial authority" from the "production of differentiations" (153). The difference between the native's savagery and the coloniser's enlightened state, emphasised repeatedly by the Anglo-Indians in Forster's novel, is the foundation on which a sense of cultural superiority is developed in imperialist discourse. Bhabha's argument that the "colonial presence is always ambivalent" is valid because he recognises the split between colonialism's visible and discursive existences (150). An empire's "articulation as repetition and difference" undermines its "appearance as original and authoritative" by its need to be constantly asserted, which is precisely what makes colonial authority ambivalent (150). Spurr corresponds with this argument, observing that "the intensity of [the rhetoric's] repetition… increases as its authority loses grasp", which the reader may observe in all three given texts (124). Bhabha's dichotomy of imperialism's appearance and articulation highlights the fragility of its authority, echoed in the vulnerable

mental states of Conrad's white characters and the hypocrisy of Forster's Anglo-Indians, as well as the stanzaic structure of Kipling's poem which will be discussed presently.

It is worth noting that Conrad's and Forster's narratives do not perpetuate the kind of pro-imperialist rhetoric highlighted by Spurr and Bhabha, but act as critical responses to it. 'The White Man's Burden', on the other hand (addressed to the American nation, which had, at the time of publication, gained colonial control in the Philippines), is seminal in its espousal of imperialist values. It begins by imploring the reader to "[t]ake up the White Man's burden", a burden that the poem illustrates in detail as an ideal of service to the natives under the white man's rule (line 1). Though the poem's overarching imperative mood in the use of verbal phrases like "fill full the mouth of famine / And bid the sickness cease" identifies it as a call to action, it underlies theoretical ideas of cultural superiority and a sense of responsibility associated with colonial rule (lines 19-20). In the very first stanza, the contrast between the "best" of the Western "breed" and "sullen peoples / half devil and half child" is established as a means of differentiating the Western Self and its Other, the imagery of evil and immaturity used to emphasise the qualities supposedly inherent to natives (lines 2-8). Gripped by the "threat of terror" and the "show of pride", the Other is depicted to be in constant need of Western intervention and the fruits of Western civilisation (lines 11-12). Bhabha's discussion of repeated rhetoric is relevant to the poem's analysis, for Kipling's verse echoes in every stanza the same burden to civilise. The anaphoric line 'Take up the White Man's Burden' appears at the beginning of each stanza to signal the necessity to assert control and superiority at a moment in history when Britain's imperial power is waning. The poem also expresses Spurr's idea of collective subjectivity, as Kipling's constant association of imperialist morality with the white race reminds the reader that the 'service' ideal would not be as noble if it were not the culturally superior West engaging in it. The structure of each stanza transitions from acts reflecting noble values such as "patience" and "open speech", to

the negative consequences that such efforts bring to the coloniser (lines 10-13). The most extreme reversal in the poem is the effort to "make [roads and ports] with your living", which, the narrator warns, will require the coloniser to "mark them with [his] dead", signalling a futility in the civilising mission that seems to contradict the poem's central message. Though the poem is clearly in favour of spreading civilisation through empire, its warning of thanklessness from colonial subjects and needless death and danger is not lost on the reader. 'The White Man's Burden' thus provides a view of the kind of discourse scrutinised in Spurr's and Bhabha's analyses, despite its tinge of ambivalence surrounding imperialist ideals. As such, the reader has a framework to assess the critique of anti-conquest in Conrad's and Forster's narratives.

Like Kipling, Conrad uses juxtaposition to comment on colonial relationships, though the contrast between his characters achieves the opposite effect, revealing the hypocrisy of the civilising mission. Initially, Kayerts and Carlier are portrayed as unassuming "imbeciles", and only upon prolonged exposure to the "vast and dark country" does their volatile and frail character emerge (Conrad 127-128). Their direct characterisation is largely negative and has a bathetic effect on the reader rather than evoking admiration for their qualities as supposedly well-meaning, noble "pioneers of trade and progress" (Conrad 135). Spurr's collective subjectivity is most applicable to their characterisation, as Conrad extensively describes their "every great and every insignificant thought" as belonging "not to [themselves] but to the crowd (128). The story's title itself connotes a preoccupation with ideals of advancement and order. The words 'civilisation' and 'civilised' feature regularly in Conrad's prose, to an almost hyperbolic degree, for instance as transferred epithets when describing "civilised crowds" and "civilised nerves" (128). The Great Trading Company itself is a symbol of imperialist economic exploitation, transforming over the course of the story into the ironically named 'Great Civilising Company' to connote the inseparability of commercial and

exploitative activity from a false sense of moral superiority within imperialist discourse. Conrad's preoccupation with the terms suggests the pervasiveness of the civilising ideal in the goals of the imperial project, mirrored by its recurring appearance in his narrative. Conrad even dedicates a significant section of the text to Kayerts' and Carlier's engagement with the station's "torn books" and their "imaginary personages", and even a "home paper" that "extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith, and commerce to the dark places of the earth" (135). Conrad's brief, ironic construction of the two characters, who "understood nothing, cared for nothing", presents them as unworthy representatives of an enlightened European culture (136). The dramatic irony that pervades the text, given the reader's awareness of the Managing Director's unfavourable perception of the pair, and the proleptic suggestion that Makola would play a role in their deaths ("Perhaps he had propitiated [the Evil Spirit] by a promise of more white men to play with…"), adds to the sense of the white men's inevitable decline (Conrad 126). Symbolising unqualified colonial administration that is often ill-equipped for a remote colonial context, Conrad's white characters subvert the ideals of imperialism on practical grounds; they are characterised as incompetent workers with a false belief in their own superiority and an obliviousness to their own weaknesses, set up to only be outplayed and defeated by the text's African characters.

In contrast to the white men, Makola is established from the outset as a "taciturn and impenetrable" force that precedes the arrival of the white men (Conrad 125). The narrator even confers enough agency on Makola for him to "[despise] the two white men", despite his status as a colonial subject (125). The armed traders from Loanda, engaging in slave trade and aggressive behaviour, are also sharper and more pragmatic than Kayerts and Carlier, and their leader "startled the two whites" by uttering the "speech of civilised men" (140). Conrad thus projects the values of European civilisation that the reader expects Kayerts and Carlier to carry with them into the jungle, such as enterprise and intelligence, onto the

colonised—Makola is also referred to as a "civilised n***er" (149). Though still infused with racist language, this reversal of description establishes Makola and the traders as "measures for the whites", indicating that Conrad's primary concern is not the effect of colonial exploitation on natives, but on the subsequent degeneration of Kayerts and Carlier (Black 133). The degenerated Europeans, therefore, very clearly do not live up to the lofty ideals of imperialist rhetoric; they seem to be the ones in need of civilisation, much less become the ones who would bring it to the jungle. In contrast, almost all the African characters in the text mirror the "cut-throat commercialism" of the imperial project, and achieve it better than the imperialists themselves, signifying the sheer lack of the text's moral centre—the only difference is that the "Europeans justify their expedience self-righteously, rationalizing that they are civilising the dark continent" (Black 133). Unlike Forster, who uses frequent focalisation to ambiguate the morality of his novel's universe, Conrad's employment of omniscient narration conveys that his jungle setting has only a "jungle code" where Makola, the armed traders, and the two white men are all left to fend for themselves (Black 133). His setting also plays a role in undermining the presupposition that imperialism *can* even tame its subjects, being a "wilderness rendered more strange, more incomprehensible by the mysterious glimpses of the vigorous life it contained" (Conrad 128). Conrad's critique of the kind of colonial hypocrisy permeating Kipling's rhetoric is centred around this clear juxtaposition between the ruthless native and the comically foolish coloniser, and the reversal of putative 'European' and 'native' values, through which he successfully questions the "sacredness of the civilising work" in discourses of empire (137).

Similar to Conrad's short story, Forster's novel relies on characterisation to suggest the immorality and hypocrisy of British administration in India, particularly of its Anglo-Indian characters. The argument between Mrs. Moore and Ronny on British imperialism is a key moment in the text for exploring this characterisation, as it makes explicit the conflict

between opposing viewpoints on the role of this imperialism in India. Though the novel itself is largely anti-imperialist in many respects, this particular conversation lays out the problems associated with anti-conquest. Ronny's intensely contemptuous vocabulary in his description of India as a "wretched country" to be held "by force", or of Mrs. Moore's opposing views as "eyewash", reflect Bhabha's notion of ambivalence in authority, signifying that Ronny's power, or at least his claim to power, is not as absolute as his rhetoric would have the reader believe (37). Bhabha's division of appearance and articulation is also expressed in Mrs. Moore's observation of the "gusto" in Ronny's speech, from which he derives "positive satisfaction", distinct from his actual role of "trying to dispense justice fearlessly", the extolment of which itself demonstrates Forster's sympathetic narrative stance towards Ronny's views and his role in the colonial administration (37). In a subsequent chapter, he even charts out the path that led Ronny to his current positions, and thereby his current, contemptuous views on India and its inhabitants, from "public school" to "London University" to "a year at a crammer's", and so on (59). However, through his focalisation on Mrs. Moore, Forster conveys to the reader that "this is not the last word on India", which the reader may identify as the moral stance of the narrator, too (38). The balance of sympathies thus rests somewhat proportionately among the novel's characters, demonstrating the multi-dimensional nature of Forster's narrative. Through their conversation, Forster critically engages with imperialist discourse directly, and his Anglo-Indian characters embody that subject, that voice of power, that Spurr argues must reconstitute itself through repetition.

The novel's theme of cultural animosity between white and Indian people is expressed through its strong attention to governance and law, which influences interpersonal relationships such as that of Aziz and Mr. Fielding, whose friendship suffers irreparably as a result of Aziz's treatment at the hands of the colonial state. The Chandrapore club, whose members are also largely British civil servants and their families, also serves as an example

of Foucauldian ‘governmentality’, a reconceptualization of governances as a process operating “beyond the domain of the state”, in the boundary it draws between Anglo-India and the rest of the country (Lemke 35). Forster’s preoccupation with law, which Kieran Dolin calls the “most significant hegemonic discourse of Anglo-India” and the “centrepiece of the English cultural mythology”, culminates in the novel’s climactic trial scene (Dolin 329). Dolin raises the point that, while the withdrawal of Adela’s charges delivers justice to Aziz and signals cracks in the authority of Anglo-India, the novel’s “vindication of the rule of law” can be interpreted as an affirmation of the imperialist legal institution and its permanency in a colonial context (341). However, Gillian Beer’s analysis provides a counterpoint to this; the trial’s verdict offers a limited resolution to the reader, being an “act of proof that creates nothing fresh”, which Beer believes to be an indication of the “negation” that pervades the novel’s moral universe (Beer 163). There is no clear morality that is espoused in the novel but rather a negation of various preconceived moralities, among them that of empire’s civilising mission. After the disappointment of the trial, the reader must look “beyond the English gospel of law”, and hence all imperialist institutions, to find a resolution (Dolin 346). Adela’s comprehension of this fact comes as she observes the “naked” and “splendidly formed” punkah wallah, symbolising the India that is removed from the colonial politics of the trial (Forster 159). The lack of a comprehensible vision of India is symbolised by Godbole’s song, “unintelligible” to the European ear, and the green bird encountered by Adela and Ronny, whose namelessness only proves that “nothing in India is identifiable” to the coloniser (Forster 58-62). Forster’s India deprives the novel’s colonisers, as well as the reader, of any robust moral evaluation of it, and it is this absence of morality that subverts the imperialist’s need to discursively prove his cultural superiority.

Kipling’s ‘The White Man’s Burden’ serves as a useful introduction to the ‘white man’s burden’ and its moral vindication of the imperial project, while claiming a cultural superiority

that maintains a permanent differentiation between coloniser and colonised. It is an example of the rhetoric discussed by Spurr and Bhabha, and reproduces the duties of Western imperialists multiple times within the poem itself, suggesting a need to be asserted that undermines the authority of its own rhetorical claims. In contrast, Conrad's 'An Outpost of Progress' and Forster's *A Passage to India* reveal the hypocrisy and moral abhorrence of the very views expressed in Kipling's poem. Their critique is achieved in differing ways: Conrad's is predicated on the degeneration of Europeans when placed in a 'wild' setting, while Forster places emphasis on the need for international friendship and views the absoluteness of a colonial governmentality as an obstacle to this ideal. They both employ direct characterisation to criticise their white characters for their ignorance and moral failings. Conrad centres his narrative stance around the juxtaposition between his European and African characters, whose relationship reverses the traditional image of intelligent coloniser and innocent yet ignorant colonial subject. Forster, on the other hand, relies heavily on symbolism and free indirect discourse to explore the various subjectivities moulded by British imperialism in India. Though colonial writers such as Kipling spent their words extolling the imperial project for all its values and seemingly virtuous actions, an analysis of their rhetoric reveals its hollowness. Writers like Conrad and Forster, on the other hand, express an ambiguity about colonial relationships, but are nonetheless able to direct their criticism towards the hollowness that they are built upon.

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