Postcolonial Subjects and Their Responses to Metanarratives

Postcolonialism is concerned with 'the ways in which the colour of your skin or your place and circumstances of birth define the kind of life, privileged and pleasurable, or oppressed and exploited, that you will have in this world' (Young, 2009, 13). It continues to uncover the effects of colonialism in post-colonial times and draws attention to the reproduction of hierarchies and dominant structures from colonial times to the present.

This essay seeks to focus on the responses of postcolonial subjects to metanarratives. The essay argues that while most of the postcolonial literature has focused on the internalising or challenging of metanarratives by postcolonial subjects, the metanarratives have also been used by the postcolonial subjects as a rhetoric to advance their personal aims. Such an approach by the subject is guided by its own utility and not by its acceptance of, or belief in the metanarrative.

To demonstrate the same, the essay has been divided into four parts. The first part will discuss what a metanarrative is and how it is constructed and promoted, with a focus on Edward Said's Orientalism and Michel Foucault's work on knowledge and power. The second part will draw on the works of a variety of postcolonial scholars to discuss the focus of postcolonial literature on the internalisation and challenging of metanarratives. The third part will discuss how postcolonial subjects may use metanarratives as a rhetoric to justify their position or advance their goals in the international system and will cite contemporary situations to demonstrate the same. The final section will examine the Algerian civil war as a case study to contextualise the arguments made in the first three sections. The case of the Algerian civil war will be used to demonstrate how the Algerian government used the metanarratives about Islamist politics to secure its position of power within the Algerian state, to avoid international criticism, and to vilify its opponents–mainly its political opponent, The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS).

It should be noted that the essay acknowledges the problems associated with the term 'postcolonial subject', such as its restriction to the colonial experiences and hence ignorance of the pre-colonial past (Jabri, 2012, 19). Such a conception risks seeing the subject as emerging with its colonial experiences (*ibid*). Further, it can be argued that referring to it as a subject risks fixing its position in the international system and reinforcing the viewing of the non-West through the lens of coloniality (*ibid*, 11). The term, however, importantly also reveals the continuation of colonial structures and the responses of the non-West to them (Bhabha, 1994, 25) and will hence be employed in the essay.

It is also important to note that for the purpose of the essay, the postcolonial subject is conceived not just in terms of postcolonial states but also institutions and organisations of individuals in the postcolonial world, so as to reflect the broad and widespread impact of postcoloniality.

Construction and Promotion of Metanarratives

John Stephens defined a metanarrative as 'a global or totalising… narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience' (1998, 6). Metanarratives thus provide a 'cognitive lens' that people can see the world through (Adebanwai, 2016, 281), and can provide a mental schema to understand the Self and the Other (Hiddleston, 2014, 16). The construction of such schemas in postcoloniality can be best understood through Edward

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Said's Orientalism and Foucault's work on power and knowledge.

Said's conception of Orientalism refers to the epistemological and ontological differentiation between the 'Occident' or the West and the 'Orient' or the non-West (1978, 2-3). It focuses on the representations of the Orient by the West and how such false representations position the so-called civilised West at a higher level and the so-called barbaric Orient at a lower level (Burney, 2012, 23). Such hierarchies are established to create structures of 'power, knowledge, hegemony, culture and imperialism' embedded in a 'colonial discourse' that reinforces the Orient as the Other (*ibid*).

The construction of metanarratives can be understood by looking at how the colonial discourses that Said talked about are formed. The colonial discourse, at its very conception, is a construction of the truth, a fiction created by the Occident to explain the Orient in a way that creates and reinforces the power of the Occident over the Orient (Spanos, 2009, 72). These ideas, created with an 'imperial will' (*ibid*), are propounded through the use of literature and media to establish domination by the power of knowledge and by constructing the regime of truth (Said, 1978, 30, 35-36, 46). Thus, it can be understood that a metanarrative such as a colonial discourse is constructed in a way that projects it as the ultimate truth, it is transformed from an idea to knowledge through its propagation and subsequent naturalisation, and that such knowledge becomes a metanarrative and allows the consolidation and retention of power.

The construction of such a metanarrative is clearly evident in the West's conception of Islam and the promoted link between Islam and terrorism in the stereotypically reductionist discourse on it, especially since 9/11. The hierarchies between the West and the non-West that Said pointed towards in Orientalism continue to be expressed through 'narratives emphasising the primitivism of Arab and Muslim societies' (Whitlock, 2010, 109). Along with such an emphasis, the media has been used to propagate a link between Islam and terrorism, evident from the increased references to the two together in news reports since 9/11 (Schmidt, 2014, 162). It can also be seen in the circulation of the image of a Muslim terrorist in films such as The Siege and the portrayal of the Arab world as brutal with shows like Disney's Aladdin explicitly referring to the Arab world as barbaric (Ward, 2007). Such metanarratives, as evident from those about Islam and Muslims, are spread through discourse in media, organisations and formal institutions (Said, 1985, 100), and also transnational forms of discourse such as that on social media (Froio and Ganesh, 2018, 16).

The above discussion on the construction of metanarratives is complemented by Foucault's work on knowledge and power. According to Foucault, 'statements' are introduced to us externally as a structured set of claims that are neither false nor true but rather the perspective of a particular group (1984, 129). These claims or 'knowledges' are crucial to the exercise of power by the group in question and hence, when internalised, allow the group to exercise its power over the rest of the society (Foucault, 1979, 62). Foucault thus creates a close nexus between knowledge and power, wherein he holds that 'every point in the exercise of power is a site where knowledge is formed. Conversely every established piece of knowledge permits and assures the exercise of power' (*ibid*). This explains how a metanarrative attains a position of dominance in the society after it is naturalised as a discourse and turned into knowledge. Whilst the metanarrative allows the exercise of power by a certain group, it is itself strengthened as a result of the group's exercise of power. This can be understood by looking at the nexus between the continued domination of the West in the international sphere through its control over international organisations, and the propagation of metanarratives which reinforce the superiority of the West and its ideas such as liberal democracy and capitalism (Novosad and Werker, 2018).

Responses to Metanarratives in Postcolonial Literature

Most of the postcolonial literature, such as the works of scholars discussed in this section, has focused on how the subject has internalised metanarratives and how it has or should resist such metanarratives whether in colonial or post-colonial times. Mainstream literature has thus overlooked alternative responses to metanarratives, as this section will demonstrate, and it is such inattention to other responses employed by postcolonial subjects that the essay seeks to correct.

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With regard to resisting colonial metanarratives, Frantz Fanon has been one of the most radical scholars. Fanon speaks of a complete revolution against colonial rule and the removal of its influences in the society whilst emphasising the concept of national identity (1968, 50). Although differentiating between a revolution led by the native bourgeois elite and that by people at the grassroots, his work stresses on the resistance to metanarratives and the power structures accompanied by them – at earlier stages in his life through a comparatively subtle resistance proposed in Black Skin White Masks (1967) and later a radically violent resistance proposed in The Wretched of the Earth (1968).

In contrast to Fanon, Mohandas Gandhi neither bases his call for resistance to colonialism on national identity, nor does he support the use of violence. Gandhi saw colonialism not as a conflict between the West and the non-West but rather modernity and tradition, and hence focused on the need to oppose the metanarratives promoting 'individualist, competitive spirit of modern civilisation and capitalism' that accompanied colonialism, instead of the physical power structure of the colonial regime (Hiddleston, 2014, 55). Due to his perception of the basis of colonialism being in such metanarratives that he links with ethics and morality, he proposes forms of passive resistance to colonial rule such as strengthening traditional values (*ibid*, 56).

Edward Said, in Culture and Imperialism, too speaks of the resistance that the 'white man' met with when he went to the 'non-European world'. He asserts that there was 'always some form of resistance' when the West sought to impose its metanarratives and the accompanying power structures, and these resistances which were expressed in military and cultural terms culminated in the decolonisation movements across the Oriental world (1993, xii).

Most scholars looking at the internalisation of metanarratives, have focused on how the colonial metanarratives continue to shape the postcolonial subject even after decolonisation. Partha Chatterjee, for instance, observes that the colonial institutions and administration were not replaced in postcolonial India, which hints at the internalisation of the metanarrative about the superiority of Western structures (1986, 23-4). He also notes how Eastern nationalism seeks to differentiate itself from colonial thinking, albeit it is itself based on Western modes of thinking as opposed to traditional structures, again hinting at the internalisation of the metanarrative about the West's superiority (1999, 42).

Another postcolonial scholar, Octavio Paz, focuses on the imitation of the Occident by the Orient. He contends that such imitation signifies the loss of identity and the feeling of emptiness in the Orient which is sought to be filled through such imitation. He argues that the (post)colonial subjects 'tremble and disguise themselves in the presence of the master', which can be seen as reflecting the internalisation of the hierarchies promoted by colonial metanarratives (1967, 62).

Gayatri Spivak on the other hand, takes a very different approach and focuses on the inability of the subject to voice its concerns and hence, to challenge metanarratives. Criticising Fanon for assuming and giving the subject a European position wherein in it has a voice, Spivak asserts that the masses of the subjects who are not from the native bourgeois class are positioned outside the margins of the hegemonic power structure and thus rendered powerless (Spivak, 1988, 280). She further demonstrates how the subaltern's or the subject's knowledge is relegated to the realm of myths and how this forces the subject to Westernise and adopt Western modes of thinking and expression to be heard (Sharp, 2008, 111). Spivak thus shows a form of forced internalisation that happens amongst postcolonial subjects.

Whilst there are a number of other postcolonial works that can be discussed in this section (such as W. E. B. du Bois's double consciousness as a struggle between the simultaneous internalising and challenging of metanarratives), the examples discussed above suffice to show that postcolonial literature has focused mainly on the two broad approaches to metanarratives – internalising or resisting them.

The Use of Metanarratives as Rhetoric

Having discussed the construction and promotion of metanarratives as well as the focus of mainstream postcolonial literature on the internalisation of and resistance to metanarratives, this section will argue that postcolonial subjects have also used these metanarratives to secure their position and advance their goals.

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When a metanarrative is employed as rhetoric by a postcolonial subject, it is not due to its acceptance of, or belief in the metanarrative. Rather, such an approach is guided by the postcolonial subject's assessment of its utility and to gain international (mainly Western) support. The metanarrative, thus, becomes a means of gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the international community and a cloak to hide its interests and intentions under. Its use is restricted to the level of rhetoric and is devoid of internalisation, which becomes evident when the actions of the postcolonial subject are judged against the metanarrative it uses. Further, such use cannot be categorised as a form of resistance because the subject does not explicitly or implicitly suggest that, and rather than posing any challenges to the metanarratives, such an employing of rhetoric subsequently strengthens the metanarrative – albeit the postcolonial subject might not in itself intend to do so.

Such an approach can be understood by looking at examples of the use of metanarratives as rhetoric by postcolonial states, institutions and organisations. A prominent example in this regard is that of the conducting of rigged elections whilst making references to democracy. The Syrian regime under Bashar al Assad, which is termed as a dictatorship, has had presidential and parliamentary elections which have been rigged yet hailed by the state as 'democracy at its best' and as Syria's 'own style of democracy' (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2014; Black, 2007). Simultaneous with such references to democracy have been the brutal stifling of any form of dissent at torture centres such as Saydnaya prison (Amnesty International, 2017) and the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the continuing civil war (Amnesty International, 2018, 349-353). Academics have shown how authoritarian states conduct rigged elections to create a false sense of legitimacy (Schwedler and Chomiak, 2006).

However, analysing the same from a postcolonial lens demonstrates how metanarratives such as those about democracy are used by postcolonial subjects in such situations to create a fake, albeit weak, legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. Whilst it can be argued about how successful or unsuccessful the Syrian regime has been at it, the case of Syria clearly shows an attempt to disguise the authoritarian rule as accepted by Syrian people, so as to strengthen the government's hold on power. At the same time, the stark contradictions between the Syrian government's rhetoric of democracy and its approach to opposition and dissent demonstrate that the metanarratives about democracy being the ideal form of government has not in reality been internalised and instead exists only at the rhetorical level. The Syrian government, therefore did not internalise the metanarrative about democracy or challenge it by arguing in favour of an alternative form of government. Rather it used the metanarrative as a rhetoric to attempt to consolidate its power.

Another (and rather successful) instance of the use of such an approach is the Pakistani military intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence's (ISI) use of the rhetoric of war on terror. The ISI affirmed itself as an ally of the West in the so-called Global War on Terror which seeks to target violent Islamic fundamentalist groups (Gregory, 2007, 1020). On the other hand, it used the financial and military aid that it received from the same to fund Taliban and the Haqqani network (*ibid*, 1025). The ISI thus employed the metanarrative of the war on terror as a rhetoric to present itself as a legitimate partner to the West to serve its own interests. As is evident from both the cases, such a use of metanarratives does not challenge them. Rather, it unintentionally strengthens them as it promotes them as means of gaining legitimacy.

The Algerian Civil War – Case Study

Examining the descent of Algeria into a civil war in 1992 and the reactions of the Algerian government before, during and after the civil war demonstrate how powerful a weapon a metanarrative can be and how a postcolonial subject can use it as a rhetoric to save its own position of power or to advance its goals.

The beginning of the civil war and the rise of the FIS can be traced to the riots of October 1988 wherein Algerians led protests against their worsening economic condition (Willis, 1996, 107). These protests were met by the Algerian regime with brutalities against the protesters which included open-firing on, arresting and torturing them (*ibid*). Such a response increased the already growing frustration against the regime among the Algerian masses (Joffé, 1995, 6) and laid the basis for the FIS to gain support in the elections of 1990-91.

As clashes between the Algerian military and the protesters turned violent, President Chadli announced political

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reforms and lifted the ban on new political parties, allowing opposition parties to be formed and to contest elections (Willis, 1996, 112). It was then that the FIS was formed as a formal political party based on Islamic values and promoting an Islamic form of governance (*ibid*, 117).

Against this backdrop of frustration against the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) that had been in power since independence, the FIS won 62% of the seats in local assemblies in Algeria's first ever democratic elections in 1990 (*ibid*, 133). This came as a shock to the FLN which expected to continue its control even after the introduction of democratic elections (*ibid*). However, it was with the clear victory of the FIS in the first round of general elections in 1991 that the FLN felt threatened to the point of deciding to dissolve the parliament and disband the FIS (*ibid*, 213-214). With the Algerian government's refusal to accept the electoral results began Algeria's civil war.

As violent clashes erupted between the state forces and Islamist guerrilla groups that came to occupy the centre stage, the FLN presented its fight against the FIS and the guerrilla groups as a fight against Islamist fundamentalism (*ibid*, 288), a claim that did not just put the FIS and the other Islamist guerrilla groups in one category[1], but also sought to present the FIS as an Islamist threat that the FLN was seeking to counter. The success of the FLN's use of metanarratives about the danger of Islamist politics and the threat such a regime would pose to democracy[2] becomes evident when one looks at the international community's response to the developments in Algeria.

The international community, especially the West, has been quick to express its criticism when such a ban has been placed on opposition parties in other contexts. For instance, Cambodia faced strong criticism from the European Union (EU) after it dissolved the opposition party and even received a warning from the European Parliament, threatening action over the aid it received and the trade it conducted with the EU (Thul, 2017). Similarly, the United Kingdom and the EU have called on Bahrain to lift its ban on opposition parties and allow free and fair elections (Wintour, 2018). However, there has been a lack of such criticism against the Algerian government and its use of the metanarratives about the threat posed by Islamist politics has been used to create a widely accepted narrative about the Algerian civil war which paints it as a struggle between the secularists (hence, good) and the Islamist fundamentalists (hence, evil) (see Ruedy, 2005; Phillips, 1995). As proclaimed by an Algerian, 'the reason why cancelling of elections and the dissolution of the FIS…did not arouse any reaction from the world community was the "fear of Islam in the West"' (Martinez, 1998, 159).

To understand how the FLN's reference to the FIS as an Islamist threat was merely an employing of such a metanarrative as a rhetoric and not based on any observations of threats posed by the FIS, it is important to look at the record of the FIS in local constituencies after its victory in 1990. The short rule of the FIS in local communes brought about major changes for that brief period, most visible in the economic and social terms. Under the FIS rule, the corruption and lack of access to basic necessities that had led to the riots of October 1988 were addressed (*ibid*, 29-30). With the drastic decline in corruption, people had regular access to the basic necessities and the law and order in local communes improved with drop in crimes (*ibid*, 40). Further, there was a close connection between the local representatives and the people of the commune in the FIS's constituencies, which allowed the local grievances to be resolved quickly and efficiently (*ibid*, 34). There was therefore widespread satisfaction with the FIS in its constituencies which culminated in the massive support it received for the general elections. On the other hand, the FLN accused 'Islamist fundamentalists' of being a threat to the Algerian society whilst it itself targeted innocents for any expression of Muslim identity in its paranoia to counter opposition (*ibid*, 56, 59). This demonstrates that the Algerian government under the FLN did not believe in the metanarratives it used about Islamist politics, but rather used them as a rhetoric to justify its position of power. The success of the FLN in such an approach is evident not just through its victory in the civil war without much criticism for its brutal conduct, but also in its ability to establish its own view of the civil war as the dominant narrative – a dominance that academic literature has failed to break.

Conclusion

The essay demonstrated how the response of postcolonial subjects to metanarratives is not restricted to internalising or challenging them. The subject may also use the metanarratives as a rhetoric to advance its own interests or to secure its position of power. In cases such as the Algerian civil war, the use of metanarratives as a rhetoric plays on the fears and anxieties of the West or the Occident, to incite a particular response from them that suits the

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postcolonial subject in question. A similar case can be seen in Morocco wherein the state associated the POLISARIO independence movement with metanarratives about Islamist fundamentalism and the war on terror in its diplomacy with the United States, and as a result, received support from the United States and France in suppressing the Sahrawi nationalist movement (de Orellana, 2015, 179).

Whilst such an approach may play on the fears of the West, it also unintentionally strengthens the metanarratives created by the West as it confers a form of legitimacy to them when the postcolonial subject itself employs and confirms them. Further, whilst such an approach may seem to serve the immediate goals of the concerned postcolonial subject, it is, in the long term, detrimental to its interests as it does not just strengthen the metanarratives but also the associated power structures that place the postcolonial subject at a lower rank in the hierarchy[3]. On the other hand, the use of metanarratives as a rhetoric is restricted to the postcolonial subject's assessment of its utility, and hence may be replaced by internalisation or challenging of metanarratives at another point of time. Thus, whilst the use of metanarratives as a rhetoric may be a powerful approach to serve the postcolonial subject's immediate interests, it may also be the most transitory and short-lived response of a postcolonial subject in its confrontation with metanarratives.

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Notes

[1] There is evidence that suggests that the FLN was in fact involved with the main Islamist guerrilla group, Armed Islamist Group (GIA), in committing violence which it then attributed to the 'Islamist fundamentalists' and hence used to vilify the FIS (Ryan, 2010).

[2] See Melonas, 2017 for how the idea of democracy is tyrannical due to its forced universalisation and sees any alternative to the West's conception of democracy as unacceptable.

[3] As discussed earlier, there is close nexus between metanarratives and the associated power structures and hence strengthening one would also lead to strengthening of the other.

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