

“To a new land we have come”: Colonial Adventure of the Prince and the Merchant in Tagore’s *The Land of Cards*

Nabanita Paul

Tagore’s *The Land of Cards* (1933) is popularly read as a “. . . mockery of the Indian lack of initiative, of human lives guided by a set of preposterous activities and by absurd obeisance to irreproachable rules without understanding them . . .” (Bhattacharya 4). Though the play is sometimes canonized under children’s literature, it encourages a deeper reading and thinking of the text. After a close reading it is realized that the play also has its say on issues related to divergent matters like politics, economics, and repression and so on. Keeping these elementary associations of the play in mind, this paper attempts to study the text as representing the Prince and the Merchant as colonizers in the land of cards. The aim of the paper is to explore the understudied but unimaginably expansive field, an aesthetic angle of Postcolonial theory may ascribe to it. It might be interesting for one to look at the play as a site of postcolonial encounter. Although some of Tagore’s well known plays received Postcolonial criticism but this particular play, as far as the research goes, have no such critical engagement with Postcolonial discourse. Therefore, here is an attempt to illuminate the way the colonizers, namely the Prince and the Merchant, intervenes into the fixed and formulized societal structure of the land of Cards and how effective their intervention may have been in making “things fall apart” in the rigorous structure of that native society.

At the very outset of his essay “Not at Home in Empire”, Ranajit Guha considers empire to be “something uncanny” (Dube 38). And there is no denial of the fact that this is not a subjective opinion exclusive to Guha only. For colonizers, the colony was a site which is entirely unique, different in its climate and “native” in its characteristics. The entity known by the name “empire” is usually “. . . a place constituted by the violence of conquest, the jurisdiction of law and ownership, the institution of public order and use” (Dube 38). Therefore, the state arises not out of the society of the subject population because the “language” and the nature of their subjects were entirely unknown and unimaginable to the colonial masters. The lack of the information made the colonizers so isolated that they always perceived themselves to be surrounded by dangers. The sense of isolation was identified thus with fear- the fear of sedition and rebellion.

In *The Land of Cards*, the Prince and the Merchant, after being shipwrecked, floats up to a new land. The fear of the merchant is evident in his own speech: “What is new is precisely what I fear” (Tagore 85). The Prince tries to comfort the Merchant invoking the indomitable adventurer spirit of the English race. He truly epitomizes the haughty Western colonial self while uttering: “. . . I must conquer my new kingdom with new force . . .” (Tagore 86). But in spite of all these motivating “mantra”, the Merchant cannot completely shake off the uneasiness of his colonial self. That is why he asked the Prince: “Can this dead place be called a new land?” (Tagore 87). The reason behind the Merchant’s such reaction is the differences the newly explored land has with a place called home whose limits were known. In “Not at Home in Empire”, Guha says:

Limit, says Aristotle, is 'the terminus of each thing, i.e. the first thing outside which there is nothing to be found'. It is in the nature of limit, therefore, to define the limited by an operation that excludes as much as it includes, and of all possible worlds of known limits there is none more inclusive, of course, than home. A space of absolute familiarity, it makes the members of a family feel secure by the completeness of their mutual understanding Conversely, India, standing as it did beyond the limit, was an empty, hence inaccessible, outside. Empty because it had 'nothing to be found' in it for content, and inaccessible because a void is a non-entity one can hardly get to know and relate to. For a limit, to cite Aristotle again, is also 'the substance of each thing' and as such 'the limit of knowledge; and if of knowledge, of the object also'. Beyond limit, hence beyond knowing, India was thus unhomey opposite of the world of known limits. (Guha 39)

This difference of the colony was encoded basically as the exotic in colonial writing. The exotic is something beyond the empirical experience of European mind. That is why at the very first encounter with the people of Card isle, the Merchant describes their movement as ". . . a dance of corpses possessed by spirits!" (Tagore 87). The exoticism is also evident when the Prince describes the scene as "bizarre" one (Tagore 87).

Pramod. K. Nayar, in his book *Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire*, admits that the discourse of the colonial exotic took two principle forms: the sentimental and the scientific. The sentimental exotic constructed tropical India as something that arouses in the colonizer's mind a strong emotion like immediate horror, attraction and revulsion. It is for the sentimental exotic that the Prince and the Merchant ". . . perceives and represents difference from an affective and moral standpoint" (Nayar 62). Thus confronting all the differences of the colony, the Merchant draws the conclusion: "It would be hard to survive here" (Tagore 93).

Other than sentimental exotic there is another principle form of the colonial exotic, and that is the scientific exotic. Scientific exotic is marked by empirical understanding and construction of the empire. If the effect of sentimental exotic is "extreme emotions about difference", scientific exotic resulted in "a domestication of the difference" (Guha 61). Eventually colonizers understood that they need to turn the unknown "space" namely the empire into known substitute – a symbolic space produced by an empirical understanding of the colonizers, in order to sustain their rule over the aboriginal people. Therefore, they led scientific expeditions in order to map the subcontinent's topography and cultures. It showcased India's difference from England and established a clear dichotomy as a part of the colonial project.

In *The Land of Cards*, this dichotomy is quite clearly evident. In the second scene of the play, Pack of Cards entered parading with a song specific to the Land of Cards (Tagore 87). The reaction of the merchant to this song is what should be seriously taken into consideration. He enumerates the movement of the Pack of Cards saying: "Red suit and black, rising, falling, lying, sitting, for no reason at all – how bizarre!" (Tagore 88). He also looks at the cards as something primitive, ancient – devoid of modernity. That is why the Merchant asks Six: "And you have style I suppose, but no motion?" (Tagore 88). Here "motion" connotes progress towards modernity. The Merchant's construction of the difference of the Land of Cards is a colonial move showing the card people's inferiority in comparison to the superiority of their own. Proving the card people to be inferior, the Merchant actually justifies their colonial dominance as a structural necessity for the "improvement" of the Land of Cards.

In the introduction of his book, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, Bernard Cohn admits that the first step to conquer an unknown epistemological space is to learn the local languages (Cohn 4). And the strategy is successfully appropriated by the colonizers of the Card

Isle. As a part of “investigative modality” (Cohn 5), the Prince and the Merchant set a list of specific questions called “enquiries” (Cohn 5) in order to collect “customs and local histories” (Cohn 5). They led questions about the card people’s identity, details of their caste system and customary rules and finally admit, “It’s beyond our comprehension” (Tagore 97). So it is evident that they fail to grab India in their empirical fashion of knowing. During the course of leading the chain of enquiries, the Merchant asks them about the origins of their race. Then Six replied: “Lord Brahma felt exhausted as he labored to create the universe . . . We were born of that sacred yawn” (Tagore 89). The same language is appropriated by the Merchant, but in a satirical way, when he explained the myth of their origin to the card people: “. . . Grandsire Brahma had barely placed the sun upon his whetstone when a fire-spark entered his nostril . . . It was from that earth-shaking sneeze that we emerged” (Tagore 93).

It might be interesting for one to look at the Merchant and the Prince’s attitude to the Land of Cards through the lens of Said’s “Orientalism”. In *Orientalism*, Said examines how European texts used to construct the orient through seemingly factual details, and through claims to knowledge about Oriental history and culture. All these forms of Western writing form a Foucauldian discourse – a loose system of statements and claims that constitutes a field of supposed knowledge. Such discourses, in spite of its seeming interest in knowledge, always establish relationships of power. According to Foucault, power is first of all a force that serves itself and it always works through human beings making them “functions” within networks of power. For Said, Orientalism has traditionally served hegemonic purposes.

In *The Land of Cards*, what can be seen operating is Antonio Gramsci’s thought of “hegemony” as domination by consent (Bertens 204). And to the card people this “domination by consent” is “A matter of grave concern” (Tagore 98). After leading a seemingly strong resistance against the “Strangers from a foreign land” (Tagore 96), the card people fall short before the power-packed rhetorical action of the strangers – the Prince and the Merchant. The Prince proposes to “. . . bring what is scarcest of all in this land” (Tagore 97) – the “Disturbance” (Tagore 97). In a sudden throwing of this single word- the “Disturbance”- Six becomes afraid of losing the faith in their own age-old rules and regulations. Their whole existence seems to be shaken out from the very root at the blow of this single word. Six apprehends that the Prince will “. . . lighten the air in this place” (Tagore 98). The members of the Land of Cards inherently become so prone to change that all their laws are blowing away. The Knave is afraid that even their priest “. . . will begin to speak of progress” (Tagore 98). This is perhaps the most potent example of the way ruling class succeeds in oppressing other classes with their apparent approval. This is what Ngugi calls, the colonization of the mind. Here in the play, the colonizers make their own values central to what they present as a common, neutral culture. Accepting that imposed culture, the natives become oblivious about their own oppression and become an instrument of the velvet dominion. It is for this contagious atmosphere that the Queen feels rather strange herself.

Orientalism served two purposes. In the text, firstly, it legitimizes the Prince and the Merchant’s expansionism of their own belief. And secondly, it insidiously works to convince the Card people that the colonizer’s culture represents universal civilization and accepting that culture they can be elevated into the most advanced civilization from their seemingly “backward” condition. According to Said, this Western representation of the Orient, no matter how well intentioned, have always been a part of damaging discourse. Even those Orientalists who are clearly in sympathy with Oriental people cannot overcome their colonizing self and unintentionally contributes to Western domination.

The discourse of “Orientalism” serves not only to create the East but also the West. The inferiority that “Orientalism” attributes to the East simultaneously serves to construct the West’s superiority. In case of the present play also, the superiority, rationality and the progressiveness of colonizers’ culture is established in showing the primitiveness, irrationality and inferiority of culture of the Land of Cards. Therefore, it is evident that the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is relative and relational.

This discourse of interdependent relationship is further extended and explored by Bhaba in showing the cultural interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. For Bhaba, the encounter of the colonizer and the colonized has an affective impact on them both. Drawing on Lacan’s views of construction of identity, Bhaba offers an analysis in which the identity of the colonizer cannot very well be separated from that of the colonized. For Lacan, identity is inherently unstable. Instead of being self-sufficient with regard to their identity, the colonizers at least partly construct it through interaction with the colonized (Bertens 207). So the most interesting thing is that the colonizers also have to depend on the colonized in question of their own identity. So, it may very well be said that a reverse colonization is happening here in the discourse of constructing the colonizer’s identity. And it is this fear of getting “translated” that drives the Merchant say: “Partner this place is becoming intolerable now . . . If we fall into their clutches, we too shall be ruined” (Tagore 101). And it is the question of same existential crisis for which the Card Isle appears as “. . . a cage, a living death!” (Tagore 101) to the Merchant.

The self confidence of the colonizer is further undermined by what Bhaba calls *mimicry* – the always slightly alien and distorted way in which the colonized, either out of choice or under duress, will repeat the colonizer’s way and discourse. In *The Land of Cards*, the same concept of mimicry is appropriated in Iskabani’s words: “See how desperate Chiretani is to become human, but because she can’t, she has donned a human mask . . .” (Tagore 115). In *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin admit: “When colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to ‘mimic’ the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits” (Ashcroft 124-125). It happens because the copying of the colonizing culture by the colonized sometimes involves mockery which further leads to menace of the colonizers. This mimicry also fails because the colonial master, on the one hand, wants the native as similar to himself as possible and, on the other, wishes to keep the difference between himself and native. In the same book, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin state:

The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer. Rather than assuming that some colonized subjects are ‘complicit’ and some ‘resistant’, ambivalence suggests that complicity and resistance exist in a fluctuating relation within the colonial subject. Ambivalence also characterizes the way in which colonial discourse relates to the colonized subject, for it may be both exploitative and nurturing, or represent itself as nurturing at the same time. (Ashcroft 10)

Ambivalence ‘decentres’ authority from its position of power and in doing this, it actually opens up a possibility for the authority to become hybridized when placed in a colonial in which it finds itself dealing with, and often inflected by, other cultures. In *Literary Theory: The Basics*, Bertens sums up Bhaba’s notion of hybridity:

Shifting its focus from ‘the noisy command of colonial authority’ and ‘the silent repression of native traditions’, to ‘the colonial hybrid’, Bhaba argues that the cultural interaction of colonizer and colonized leads to a fusion of cultural forms that from one perspective, because it signals its ‘productivity’, confirms the power of the colonial

presence, but that as a form of mimicry simultaneously ‘unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demand of colonial power’ (Bhabha [1985] 1994b:112). (Bertens 209)

Bhaba’s notion of “mimicry”, “ambivalence” and “hybridity” finds its powerful expression in *The Land of Cards* also. In the 4th scene of the play, Dahalani tells Tekkani: “. . . I heard the merchant say: ‘They are making clowns of themselves, trying to be human’.” (Tagore 115). Here the word “clowns” connotes the differences a native generally share in their attempt to appropriate their colonial master. This whole process of “making clowns of themselves”, though may appear ridiculous to the Merchant, the Prince is very serious about it because it is a part of colonial project. That is why in the face of the Merchant’s words he lost his temper and said: “That’s a good thing, for through their attire, we can see taste emerge” (Tagore 115). He forbids his friend to ridicule their act and advises: “If you want to laugh, seek out the humans who go about attired as clownish cards” (Tagore 116). This is the moment of unbelievable unexpectedness: “For humans to imitate cards!” (Tagore 116). Evidently here seems to emerge a culture through reciprocal interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. But this hybridized nature of the colonizer is extremely undesired for the Prince because this culture is often considered to be the site of resistance, for the native people.

In *Beginning Postcolonialism*, John McLeod argues: “Homi K. Bhabha’s work on the ambivalence of colonial discourse explores the relationship between a ‘colonising subject’ and a ‘colonised subject’ in highly abstract terms without reference to how the specifics of gender might complicate his model” (McLeod 180). Some critics have become suspicious of the male centered biasness of postcolonial critique and question about the location of women in the theorization of Postcolonial theory. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford have used the phrase “a double colonization” to focus on the ways in which women have subjected to both on the oppression of colonialism and of patriarchy.

In case of the present play female Cards have to live in a world where male Cards compel them. The repression of women in conjugal space is evident in queen’s words: “We too deploy the Law of Conformity in the inner quarters of the andarmahal” (Tagore 100). Each and every movement of the women is determined by the patriarchal “scriptures of Card Isle” (Tagore 103). As in all cases here also patriarchy operates through language. In the language of Card Isle, “. . . shackles are called ornaments”, “. . . prison is called sasurbari . . .” (Tagore 121). The patriarchal oppression become so acute for them that they seek their freedom in compliance with colonial project, which may, in turn, be no less an oppression for them. Here Chiretani says: “. . . if only I could become a manabi . . . I would be saved!” (Tagore 104).

The theme of “double colonization” of the women can be extended into the “. . . sexual interface of the colonial encounter” (Stoller 179). In her book *Imperial Fictions: Europe’s Myths of Orient*, Rana Kabbani looks at the production of the Eastern female as a figure of Western heterosexual male desire (McLeod 175). In *Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire*, Nayar suggests: “By locating Indian women in the landscape, both the land and the woman become subject to a possessive, desiring gaze of the English man . . .” (Nayar 70). Therefore, it is not for nothing that the Prince has his submission to make only “To all these princesses” (Tagore 99). As a sheer strategy of colonial politics the colonizers target women in the name of liberating them from patriarchal oppression.

Tagore, in works after works, tries to project India and its very essence as something completely different from Western banner of civilization. In “Svades”, he considers ancient India to be mysterious laboratory in the state of solitary confinement, where the experiment of making

an utterly unique civilization was going on. But the experiment is never complete as a large number of people rushed into this laboratory from the outer world. As a result of this originates a rootless generation who try to keep pace with the Western civilization without being able to internalize them. According to Tagore, this artificial imitation is what causes a real problem for India. In "Nationalism", Tagore argues: " Anyhow our ideals have been evolved through our own history and even if we wished we could only make poor fireworks of them, because their materials are different from yours, as is also their moral purpose. If we cherish the desire of paying our all for buying a political nationality it will be as absurd . . ." (Tagore 457).

Therefore, listening to all these words one can easily assume that Tagore was conscious about colonial situation and his writings are mere reflection of it. So the reading of *The Land of Cards* from Postcolonial perspective is not something awkward but a continuation of a trend that Tagore himself has paved way for. Tagore's critique against colonialism is quite clearly evident in the following words from "Nationalism": "We must, however, know it is providential that the West has come to India. Yet someone must show the East to the West that East has her contribution to make in the history of civilization. India is no beggar of the West" (Tagore 457).

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Nabanita Paul is currently working as Guest Lecturer in the Department of English, Chakdaha College. She can be contacted at nabanita.ujansrot@gmail.com