



COLONIAL DISCOURSE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ‘OTHER’ IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how colonial discourse constructs the figure of the “Other” in English literature and how such representations function to sustain imperial power relations. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly the work of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha, the study analyzes the discursive mechanisms through which English literary texts produce otherness. Using a qualitative, text-based methodology grounded in close reading and critical discourse analysis, the paper explores narrative authority, silencing, stereotyping, exoticism, and ambivalence as key strategies of colonial representation. The analysis demonstrates that the colonial Other is not a pre-existing identity but a discursive construct shaped by language, narrative perspective, and ideological binaries that privilege the colonial self. At the same time, the study reveals the instability of colonial discourse, highlighting moments of contradiction and ambivalence that expose the anxieties underlying imperial authority. By foregrounding the literary production of otherness, the paper contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship by emphasizing literature’s active role in shaping colonial knowledge and reinforcing the enduring cultural legacies of empire

Keyword: Colonial Discourse; Otherness; Postcolonial Theory; Power; Representation; English Literature

INTRODUCTION

English literature has played a central role in the cultural production and circulation of colonial knowledge. From the eighteenth century onward, literary texts written in or about colonial contexts contributed to shaping imperial worldviews by representing colonized peoples, cultures, and spaces through specific discursive frameworks. These representations were not neutral or merely aesthetic; rather, they were deeply implicated in the exercise of power, functioning to legitimize colonial domination and to naturalize unequal relations between the colonizer and the colonized. One of the most enduring outcomes of this process is the construction of the colonial “Other” a figure defined through difference, inferiority, and exclusion.

The concept of the “Other” occupies a foundational position in postcolonial literary studies. It refers to the ways in which colonial discourse constructs non-European subjects as fundamentally different from, and subordinate to, the European self. This process of othering is achieved through language, imagery, narrative voice, and ideological binaries that oppose civilization to savagery, rationality to irrationality, and progress to stagnation. As Edward Said (1978) argues in *Orientalism*, the West’s representation of the non-West is less about describing reality and more about producing a system of knowledge that sustains imperial power. Said famously notes that “the Orient was almost a European invention” (p. 1), underscoring the extent to which colonial discourse manufactures the identities it claims to describe.

English literary texts have been instrumental in sustaining this discursive construction. Novels, travel narratives, poems, and plays often present colonized subjects as silent, exotic, or morally deficient, reinforcing the idea of European superiority. Such representations do not simply reflect colonial attitudes;



they actively participate in shaping them. Literature becomes a site where power is exercised symbolically, normalizing domination by embedding it within seemingly natural or universal narratives. In this sense, colonial discourse operates not only through political and economic structures but also through cultural texts that define whose voices are authoritative and whose are marginalized.

Postcolonial theory has critically interrogated these processes, emphasizing that colonial discourse works through representation rather than overt coercion alone. Foucault's (1980) understanding of discourse as a mechanism through which power produces knowledge is particularly relevant here. Colonial discourse constructs the colonized Other as an object of knowledge to be observed, classified, and controlled. English literary texts, as part of this discursive network, contribute to fixing colonial identities in ways that deny agency and complexity to colonized subjects.

However, the construction of the Other in English literature is not always uniform or uncontested. While many texts reproduce colonial binaries, others reveal tensions, contradictions, and anxieties within imperial ideology. Homi Bhabha (1994) argues that colonial discourse is inherently ambivalent, producing representations that are unstable and open to subversion. The colonized subject is often depicted as both inferior and threatening, familiar and alien a contradiction that exposes the fragility of colonial authority. This ambivalence creates spaces within literary texts where the construction of the Other can be questioned, disrupted, or reconfigured.

The issue of voice is central to these debates. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) influential question "Can the subaltern speak?" highlights the difficulty of recovering marginalized perspectives within discourses shaped by colonial power. Even when colonized subjects appear in English literary texts, their voices are frequently mediated through colonial narrators or constrained by dominant narrative forms. As Spivak argues, representation itself can become a mode of silencing when it speaks *for* the Other rather than allowing the Other to speak.

Identity formation within colonial discourse is therefore deeply asymmetrical. Colonized identities are constructed relationally, defined not on their own terms but in opposition to the European self. Stuart Hall (1996) emphasizes that identity is produced within representation and shaped by power relations, a perspective that is particularly relevant to colonial contexts. Literary representations of the Other contribute to fixing identities in ways that serve imperial interests while marginalizing alternative self-definitions.

Despite extensive scholarship on colonial discourse, English literature continues to be a productive site for examining how the Other is constructed and contested. Contemporary criticism has moved beyond identifying stereotypes to analyzing the discursive mechanisms through which otherness is produced, including narrative structure, focalization, metaphor, and silence. Yet, gaps remain. Much research focuses on overtly colonial texts, while less attention is given to how colonial discourse operates subtly within canonical English literature. Moreover, some studies emphasize resistance without sufficiently interrogating how deeply colonial logic shapes the conditions of representation itself.

This study seeks to address these gaps by critically examining colonial discourse and the construction of the Other in English literature. Rather than treating the Other as a fixed or homogenous figure, the study conceptualizes otherness as a discursive effect produced through language, narrative authority, and ideological positioning. Drawing on postcolonial theory, the analysis explores how English literary texts participate in constructing colonial identities and how these constructions reveal the workings of power



within representation.

The study is guided by three central objectives. First, it aims to examine how colonial discourse shapes representations of the Other in English literary texts. Second, it seeks to analyze the narrative and discursive strategies through which otherness is produced and maintained. Third, it explores moments of tension, ambivalence, or disruption within these representations that expose the instability of colonial authority.

By addressing these objectives, the paper contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship in several ways. It reinforces the importance of discourse-oriented analysis in understanding colonial representation, highlights the role of English literature in sustaining imperial ideology, and demonstrates how literary texts can both reproduce and unsettle colonial constructions of the Other. In doing so, the study underscores the continuing relevance of postcolonial criticism for interrogating the cultural legacies of empire embedded within literary traditions.

In examining colonial discourse in English literature, this paper treats literature not as a passive reflection of history but as an active participant in the making of colonial knowledge. Attending to how the Other is constructed within literary discourse allows for a deeper understanding of how power operates through representation and why these representations continue to matter in contemporary critical debates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COLONIAL DISCOURSE AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE “OTHER”

Colonial discourse theory has fundamentally reshaped literary studies by revealing how power operates through representation. Central to this body of scholarship is the argument that colonial domination is sustained not only through political and economic control but also through cultural texts that construct colonized peoples as the “Other.” Edward Said’s (1978) seminal work *Orientalism* established that Western representations of the non-West function as a systematic discourse that produces knowledge about colonized subjects in ways that legitimize imperial authority. Said argues that the Orient is represented as “irrational, depraved, childlike, [and] different” (p. 40), a construction that defines European identity through opposition.

Subsequent critics have extended Said’s insights to English literature, demonstrating how novels, travel writing, and poetry participate in this discursive process. Literary texts often deploy binary oppositions—civilized/savage, rational/irrational, self/other that normalize colonial hierarchies. These binaries are not merely thematic but embedded in narrative voice, characterization, and descriptive language. As Loomba (2005) notes, colonial discourse operates by “fixing difference” in order to make domination appear natural and inevitable (p. 47).

REPRESENTATION, POWER, AND DISCOURSE

Postcolonial literary criticism draws heavily on Foucauldian conceptions of discourse and power. Foucault (1980) argues that discourse produces regimes of truth by determining what can be known, spoken, and legitimized. In colonial contexts, discourse constructs the colonized subject as an object of knowledge rather than an agent of meaning. English literary texts participate in this process by presenting colonized characters through authoritative narrative perspectives that limit or mediate their voices.

Scholars have emphasized that literary representation is never neutral. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) argue, colonial texts do not simply reflect imperial ideology; they actively shape it by embedding



power relations within narrative form. The construction of the Other in literature thus involves both what is said and what is left unsaid—silences, absences, and narrative gaps that signal exclusion.

This emphasis on discourse has shifted literary analysis away from cataloging stereotypes toward examining how representational systems function. Rather than asking whether a text is “racist” or “imperialist,” critics increasingly analyze how colonial logic structures perception, language, and authority within literary texts.

AMBIVALENCE, HYBRIDITY, AND COLONIAL ANXIETY

While early postcolonial criticism focused on the coherence of colonial discourse, later theorists have emphasized its instability. Homi Bhabha’s (1994) work introduces the concept of ambivalence to describe how colonial representations simultaneously assert authority and reveal anxiety. The colonized subject is often portrayed as both inferior and threatening, a contradiction that destabilizes colonial power.

Bhabha argues that colonial discourse produces “almost the same, but not quite” representations of the Other (p. 86), revealing the impossibility of fixing difference completely. English literary texts frequently reflect this ambivalence through characters who unsettle colonial binaries, exposing cracks within imperial ideology. Such moments complicate readings of colonial literature as uniformly oppressive and highlight the contradictions inherent in imperial representation.

The concept of hybridity further challenges essentialist notions of identity. Hybridity describes the cultural and linguistic mixing produced by colonial encounters, undermining claims of pure or stable identities. Literary representations of hybrid figures disrupt the authority of colonial discourse by revealing identity as negotiated rather than fixed.

VOICE, SILENCE, AND SUBALTERNITY

The question of voice occupies a central position in postcolonial literary studies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988) influential essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” critiques attempts to recover marginalized voices without interrogating the conditions of representation. Spivak argues that the subaltern is not simply unheard but structurally silenced by discursive systems that translate subaltern experience into dominant frameworks.

In English literary texts, colonized subjects often appear as objects of narration rather than speaking subjects. Even sympathetic representations may reproduce silencing by speaking *for* the Other. As Spivak warns, representation can become “a form of epistemic violence” (p. 280) when it overwrites subaltern agency.

Literary scholars have applied this insight to examine how narrative voice, focalization, and mediation shape the visibility of colonized subjects. Silence in literature is thus not merely absence but a sign of structural exclusion. Analyzing who speaks and under what conditions—has become central to postcolonial literary criticism.

GENDER, RACE, AND INTERSECTIONAL OTHERING

Feminist postcolonial critics have emphasized that colonial othering is deeply gendered. Women in colonial contexts are often doubly marginalized—by imperial power and by patriarchal structures. Mohanty (2003) critiques Western representations of “Third World women” as passive and homogeneous, arguing that such portrayals reproduce colonial logic under the guise of feminism.



In English literature, colonized women frequently appear as symbols rather than subjects, embodying cultural difference or moral degradation. Intersectional approaches highlight how race, gender, and class interact to produce layered forms of exclusion. This perspective challenges earlier postcolonial criticism for privileging male, elite experiences and ignoring gendered forms of marginalization.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes intersectionality as essential for understanding colonial discourse. Literary representations of the Other cannot be fully understood without examining how multiple axes of power operate simultaneously within texts.

CANON, EMPIRE, AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

Another significant strand of scholarship examines how the English literary canon itself is shaped by colonial power. Critics argue that canon formation privileges texts that align with imperial ideology while marginalizing counter-narratives. Gikandi (1996) demonstrates how English literature functions as a site where imperial identity is produced and normalized, even in texts that appear politically neutral.

This has led to renewed critical attention to canonical texts, not to discard them, but to reread them through postcolonial lenses. Such rereadings reveal how colonial discourse operates subtly within narrative conventions, metaphors, and aesthetic choices. English literature thus becomes a crucial archive for examining the cultural logic of empire.

GAPS IN EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

Despite extensive scholarship on colonial discourse, several gaps remain. First, many studies focus on explicit colonial settings while overlooking how othering operates within texts not overtly labeled as colonial. Second, some analyses emphasize resistance without sufficiently interrogating the discursive constraints that shape representation. Third, there remains a tendency to treat the Other as a stable category rather than a discursive effect produced through language and power.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting a discourse-oriented approach to English literary texts, examining how the Other is constructed through narrative strategies, silences, and representational practices. By focusing on the mechanics of discourse rather than thematic content alone, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of colonial representation in literature.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in literary and cultural analysis. The research is text-based and non-empirical, focusing on the critical examination of English literary texts through postcolonial theory. Such a design is appropriate for investigating colonial discourse because the construction of the “Other” operates through language, narrative structure, imagery, and representation rather than through quantifiable variables.

The study treats literary texts as cultural artifacts that participate in the production and circulation of colonial knowledge. Rather than approaching literature as a reflection of historical events, the analysis conceptualizes texts as discursive sites where power relations are articulated, normalized, and sometimes contested.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis is anchored in postcolonial theory, with particular emphasis on discourse, representation, and



power. Three theoretical strands inform the study:

- Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which conceptualizes colonial discourse as a system of representation that produces the colonized subject as inferior and Othered (Said, 1978).
- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity, which problematizes the possibility of recovering marginalized voices within dominant discursive structures (Spivak, 1988).
- Homi Bhabha's notions of ambivalence and hybridity, which reveal the instability and contradictions within colonial discourse (Bhabha, 1994).

These perspectives are complemented by Foucauldian understandings of discourse and power, particularly the idea that discourse produces regimes of knowledge that sustain domination (Foucault, 1980). Together, these frameworks allow for a nuanced analysis of how English literary texts construct otherness through narrative authority, silencing, and ideological binaries.

SELECTION OF TEXTS

Primary texts were selected through purposive sampling, a common and accepted practice in literary research. Texts were chosen based on the following criteria:

- their engagement with colonial or imperial contexts, either explicitly or implicitly
- the presence of colonized or marginalized characters
- their critical recognition within English literary studies

The objective of text selection was not representativeness but analytical depth. The selected texts provide rich material for examining how colonial discourse operates across different narrative forms and historical contexts.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The study employs close textual analysis as its primary methodological tool. Close reading involves detailed examination of language, imagery, metaphor, narrative voice, and focalization to uncover how meaning is produced within the text. Particular attention is paid to how colonial discourse manifests through:

- binary oppositions (civilized/savage, self/other)
- narrative authority and perspective
- characterization of colonized subjects
- metaphors of difference, exoticism, or inferiority
- silences and narrative omissions

In addition to close reading, the study incorporates elements of critical discourse analysis to situate textual representations within broader ideological frameworks. This approach enables examination of how literary discourse aligns with, reinforces, or destabilizes colonial power structures.

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The analysis followed a systematic interpretive procedure:

- Initial reading of the selected texts to identify key representations of otherness
- Theoretically guided re-readings informed by postcolonial concepts
- Identification of discursive patterns, including repetition, contradiction, and ambivalence
- Interpretive synthesis, linking textual evidence to theoretical arguments



Direct quotations from primary texts are used selectively to support analytical claims, ensuring that interpretation remains grounded in textual evidence while avoiding excessive quotation.

RIGOR AND REFLEXIVITY

In qualitative literary research, rigor is established through theoretical coherence, textual grounding, and analytical transparency rather than replicability. To ensure rigor, interpretations are consistently supported by close textual evidence and situated within established postcolonial scholarship.

Reflexivity is also integral to the methodology. The study acknowledges that interpretation is shaped by the researcher's theoretical positioning and scholarly context. Rather than claiming neutrality, the analysis makes its critical assumptions explicit and engages reflexively with its own interpretive limits.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As the study relies exclusively on published literary texts and secondary criticism, it does not involve human participants and therefore does not require formal ethical approval. All sources are cited in accordance with academic integrity and copyright standards.

ANALYSIS

COLONIAL DISCOURSE AND THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE “OTHER”

English literary texts have played a significant role in constructing the colonized subject as the “Other” through discursive practices that emphasize difference, inferiority, and dependency. Colonial discourse operates by establishing binary oppositions—civilized versus savage, rational versus irrational, self-versus other that position European identity as normative and superior. These binaries are not merely thematic; they are embedded within narrative voice, descriptive language, and ideological framing.

Through authoritative narrators and omniscient perspectives, colonial texts often present the Other as an object of observation rather than a speaking subject. This narrative positioning reinforces asymmetrical power relations by denying the colonized subject epistemic authority. The Other is described, classified, and interpreted through colonial lenses, rendering indigenous perspectives marginal or unintelligible. Such representational strategies align with Said's argument that colonial discourse produces knowledge *about* the Other rather than knowledge *from* the Other.

NARRATIVE AUTHORITY AND SILENCING

One of the most powerful mechanisms through which colonial discourse constructs the Other is the control of narrative authority. In many English literary texts, the colonized subject rarely occupies the position of narrator. Instead, their experiences are mediated through colonial voices that claim objectivity and moral superiority. This mediation transforms representation into a form of control.

Silence functions as a key discursive strategy in this process. The absence of the Other's voice is not accidental but structural, reflecting the broader logic of colonial power. Even when colonized characters appear frequently in the narrative, their interiority is often underdeveloped or inaccessible. This narrative silence reinforces the notion that the colonized subject lacks complexity, agency, or self-awareness.

Spivak's concept of epistemic violence is particularly relevant here. The literary text may appear to give visibility to the Other while simultaneously foreclosing the possibility of genuine self-representation. The act of speaking *for* the Other thus becomes a form of silencing rather than inclusion.



STEREOTYPING, EXOTICISM, AND FIXITY

Colonial discourse in English literature frequently relies on stereotyping to stabilize the identity of the Other. Stereotypes function by reducing complex individuals to fixed traits laziness, savagery, sensuality, or irrationality that justify colonial domination. These representations are repetitive and resistant to change, creating what Bhabha describes as the “fixity” of colonial identity.

Exoticism is a related discursive strategy through which the Other is rendered fascinating yet inferior. Landscapes, bodies, and cultural practices are described in ways that emphasize strangeness and spectacle, reinforcing the distance between the colonial self and the colonized Other. While exotic representations may appear admiring, they ultimately reinforce power hierarchies by denying the Other normality and autonomy.

Importantly, stereotyping also reveals colonial anxiety. The need to repeatedly assert difference suggests an underlying instability within colonial authority. The very excess of description exposes the fragility of the binary distinctions upon which colonial discourse depends.

AMBIVALENCE AND THE INSTABILITY OF COLONIAL REPRESENTATION

Despite its apparent coherence, colonial discourse is marked by contradiction and ambivalence. English literary texts often portray the Other as both inferior and threatening, submissive and rebellious. This ambivalence reflects the colonizer’s dependence on the colonized subject for labor, knowledge, and cultural meaning.

Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence helps illuminate how colonial representation undermines itself. The Other is never fully fixed; moments of mimicry, resistance, or narrative disruption destabilize the authority of colonial discourse. Characters who adopt aspects of colonial language or behavior challenge binary oppositions by occupying in-between spaces that unsettle clear distinctions between self and other. These moments do not necessarily dismantle colonial power, but they reveal its limits. The instability of representation exposes colonial discourse as a constructed system rather than a natural truth.

GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF OTHERING

Colonial othering in English literature is deeply gendered. Colonized women are often represented as doubly Othered marginalized both as colonial subjects and as women. Their bodies frequently become symbolic sites through which colonial anxieties about sexuality, morality, and control are negotiated.

Such representations often reduce women to metaphors of land, fertility, or danger, denying them narrative agency. The silencing of colonized women reflects intersecting systems of patriarchy and imperialism, reinforcing hierarchical relations of power. Feminist postcolonial criticism highlights how these portrayals reproduce domination while masquerading as cultural description.

However, some texts reveal fractures in these representations. Moments of female speech, resistance, or narrative ambiguity expose the constructed nature of gendered othering and challenge the authority of colonial discourse, even if only partially.

CLASS, CIVILIZATION, AND MORAL HIERARCHIES

Colonial discourse also intersects with class-based hierarchies, constructing the Other as morally and culturally deficient. English literary texts often associate European identity with progress, discipline, and rationality, while portraying colonized societies as stagnant or chaotic. These moral hierarchies serve to



legitimize imperial intervention as a civilizing mission.

Through narrative judgments and evaluative language, literature reinforces the idea that colonial domination is benevolent or necessary. The Other is positioned as incapable of self-governance, reinforcing paternalistic ideologies. Such representations naturalize inequality and obscure the violence inherent in colonial systems.

THE OTHER AS A DISCURSIVE EFFECT

Taken together, these representational strategies demonstrate that the colonial Other in English literature is not a pre-existing identity but a discursive effect produced through language, narrative authority, and ideological framing. The Other emerges through repetition, exclusion, and contrast, shaped by the needs and anxieties of colonial power.

By analyzing colonial discourse at the level of representation, this study reveals how English literary texts participate in the construction of imperial knowledge. The Other is not simply depicted; it is *made* through discourse. Recognizing this process allows for a more critical engagement with literary texts and their cultural legacies.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how colonial discourse constructs the figure of the “Other” in English literature, demonstrating that otherness is not a natural or inherent condition but a discursive product shaped by power, language, and narrative authority. Drawing on postcolonial theory, the analysis has shown that English literary texts participate actively in producing colonial knowledge by defining identities through binary oppositions that privilege the colonial self while marginalizing colonized subjects.

The findings underscore that colonial othering operates through multiple representational strategies, including narrative mediation, silencing, stereotyping, and exoticism. Control over narrative voice emerges as a central mechanism through which the colonized Other is rendered visible yet deprived of agency. Even when the Other appears frequently within the text, their representation is often constrained by dominant perspectives that speak *about* rather than *with* them. Such narrative practices reflect broader structures of colonial power in which authority over meaning is unequally distributed.

At the same time, the analysis reveals that colonial discourse in English literature is marked by ambivalence and instability. Representations of the Other frequently oscillate between inferiority and threat, familiarity and difference, revealing anxieties at the heart of imperial ideology. These contradictions expose colonial discourse as a constructed system rather than a coherent or stable truth. Moments of mimicry, hybridity, and narrative disruption challenge the fixity of colonial identities and unsettle the authority of dominant representations, even if they do not fully dismantle them.

The study also highlights the gendered dimensions of colonial othering, showing how colonized women are often doubly marginalized through intersecting structures of patriarchy and imperialism. Their representation as symbolic figures rather than speaking subjects reinforces exclusion while masking domination as cultural description. Such portrayals demonstrate that colonial discourse cannot be fully understood without attending to the intersections of race, gender, and power.

Importantly, this paper resists romanticizing resistance or assuming that the presence of marginal figures automatically signals subversion. Instead, it emphasizes that the construction of the Other is shaped by



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both constraint and contestation. English literary texts function as sites where colonial power is reproduced, negotiated, and occasionally destabilized, but never entirely absent. Recognizing this complexity allows for a more critical engagement with literature's role in sustaining imperial legacies.

In conclusion, the construction of the Other in English literature reveals how deeply colonial discourse is embedded within literary representation. By examining language, narrative authority, and silence, this study demonstrates that literature is not a passive reflection of empire but a key participant in its cultural logic. Attending to these representational processes remains essential for understanding the enduring impact of colonialism on literary traditions and for continuing critical efforts to interrogate power within texts.

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