

Colonialism, Modernity and Mimicry in Kipling's *Pharaoh and the Sergeant*: the Case of Egyptian Identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a cultural and colonial reading of Rudyard Kipling's poem *Pharaoh and the Sergeant*. The poem serves to examine the psychological colonization that Great Britain practiced in the Nineteenth century over Egyptians under the guise of Modernization. It also reflects the hierarchical/colonial relationship between the dominating Self (represented by Great Britain) and the subordinate other (projected through Egyptian society), and how the introduction of a condescending Self stimulates imitation in the colonized other for the obtainment of some of the lost superiority which occurred with the introduction of the colonizer; such dislocation can stimulate an in-between for the colonized other, neither the traditional nor the Western, yet both at the same time also helps locate an identity that can possibly replace the distorted one.

Keywords: Psychological Colonization, Modernization, Self and other, Identity, Mimicry.

INTRODUCTION

In his book, *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha describes the concept of the 'beyond' as the process that takes the old to the new which he terms 'the moment of transit' (1). In its movement, this process contains and produces complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion' (1). Change is thus recurrent and inevitable because of the continuous movement which does not leave space for stability or orientation, a beyond which Bhabha later describes as a continuing process of 'disorientation' and 'disturbance' (1). Bhabha's theory of change can be demonstrated in Egypt through the rapid shift from tradition to the Western conception of modernity, and how Egyptian women managed to locate an indigenous identity by forming a balance between the

old and the new.

Egypt developed its identity through the constant changes it underwent throughout its history. It was adopted, rejected, accepted and influenced by many foreign ways, concepts and ideologies which changed its people's mentality. Consequently, this affects the country's cultural, traditional, economic, as well as political aspects which accumulated into and formed its current identity. My choice of Rudyard Kipling's poem *Pharaoh and the Sergeant* (1994) will prove to be essential to this paper as it addresses the question of hierarchical authority that dictates the relationship between the West as the Self and the East as the Other.¹ By depicting the Egyptian/Sudanese battle of 'Omdurman' during Britain's colonization of Egypt, the poem will serve as an example that Kipling presents of Western influence that negatively and positively affected Egypt. The poem also addresses Britain's condescending attitude toward Egyptian identity as inferior, backward and thus requires saving. The fact that the poem presents the transformation of Egypt from a colonized to a colonial power, without clearly voicing Egyptians'

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attitudes toward, the hierarchical relationship serves as proof of mimicry of the colonizer through the process of formulating its identity. Kipling's depiction of the long years and effort put into changing Egyptians will also be translated into the different ideologies that Egyptian men and women either adopted or rejected. The paper does not only depict colonialism as physical occupation of one's country, but also sheds light on psychological colonialism of one's mind in the name of modernity. Thus, my study of Egyptian identity culminates in an examination of the threatening effect of Britain's psychological colonization on the minds of Egyptian men and women which distorts one's indigenous identity under the guise of modernity, consequently, showing how Egyptian women forged an authentic identity through their use of an 'in-between' which bridged the gap between Arab traditions and Western Modernity. In order to establish this argument, the paper will start with a short historical overview of the effect of Western Modernity and colonialism on Egyptian men and women.

1. The Introduction of a Hierarchical Self

Egypt started changing in the nineteenth century under European influence towards rapid modernization. Mohammad Ali, the governor of Egypt in 1805, had ended the French occupation which lasted from 1798 until 1801. He also ended the Ottoman's control and established himself as ruler of Egypt, and later that century he started modernizing the country by adopting European methods and styles such as Western dress. As part of modernizing Egypt in the early nineteenth century and catching up with Western technologies, he sent Egyptian students on educational missions to different parts of Europe to learn engineering, military sciences and medicine. Rifa'ah Rafi' al-Tahtawi, (1801-1873), was on one of the educational missions to Paris and was one of the first male Egyptians to encourage equal education for women because it was the custom that was practiced in the most powerful nations of the world. Al-Tahtawi also related female education to the social and technological reforms for a new modernized

society and powerful nation. Consequently, the first school for female doctors was established in 1832, the first government female school in Egypt was established in 1873, and the first secondary female school in 1874.

Although such influence positively affected the Egyptian women's cause, it was destroying the rest of the nation's indigenous identity, as it was shifting from one extreme to another through blind imitation of the Western notion of Modernity. The colonial relationship between Britain and Egypt is projected in Kipling's satirical poem *Pharaoh and the Sergeant*, further showing the Western colonizer's condescending attitude toward having to modernize, what it considers in Kipling's opinion, a backward nation.

2. Pharaoh and The Sergeant

The subject matter of the poem deals with the Egyptian territorial claim of Sudanese land in 1898. Egypt was then colonized by Great Britain, and although the Egyptian army was declared as inefficient and weak, the credit for having won back its Sudanese territory was given to the British instead for having led the Egyptian army by General Kitchener to victory in 1899, in the battle of Omdurman. The poem satirizes the British Imperialistic attitude toward elevating the state of Egyptian troops, and taking it upon themselves as a duty to civilize the barbaric and modernize the backward. The hierarchical binary relationship between Britain as the Self and Egypt as the Other is projected throughout the poem, starting with the title *Pharaoh and the Sergeant*. The poem opens with a satirical and unequal comparison between the ancient and extinct Pharaoh as a projection of the current state of Egyptians, and the modern prophet-like Sergeant who is sent by Britain to bestow the miracle of modernity upon the backward. The satirical comparison is rather suggestive of Britain's discreditation of Egypt as a civilized nation today for glorifying a past that does not exist anymore. Furthermore, the Pharaoh's voice is unheard throughout the poem, confirming the hierarchical relationship between an oppressive master promising change and his unquestioning slave desperate for subjectivity. This

attitude is reflected in the opening lines of the poem: 'Said England unto Pharaoh, 'I must make a man of you./ That will stand upon his feet and play the game;/ That will maxim his oppressor as a Christian ought to do,'[...]/ 'Though at present singing small/ You shall hum a proper tune before it ends' [...](*Pharaoh and the Sergeant* 209).

In the lines above Egypt appears as naïve as a young school boy in need of Britain's guidance in order to grow into an independent man that can 'stand upon his own feet'. On the one hand, it appears that Britain's aim is Egypt's independence, which ironically can only be achieved with blind imitation of the colonizer. The colonial understanding of independence becomes synonymous with the loss of one's indigenous identity, the act of blind imitation; and in turn learning how to 'play the game' by becoming a colonizer. Although Egypt had become the colonizer after having claimed back its Sudanese territory, its colonial power was still demeaned by means of comparison with Britain's, as it was never treated as an equal.

The religious sense of right and wrong also sets an ironic tone that is echoed throughout the poem. The 'Christian' here is a reference to Britain which ironically is the oppressor. Christianity is also used in correlation with the attainment of independence, thus implying religious racism, as it suggests that Islam is what keeps Egypt in the dark and away from Modernity and independence. Even though Islam was projected by the West as the reason behind backwardness, Egyptian women used Islamic traditions, such as the veil, as means by which they maintained their identity.

In order to bring Egypt closer to the level of comparison with Britain, Kipling introduces 'Sergeant Whatisname' as the means by which Modernity will be introduced to Egyptians: 'It was not a Duke nor Earl, nor yet a Viscount -/ It was not a big brass General that came;/ But a man in khaki kit who could handle men a bit,/ With his bedding labelled Sergeant Whatisname' (209). A simple, unprofessional man whose name is not worth mentioning or even remembering is sent to save Egypt from its backwardness, which shows Britain's

fake intention toward the betterment of Egypt. However, the following stanza reveals miraculous powers endowed upon the sergeant by means of comparison with Moses' brother Aaron, whose rod, according to the Old Testament, was endowed with miraculous powers and used as a symbol of authority before Egypt was struck with plague. Aaron was considered a spokesperson and later the first High Priest of the Israelites. He is also mentioned in the Noble Qur'an and considered a Prophet in Islam. However, his powers are belittled with the exaggerated comparison with the sergeant in the lines that follow, as the sergeant's miraculous power of modernizing Egypt appears to surpass any past miracle Egyptians had witnessed: "'You've had miracles before,/ When Aaron struck your rivers into blood;/ But if you watch the sergeant,/ he can show you something more./ He's a charm for making riflemen from mud.'"/ It was neither Hindustani, French, nor Coptics;/ It was odds and ends and leavings of the same,/ Translated by a stick (which is really half the trick)./ [...] Down the desert, down the railway, down the river,/ Like Israelites from bondage so he came,/ 'Tween the clouds 'o dust and fire to the land of his desire,/ And his Moses, it was Sergeant Whatisname!' (209-210).

The miracle that a simple sergeant seems to perfect goes beyond the act of transforming, which suggests elevating one's status, to the act of creating 'riflemen from mud': suggesting a comparison with God's power of creating humans from nothing, and therefore reflecting the dehumanizing and Imperialistic image that Britain has of Egypt and Egyptians as uncivilized, and in need for discipline by means of 'whacking' by the sergeant's miraculous 'stick'. Even though the sergeant manages to 'comb old Pharaoh out', and '[...] Pharaoh fought like Sergeant Whatisname/ [...] England didn't seem to know nor care' (210). Kipling's voice is reflected in the fourth stanza as he holds England responsible for its carelessness towards Egypt's welfare on the one hand, and the sergeant's, an English subject, on the other: 'That is England's awful way o' doing business/ [...] For she thinks her Empire still is the Strand and Holborn Hill/ And she didn't think of

Sergeant Whatisname' (210). Kipling's tone toward the end of the poem becomes one of sarcasm toward British Imperialism. He further shows sympathy toward the effort put in by the invisible sergeant to transform Egypt from a colonized to a colonizing country yet even though 'old Pharaoh' shows appreciation toward the change, Britain does not. The sergeant is described in the final stanza as having '[...] drilled a black man white, [... and having] made a mummy fight', yet a man of such miraculous powers is expected to do all in silence, as 'he isn't allowed to forward any claim'(211). The suggestion that 'the Sergeant [...] had hardened Pharaoh's heart which was broke [...]/ Three thousand years before the Sergeant came' is an insinuation to Pharaoh's desperate need for subjectivity through the blind imitation of a superior power, in which case is Britain; such a suggestion also justifies Kipling's later description of Egypt as an emerging power practicing its control over a yet more objectified country, Sudan (210).

3. Mimicry of The Self: Problem Or Possible Solution?

In his article *The Line and the Light* (1977), Jacques Lacan also talks about blind adoption of another culture along the same lines in what he terms 'mimicry'. He says: 'Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage [...] it is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 99).

Individuals would not try to adopt foreign policies and customs unless they have started forgetting their own significance. The need for mimicking the colonizer arises from a curiosity to reach and know the unknown, the ambivalent and the unfamiliar in what is foreign. But Bhabha asserts the impossibility of perfect mimicry; a slippage always occurs which reduces the colonized to difference. Thus mimicry becomes the very embodiment of difference which automatically objectifies the colonial

Self which the colonized tries to blindly adopt. It follows that the colonized resorts to this strategy in a desperate need for what Bhabha suggests is 'reform[ing], regulat[ing] and disciplin[ing]' his otherness as he 'visualizes power' (*The Location of Culture* 86). Doing so would consequently threaten the very native identity of the individual along with the colonial or foreign power which the colonized tries to mimic, because when the colonized is completely fixated with transforming the self into what it is not, the colonized subject loses touch with the national aim for liberty, freedom and an indigenous identity and is distracted from cultural and national priority. The mimicking individual is never the same as the colonizer; he is what Bhabha calls 'almost the same but not quite' (86). The continuity of this slippage also reduces the presence of the individual into a 'partial presence', which further reduces the colonized subject into partial existence. The concept of mimicry then becomes the 'desire' to formulate a discourse of power as a mask, in an attempt to conceal and repress the individual's true self which he perceives as an Other.

The fascination of the colonized subject is not however directed to the owner of power or colonizer as an individual, it is total infatuation with the concept of power itself. Lacan describes the attempt of mimicry as 'camouflage' and an act void of any originality because the mimicking individual represses his native identity and displays the forced [unoriginal] act of mimicry which reduces him to partial presence. Franz Fanon (1967) similarly agrees as he insists that 'This culture [...] fixed in its colonial status [is] both present and mummified, it testified against its members. It defines them in fact without appeal' (*Toward the African Revolution* 44). As a result, Bhabha suggests that what is needed is a change in which difference is perceived.

For a minority or oppressed group to be heard and acknowledged, Bhabha suggests that individuals have to be perceived and represented as culturally different instead of culturally diverse. Bhabha explains that cultural difference suggests authority and can be compared, fought, followed and even adopted because it exists along the same level of comparison. Cultural

difference is a 'process of the *enunciation* of culture as "knowledge"' (*The Location of Culture* 34). Cultural diversity on the other hand represents 'culture as an object of empirical knowledge' (34). It stays categorized without being open to the changing process of signification which difference has. Furthermore, when existing as different, an oppressed group can change its objectified position because of the flexibility and activity of interaction which it enjoys. Diversity on the other hand stays passive as it defines 'pre-given' cultural theories, thus totalizing experiences and negating individuality or identity, which consequently leads to the loss of the meaning of authenticity.

When claiming cultural difference, history and modernity clash as a 'binary division' (35). Through every point of cultural history leading to the present, something of the past recurs and repeats itself though not in the same form it previously appeared in. It is restructured, reformulated, relocated and then represented in the present. Along these lines the Egyptian veil, throughout its historical existence, has been perceived as a symbol to serve a hegemonic purpose. In the past it was used as a patriarchal tool for female oppression. However, Egyptian women themselves went back to this tradition of the veil following the wave of Western modernity, and changed its meaning to symbolize their freedom and authenticity: Egyptian women repeated the use of the veil but relocated its meaning to serve their emancipatory purposes.

Throughout British colonialism in Egypt (1883-1907), Egyptians were referred to as 'natives' instead of Egyptians. However, this term was later subject to many discourses concerning the veil and maintaining the indigenous.² Leila Ahmed argues that the adoption and blind application of Western thoughts and ways of living in Egyptian society in order to get rid of hierarchical and gendered oppression was 'not only absurd, it [...] was] impossible' (*Women and Gender in Islam* p?). But Egypt's fascination with ideas of modernity and the lavish Western lifestyle did lead to women's awakening to their nation's loss of its Arab identity and to nativism,

which was the start of the emergence of their new discourse of the veil as a national and feminist statement. As they started viewing the veil differently, Egyptian women gave it far more political and cultural, rather than religious, dimensions in the light of colonialism and domination.

I would like to adopt at this point the nineteenth century German Romanticist Johann Goethe's ideology of foreign influence. Goethe suggests that constant political conflicts and foreign occupation throughout history cause what he terms 'cultural confusion'. What he means by this is that individuals are always attracted to what is perceived as new and foreign: they unconsciously adopt these foreign ways and become estranged within their own environment. Goethe argues that natives 'could not return to their settled and independent [...] lives] again without noticing that they had learned many foreign ideas and ways, which they had unconsciously adopted, and come to feel here [...] their previously unrecognized spiritual and intellectual needs' (*Goethe's Literary Essays* 98-99). This was the case with Egyptian women in particular and the whole nation in general with foreign occupation throughout the whole of Egyptian history, starting with the Roman rule, throughout the oppressive Ottoman occupation, to the French and later British colonization of Egypt. Each occupation brought with it new either progressive or regressive and oppressive ideologies and concepts which greatly influenced Egyptian tradition and its culture. The unconscious internalization of foreign influence affected greatly the way Egyptian women were being treated. This demonstrates that women's oppression was caused by the unconscious adoption of oppressive foreign ways. Yet through the concept of an 'inbetween' represented by the use of the veil in the public sphere, Egyptian women were capable of forging an indigenous identity for themselves that was neither traditional nor Western.

4. CONCLUSION

The period between the 1920s and the 1950s witnessed social and political upheavals in the Arab world. After the declaration of independence from the British rule in Egypt in 1922, the aims of the people

changed and so did the feminists; 'the nationalist discourse of liberal men dropped much of its feminist dimension while men competed for political power. Moreover, nationalist men deprived women from the formal political rights of citizenship' (*Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* 13). During the period of colonialism, Egyptian men and women fought for a national identity as one entity and one nation, but when they got their independence men directed their attention to the struggle for power, and the efforts which women had put into the country's independence were neglected. At the time, many European countries had already allowed their women to vote, be elected and gain access to political rights. The Egyptian feminist struggle for political rights and complete access to the public sphere continued till the Egyptian revolution erupted in 1952. Women eventually got their political rights in 1956, as revolutionists granted them political freedom but women could not express their views or be part of any independent organization, which meant that feminists had to dissolve the 'EFU'³ and turn it into a social service association under the government's control; it was later called the 'Huda Sha'rawi Association' following her death in 1947 (219).

Egyptian women then went beyond the extreme and limited dichotomy of being either traditional or modern. They could live with neither the old nor the new ways, but instead appropriated both and situated themselves in the old and the new. This was demonstrated through the use of the veil as a feminist tool in order to enter the public sphere and be part of society. Egyptian women further strategically chose what benefited their cause through the many stages of feminism they formulated, and through the many 'disturbances' and 'disorientations' which were forced upon them. Egyptian women formulated an in-between space which neither

conformed with the traditions of the Arab culture nor resorted to miming a foreign conception of modernity, a space which balances both sides of the dichotomy in which the Arab world exists. This in-between becomes a space for authenticity and the emergence of a new identity which is neither, yet both at the same time. Discourses of feminist authenticity took many forms in the Arab world, especially in Egypt: some women chose to change the negatively perceived meaning of the veil into a feminist statement of authenticity and a vehicle for entering the public sphere. Other women in the Arab world fought for their cause through their activist and feminist writing.

It was during the regime of the secularist Jamal Abd al-Nasser, who advocated Western modernity, that women were finally given their rights to vote, to education, to work within the public sphere. Not, however, as part of gender equality and reform of the personal status code, but as part of the country's development and move towards the Western conception of modernity: women were still expected to fulfill their traditional and cultural duties as wives and mothers, thus '[...]traditional definitions of gender were reformulated but not abandoned. The new leaders undermined the old forms of sexual segregation but at the same time denounced the *noblesse oblige* feminism of the previous era and retained a conventional gender-based framework in society' (*Engendering Citizenship in Egypt* 53). Abd al-Nasser gained full control over the country, the monarchy was overturned, and all political parties were unified into one single-party government. Although women got their rights and many important public advances, these rights were under the condition that traditional family life remained unchanged; an in-between which most Egyptian men and women advocated and followed as a method to psychological deconstruction of the hierarchical system.

NOTES

(1) Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) is an English poet of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who grew up experiencing British imperialism and colonization in India. Kipling sheds light in his writing on the victimization of the Other as a projection of his

mistreatment as a child.

(2) 'Native' is the imperial term for the occupied other or the colonized other which was used on Egyptian men and women throughout the British occupation in Egypt.

(3) 'EFU' stands for the Egyptian Feminist Union.

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