

## 'Resistance from within': Reading and Neocolonialism

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### **Abstract**

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Colonial discourse analysis at present seems to need to be radicalised so that it may become a more sensitive instrument to counter the emergent colonialisms negotiated by contemporary literature. I believe this radicalisation might be achieved through a study of changing textual patterns and the changing societies which shape them. To support this argument—which involves an understanding of how the present adapts the past to suit its needs—I offer a reading of the way in which Kipling's character Mowgli is re-worked by two contemporary writers: Hanif Kureishi and Sara Suleri. The predicates of race, class and gender—and the causes and consequences of their fracture in societies both generated and threatened by new colonialisms—are examined.

**Key words:** Heterogeneity, Universality, Race, Class, Gender.

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Once —while calling for radical thought and action— Jawaharlal Nehru was sufficiently exasperated with the Moderates in the Indian national movement to quote Roy Campbell's castigation of liberal authors: «They praise the firm restraint with which you write/ I'm with you there, of course/ You get the snaffle and the curb all right/ But where's the bloody horse?» (Nehru 1982: 415). A similar sense of a sudden reining-in, just when a leap is needed, sometimes seems to characterise the field of colonial discourse analysis. Consider this summary for instance:

There seems little point...in claiming [as Edward Said does] that all forms of colonial textuality can be reduced to one model of operation, or that the literature of empire simply sugars the will to power of the non-literary discourses of imperialism. To fail to understand this is to promote a 'repentable politics' in the practice of colonial discourse analysis itself. First it can lead to a reinscription of the epistemology of which it complains in colonial discourse: the essentialist binaries by which such discourse is held

to operate are only reversed—not displaced—by seeing the whole Western cultural canon as what Aijaz Ahmad calls an archive of bad faith and Orientalist deformation. *Second* it encourages the misplaced belief that resistance from within the colonial formation is impossible, even at a textual level. *Finally* it promotes the idea that only certain privileged kinds of critical consciousness can escape... the constraints of a supposedly totalising system... (Moore-Gilbert 1996: 17-18)

I do not suggest this is a wholly just or accurate summary: either in its assessment of the work of Said and the Marxist critic, Aijaz Ahmad, or in its reduction of the relationship between their projects to one of simple opposition. Yet, the very fact that such a summary can be constructed, suggests the occupational hazard as it were, of theory. After a point it may show a tendency to stiffen in obedience to its own paradigms rather than remain flexible enough to analyse changing dynamics of resistance and complicity in cultural practice. There does seem to be room in colonial discourse analysis for greater sophistication in matters of detail, regarding the ways in which 'resistance from within'—mounted by writers and their readers—can be documented. Orientalism, «the discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, socially ... and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period» (Said 1978: 4) has been shown by Said to be sufficiently resilient to assimilate and thus neutralise any critique of itself. Decolonisation in turn has been shown by Ahmad to be even more devastating in its operation: «One of the many contradictory consequences of decolonisation within a largely capitalist framework was that it brought all zones of capital into a single, integrated market entirely dominated by this supremely imperialist power [the United States]» (Ahmad 1993: 21). Emerging colonialisms are more far-reaching and adaptive than those that have preceded them. Hence theory too needs to become more radical, to analyse and handle these new colonialisms and their societies as these are reflected in contemporary literatures. I suggest that this radicalisation of theory can take place only if it changes its somewhat self-regarding aspect and actually engages itself with contemporary texts, their writers and (by implication) their audiences. Ahmad's earlier work includes among other things a protest against Said's erasure of class and gender to produce a seamless narrative of the way in which race is the single most important constituent of post-Enlightenment experience. In other words it is a protest against universality. Currently though it would seem that Ahmad anticipates a future for which we need «forms of politics [and presumably cultural practices as well] that constitute human subjects both in their heterogeneity and their universality».<sup>1</sup> This mobility can perhaps

1. Aijaz Ahmad, «Culture, nationalism and the role of intellectuals», an interview conducted by Erika Repovz and Nikolai Jeffs in Ljubljana for Slovenian publication and by Ellen Meiksins Wood for British publication in *Monthly Review*. A part of this interview appeared in *Monthly Review*, July-August 1995. The full text is to appear in Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present: Political Essays*. Delhi: Tulika, 1996.

be achieved if we try to sensitise theory to take into account textual particularities which contain inbuilt strategies of resistance. Without this awareness critical theory might find it hard to make an imaginative leap from the aftermath of Empire—with which it has dealt so far—to an engagement with emerging colonialisms. To support this contention I offer an experimental reading of how lines of resistance and complicity can be mapped in the work of two contemporary writers: Hanif Kureishi and Sara Suleri.

At the centre of this study is the impact made by a single image: Rudyard Kipling's Mowgli from *The Jungle Books*. This seems at first to be a relatively unpromising test case with which to demonstrate how counter-cultures can originate in the minds of readers. To begin with—even when we acknowledge that contemporary audiences shape their cultural productions—we realise how difficult it is to analyse audiences. It has always been acknowledged that literatures—irrespective of genre or period—have been shaped by their societies: «...epic, or Attic tragedy, were essentially the culture of a dominant hegemonic grouping [reflected in their audiences] though in the case of Attic tragedy at least its vitality evidently came from the participation of a wider constituency» (Harvey 1988: 105-6). Yet, even as we stress the idea that literature as an instrument of social intervention is designed—at least in part—by its readers, we realise that any such audience is notoriously difficult to analyse largely because of its volatility. No audience can be frozen beyond a point for purposes of study. Yet this difficulty may be more apparent than real if we are ready to use responses by writers to the Mowgli-figure as evidence of audience-involvement in this experiment. If we are, we can move to the next difficulty which is that of the extremely contradictory responses to this figure. As the following extract indicates, critical opinions vary considerably. At bottom there is a kind of New Critical essentialism which suggests that the Mowgli-myth contains vital truths about human nature. Superimposed on this is the more precise reading which indicates that Kipling's Law—a code of collective responsibility—is expounded through this myth with or without imperialist application:

The Mowgli tales represent a great myth, redolent of passions and experiences that typify human life ... There is an explicit message regarding the Law of the Jungle... There is also a haunting psychological undertone with notes of deep sadness, as Mowgli matures, feels rejected by the jungle, and faces the need to reintegrate into humankind (Webb 1996: 9-10).

## 1. Race and resistance

At no stage though do Kipling's critics celebrate the way in which the image of Mowgli can be used as a means of self-definition and liberation. Yet it is this aspect that has been picked up in some contemporary writing. When it originally appears in Hanif Kureishi's autobiographical essay, the image is dismissively racist. As Kureishi explains, Mowgli seems to symbolise for him

his South Asian self which he wishes at first to deny. The son of an English mother and a Pakistani father, Kureishi recounts his childhood ignorance of any locale other than London, against which the Mowgli-image explodes tauntingly:

Frequently during my childhood, I met my Pakistani uncles when they came to London on business. They were important, confident people who took me to hotels, restaurants and Test matches, often in taxis. But I had no idea of what the sub-continent was like or how my numerous uncles, aunts and cousins lived there. When I was nine or ten a teacher purposefully placed some pictures of Indian peasants in mud huts in front of me and said to the class: Hanif comes from India. I wondered: did my uncles ride on camels? Surely not in their suits? Did my cousins, so like me in other ways, squat down in the sand like little Mowglis, half-naked and eating with their fingers? (Kureishi 1986: 9).

The Mowgli-image in this essay indicates the problem of ethnic identity but the image itself is not worked out in all its complexity. However, Kureishi's novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* examines the dynamics of this figure. The first job given to Karim —the protagonist whose ethnic origins are similar to those of Kureishi— is the role of Mowgli in a stage version of *The Jungle Book*. Karim is initially disgusted with the offer. It seems to make him an immigrant when he is in fact a native Londoner who invariably stresses his South London origins. As Shadwell, Karim's manager, speaks, it seems as if the whole debate on ethnicity versus citizenship is being pushed back:

What a breed of people two hundred years of imperialism has given birth to. If the pioneers from the East India Company could see you. What puzzlement there'd be. Everyone looks at you, I'm sure, and thinks: an Indian boy, how exotic, how interesting, what stories of aunties and elephants we'll hear now from him. And you're from Orpington ... The immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century (Kureishi 1990: 141).

Karim's own construction of his past is quite different:

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care —Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. (Ibid.: 3)

Shadwell claims to speak of people of Indian origin from the point of view of the British. Yet Karim —as his account reveals— is as British as is Shadwell. Migrancy —with its advantage of exoticism and disadvantage of insecurity— is the status which Shadwell wishes to impose on Karim. Shadwell's remarks are a projection of one of the opacities of the new colonialisms: the inability to understand the composition of a genuinely multi-ethnic society within a single

nation. As Kureishi insists in his essay, what is needed is an understanding not so much of race relations —a somewhat distant subject at best— but a redefinition of the very concept of national identity. This is painfully close to the bone: «... there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time» (Kureishi 1986:38).

To begin with the Mowgli-role is scarcely liberating. Karim uses it as his means to flee the suburbs and thus escape from the constraints of middle-class life. He even gives in to Shadwell's demand that he speak in a hideously artificial Indian accent. As there can be no standard accent in such a multilingual society, Shadwell's attempt to sandpaper out variations in Indian English is absurd. Karim seems to have exchanged the constraints of class for those of race. In his eyes it is true that the theatre brings him from suburbia to the metropolis. Yet it is the theatre that compels Karim to live within the confines of his skin (quite literally) and makes colour a determinant of identity. His earlier pride in his South London smartness is severely damaged. When he is told he has to wear a costume which defines him solely in terms of colour —he is smeared all over with brown cream and given a loincloth—and told to change his accent, he realises briefly the price he has to pay for greater class mobility: «I wanted to run out of the room, back to South London, where I belonged, out of which I had wrongly and arrogantly stepped» (Kureishi 1990: 148). His natural race mobility has had to be sacrificed. More significantly, Karim has had to give up his political commitment to fighting racial prejudice. He tries to stave off a recognition of this disloyalty but cannot do so on opening night when he is condemned by his father and by Jamila who says: «... it was disgusting, the accent and the shit you had smeared over you. You were just pandering to prejudices... and cliches about Indians» (ibid.: 157). Only when Karim endows the Mowgli-role with his idea of authenticity does it begin to work for him. This happens when he finally insists on speaking —literally and otherwise— in his own voice: «... I started to relax on stage, and to enjoy acting. I sent up the accent and made the audience laugh by suddenly relapsing into cockney at odd times. 'Leave it out, Bagheera', I'd say» (ibid.: 158). By hijacking the performance tradition of pantomime Karim gestures towards authenticity, however briefly.

Of course both the theatrical success and the political correctness of this episode can be endlessly debated. Karim as Mowgli with an Orpington accent becomes more rather than less of a poseur than before. More seriously we ask ourselves whether he is being a collaborator rather than a resistance agent, as he exploits not just an Indian accent but its mockery by cockney. A later colleague of Karim's condemns him for his hatred of his own people and thus for being insecure in his ethnicity. This point of view has received critical support: «The criticism of Karim comes from Tracey, a politically mature African-British woman. In the Indian classroom we would ... develop the point of this criticism significantly differently from the desire of the white» (Spivak 1992: 293). Yet one of the consequences of the Mowgli-myth is surely its capacity to destabilise given positions. If self-parody has to be

excluded from the presentation of an ethnic minority, to what extent can that group be deemed 'politically mature'? Surely cultural protectionism is no index of security or maturity.

Given this context the Mowgli-myth is a sensitive device because it shuts off any easy choice between options available for identification. Mowgli is not given the choice of comfortably selecting between one species or another. In turn humankind and the Wolf-pack cast him out: «Man-Pack and Wolf-Pack have cast me out .... Now I will hunt alone in the Jungle» (Kipling 1975: 76). The situation faced by Karim and those of mixed parentage is similarly bleak. Unlike Tracey —whose ethnic origins and therefore ethnic loyalties can be undivided— Karim is denied an easy choice. For him, as for the Kureishi of 'The Rainbow Sign' home is a problematic proposition. There can be no single and easy homecoming for them any more than there can be an honest one:

It is not difficult to see how much illusion and falsity there is in this view [that there is a knowable and welcoming home]. How much disappointment and unhappiness might be involved in going 'home' only to see the extent to which you have been formed by England and the depth of attachment you feel to the place, despite everything (Kureishi 1986: 36).

There can —in this situation— be no representation of South Asia that conforms to the oppositional paradigm between Orient and Occident.

## 2. Complicities of class

Equally there can be no cut-and-dried conclusions about class. Mowgli comes across as one who resists labelling in this connection, not only because neither species will have him but because he stands in an adversarial relationship quite frequently to many hierarchies. It is true that Kipling continually seems to stress the idea of corporate discipline in *The Jungle Books*: «Now these are the Laws of the Jungle, and many and mighty are they! But the head and the hoof of the Law and the haunch and hump is —Obey!» (Kipling 1929: 545). Simultaneously though he also gives us unforgettable pictures of Mowgli standing outside the rigid stratifications of jungle-life when he joins the *Bandar-log* (the monkey-people), and when he curses the villagers for their injustice and barbarity. This later incident provokes «Mowgli's song against people». Its bitterness can be seen from the way Mowgli speaks of letting in the jungle as a means to return civilisation to chaos because of the human damage of which the villagers are guilty: «I will let loose against you the fleet-footed vines/ I will call in the jungle to stamp out your lines ... and the *Karela* [bitter-gourd] the bitter *Karela* Shall cover it all» (ibid., 620). Such a general commination suggests the extent to which Mowgli is alienated from the system as he appears to be outside any known power-structure. If—as we have already seen— he embodies an experience not wholly determined by

race, he now comes across as one whose experience is not shaped wholly by class either. For the punishment he threatens—letting in the jungle—is one that levels all classes since anarchy and chaos threaten all strata of society. This lateral devastation is symbolised by the unchecked growth of the bitter-gourd which creeps horizontally over all ruined homesteads emphasising their derelict state. Suggestively the idea of Mowgli as an outsider looking in on all kinds of human experience—irrespective of its value or lack of it—is one that seems to have been part of Kipling's own understanding of the figure even away from *The Jungle Books*. For instance, when writing home, he uses Mowgli as a device to poke fun at the pomp and grandeur of the Nobel ceremony.<sup>2</sup> With all his appreciation of its beauty Kipling punctures the social and intellectual pretentiousness of the occasion pretty sharply. His comment here has none of the anger of the protest song but retains its propensity to level all classes and conditions of people:

The Nobel medal is pure gold and represents poetry listening to the voice of music .... I thought it was a picture of Mowgli listening to a woman playing on a lyre. He has nothing on to boast of but he is sitting on a bath towel and saying —'Now where is the rest of my week's wash. I have it all written out' (Gilbert 1984: 57)

This sense is captured in Kureishi's work too. When Karim is told by Shadwell to change his accent he expects support from Terry, a Communist Party worker:

As an active Trotskyite he encouraged me to speak of the prejudice and abuse I'd faced being the son of an Indian. In the evenings we talked of inequality, imperialism, white supremacy... But now, like the others, Terry said nothing.... I thought: You prefer generalisations like 'after the revolution the workers will wake up filled with unbelievable joy' to standing up to fascists like Shadwell (Kureishi 1990: 148)

In other words victims of race and class prejudice are not necessarily allies. Capital is seen very much as the leveller—the bitter karela plant—that causes civilisation to revert to the jungle. It erases any possible alliances that may be made to contest discrimination. For all his leftist pretensions, Terry is at least as keen on upward mobility as Karim can be. No easy equation

2. For a more serious account by Kipling of the December 1907 ceremony at which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature see «The Very-Own House» in *Something of Myself* (1937, repr. Thomas Pinney's edn. *«Something of Myself» and Other Autobiographical Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). The usual solemnity of the occasion was heightened by the fact that Oscar II, King of Sweden, had died just before Kipling and his wife arrived in Stockholm for the Nobel ceremony. Owing to the King's death, formal assemblies and speeches were reduced and a pall of gloom overhung Stockholm which was in mourning.

between one form of inequality and another can be easily made. Kureishi makes a similar personal declaration to much the same effect:

Some members of the Labour Party believe that racism is a sub-issue which has to be subordinate to the class issues of the time... They believe that winning elections and representing the mass of the working class... is more important than giving office or power to blacks (Kureishi 1986: 33).

This song against people cannot have a single victimising agent as its target. And while this comes as a shock to Karim, in the context of this novel, to find that no solidarity can be assumed between those who campaign against different forms of oppression, it is a theme familiar from Kureishi's other work. In an earlier screenplay, *My Beautiful Laundrette* a garage-owner says: «... we're professional businessmen. Not professional Pakistanis. There's no race question in the new enterprise culture» (Kureishi *ibid.*: 82). Now with Karim we find that —when capital stands forth as the leading coloniser— there is place for neither race nor class questions. This split within a single society, and indeed within a single individual, is a complicated development of Aijaz Ahmad's comment on the colonising energies of capital *vis-à-vis* the ideology of nationalism: «...nationalism alone cannot be the answer because capital can and does break down all national boundaries, especially in its cultural forms, and because most kinds of nationalism can easily accommodate themselves to this capitalistic universalisation» (Ahmad *op. cit.*). Kureishi's work demonstrates that it is not only nationalism from the Right that is vulnerable to the homogenising pressure of capital. Leftist ideology proves equally suspect. If neocolonialism entails a modification of the race-paradigm —as we have already seen— it would seem to entail alterations in the class-paradigm too.

### 3. Transgressing gender

The question of gender is considerably more complex. It has not found quite so much space in colonial discourse analysis as have the factors of race and class. Indeed this is one of the points on which Ahmad's early criticism of Said is based. He draws a parallel between the erasure of class and gender in the construction of the 'Oriental' model by Said:

Said was eventually to declare 'in the relationship between the ruler and the ruled in the imperial ... sense, race takes precedence over both class and gender ... I have always felt that the problem of emphasis and relative importance took precedence over the need to establish one's feminist credentials'. That contemptuous phrase «establish one's feminist credentials» takes care of gender quite definitively... (Ahmad 1992:197).

Ahmad's own work —although it refers to the inscription of gender— is primarily concerned with the relationship between race and class. Indeed to

think about gender at all while mapping lines of resistance and complicity with the help of such a device as the Mowgli character is more than a little fraught. Kipling's own portrait of Mowgli is of course clearly gendered. Even when recalling his first Mowgli story more than forty years after its publication he describes it as «a tale about ... a boy who had been brought up by wolves» (Kipling 1937: 67). Moreover, a good deal of the emotional tension generated by Mowgli's situation derives from his status as the 'Only Son' over whom two mothers claim ownership. Can contemporary writing use such a gendered figure?<sup>3</sup>

Apparently it can. Sara Suleri's collection of autobiographical essays, *Meatless Days* pauses on its way to summon up two absent spirits thus: «...tonight Ifat is long past summoning. 'Go back to Mowgli!' —Ifat's name for Mustakor— 'Write your Jungle Book!'» (Suleri 1990: 149). The vignette has a local poignancy. While it shows Ifat (Suleri's elder sister) imaginatively trying to evoke the presence of an absent friend (Fawzia Mustakor) the cover-page of the book shows us exactly the opposite: a reminder of the now-dead Ifat through a photograph taken by Fawzia. The image of Mowgli plays a small but significant part in the attempts made by three women to define each other in a culture described as follows:

Leaving Pakistan was, of course, tantamount to giving up the company of women... My reference is to a place where the concept of woman was not really part of an available vocabulary: we were too busy for that, just living, and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant. (ibid.:1)

In other words this mutual definition has to take place within the private rather than the public arena. This is not to say that women are without power but instead that their empowerment has a reality within personal relationships alone. On the surface there seems to be little reason why Fawzia —having migrated from East Africa through England to Pakistan— should be called Mowgli. The other nicknames she is given —Congo Lise, Faze Mackaw or Footsie Moose— bear some relationship either to her country of birth or to her real name. She is characterised by the many migrations she makes and by her strange commitment to a kind of extreme innocence, particularly sexual innocence. Her friends note this latter quality which «makes her (substitute) camisoles for sex in the scheme of her creaturely comforts ... If anyone came closest to predicting this astonishing feat, it was my sister Ifat,

3. See for instance this conclusion of «The Only Son»: «And was I born an Only son and did I play alone? / For I have dreamed of comrades twain that bit me to the bone / ... Unbar the door. I may not bide, but I must out and see / If those are wolves that wait outside or my own kin to me! / She loosed the bar, she slid the bolt, she opened the door anon, / And a grey bitch-wolf came out of the dark and fawned on the Only Son!» (Kipling 1929: 619-620).

who could think of Mustakor only as Mowgli anyway» (ibid.: 56). There seems at first to be little connection between this refusal to grow up and the Mowgli role. After all Mowgli is not Peter Pan.

The real reason for the nickname seems to lie in the fact that the Mowgli-role offers a particular kind of weapon to those who seek it. As the description of Fawzia shows, she faces isolation on account of both of her race and her gender. She is the eternal immigrant who comes to an unwelcoming Lahore «with all the tentative innocence of one who returns seeking to understand the geographic reality of her forbears ... (for) those who travel curiously imagine that returning is somewhat sweeter, less dangerous, than seeking out some novel history» (ibid.: 49). When such a return rests on unexamined assumptions it is doomed from the start. Fawzia believes naively that her hesitant 'Hodi' —which in Swahili is a polite way of asking permission to enter— will be met with enthusiasm. This does not happen. For Fawzia's identity is threatened by the issue of gender as well. In a land which allows women «...[only] two modes of behaviour —either you can be sweet and simple or you can be cold and proud» (ibid.: 166) —she opts out, perhaps caring for neither option. She finds instead a new role that breaks down barriers of both gender and age. Fawzia changes from being an amateur actress —«having become enamoured overnight with the array of buttons and levers— those nipple look-alikes ...[she] came along as a backstage boy, a hand for all seasons» (ibid.: 60-61). This exercise in self-marginalisation by transgressing gender, is not of course obviously similar to any element in Kipling's portrait. Nonetheless there is one feature both characters share: a strong sense of physical incongruity which calls their identity in question. Both live in environments which exert a strong threatening influence on their identity. Mowgli is seen in turn as man-cub, frog, wolf-cub, and is even defined in terms of his opposite self, the undisciplined monkey: «Very soft is his skin, and he is not so unlike the *bandar-log* [the monkey-people]. Have a care, Manling, that I do not mistake thee for a monkey some twilight...» (Kipling 1894: 54) In the case of Fawzia, pressures of race and gender alike lead to a grotesque exaggeration of this incongruity, a concentration on «the principle of radical separation; mind and body, existence and performance, would never be allowed to occupy the same space of time» (Suleri 1989: 49). Hence her grimaces and loping movements which recall those of a monkey and ultimately of course, those of Mowgli. Thus the Mowgli-image may be said to offer a means of liberation to Fawzia, to the extent that it allows her to transgress the limits of her identity prescribed by gender.

This study suggests then, that contemporary literatures —the products of societies shaped and threatened by new colonialisms— generate resistance to these colonialisms in diverse ways. The societies seen here —a multi—ethnic Britain and a theocratic Pakistan —are equal but different products of the dismantling of empire. To this extent their legacy— as seen in the common choice of the Mowgli image —is shared. The image develops so as to reflect the ways in which the dynamics of race, class and gender, change in response

to the shifting pressures of new colonialisms. But the Mowgli-image is no passive mirror. It becomes a creative instrument by incorporating within itself resistance to these changes. We have seen how Kureishi uses this image to suggest that capital is the common enemy to both race-mobility and class-mobility and also how Suleri uses this image to explore the nature and limits of the freedom gained by crossing the boundary of gender. If contemporary writing has thus sensitised itself to both reflect and resist new colonialisms, so must theory. For without this radicalisation, theory will be unable to anticipate and negotiate a world in which —as it already recognises— «it is the children who make history, not the parents» (Ahmad 1996).

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