

The Role of Literature in Challenging Cultural Imperialism: A Postcolonial Study

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Abstract—The reality of cultural imperialism is a subject that has been extensively explored by many scholars. Many writers have written out their thoughts about this crucial topic. In this sense, it is imperative to understand that imperialism would not exist without the establishment of an Empire. However, all dominated territories have experienced a high level of cultural imperialism; and this structure has affected their lives, history, identity, uniqueness, and the way they live. The truth is that the superior force subjugates the weaker one and imposes its culture over it and this is where the theorization of cultural imperialism begins to come into form. However, this mindset of cultural imperialism has made the modern superpower to continue to influence the way other nations of the world live even without the cultural consensus. The expansion of the modern Empire brought about colonialism and eventually led to the cultural imperialism. The writers have tried to write in a way that reflects the resistant spirit in which the literature is used in challenging this peculiar phenomenon. It is in this sense this study examines how literature becomes an effective weapon in challenging cultural imperialism – a new form of imperialist system that we experience in recent times.

Keywords—Cultural Imperialism, Empire, Literature, Subjugation, Resistance.

I. INTRODUCTION

From time to time, scholars have expressed their views on cultural imperialism and the role literature has played in challenging this phenomenon. Cultural imperialism has been a very important study that has been widely studied. It refers to the hegemony of the more powerful culture over another. Hence, the origin of this theory is traced to the study of critical communication. It was propounded to explicate the profound effect of the USA and her economic media institution over the global system, particularly from the frame of reference of the Cold War (Dunbar, 2014). In other words, immediately the World War II ended, the USA and the Soviet Union developed a very strong propensity to influence other countries of the world to apply their socioeconomic framework.

The theory places so much emphasis on the USA's attempt to spread her cultural identity and belief system across the globe. In fact, it reveals how the United States tried to force this system on all other countries of the world, especially the growing countries through her media network. The focal point of this theory vehemently criticizes the pattern at which the USA planned to impose its ideology on other countries through its media in terms of political, economic, and even

cultural systems. Hence, the theory also suggests that those countries that have gone through cultural imperial system should be given the opportunity to independently develop their own media of sovereign states without the interference of the superpower.

The attempt to establish the structure happened in the order of the fight for an independence state to resist the European colonial system and the current US and the Soviet imperial structures (Neocosmos, 2017). Notwithstanding, the theory faced strong oppositions from different angles. First of all, scholars in cultural studies opposed it in a way that challenged the similar structure of mass communication effect on the listeners. From the demographical concept, the scholars opined that the US media did not have total effect on the audience as the cultural imperialism theory has claimed. Instead, those mercantile icons and information are controlled by the native modification, and the refusal to be dominated cannot have any influence on the audience.

Second, another opposition that occurred emphasized on the economic and political situation of other nations and their media structure, it is not certain if they were actually affected by the USA media system. Thus, the scholars place so much emphasis on this aspect of the ownership structure of the government power; and the media system has greatly affected

the system in which the media operated. Furthermore, scholars examine the probability of the models having power over the structure of the media and the level that the media daily activity presents their programs set the convention that the media intend to support and the sociopolitical interest they promote on daily basis. For years, these criticisms against the cultural imperialism theory have been included in it and have also been shaping its interest. Some critics have attempted to inculcate these criticisms into the theory by evaluating it, but some other scholars intend to reestablish the same theory (Neocosmos, 2017).

Factually, the authenticity of the theory has continued to attract more criticism and debate, especially in accordance with historical development and the emerging mainstream that have developed the sociopolitical situation of the international media structure. Despite the opposing opinions from different scholars, the theory has been applied to different studies in its uniqueness. This paper applies this theory in examining the role literature plays in opposing this cultural imperialism in terms of both sociopolitical and cultural domination of the superior culture.

II. CULTURE AND DOMINATION

According to Gramsci, he regards both culture and literature as the concealed pattern of governance in comparison to the state system, thus some gregarious structures obtain the governance in concepts, tenet, culture, and integrity controlled by some gregarious formulation – that Gramsci considers the cultural domination. According to him, a country that operates with capitalist system is made up of both political and civil societies. The system and the force of the state in terms of political group seem to be totally dependent on the army, police, and the prison systems. The pattern of the civil society seems to be completely dependent on the clan, religious gathering, school, and mass communication. From Gramsci point of view, he believes that civil society constitutes a great structure and it is not the center of the economy. In Europe, the governing of the middle class needs not to rely on a specific concept by ordering the political group and her vice.

Hence, looking at this very critically, this study focuses on the cultural imperialism and how literature is used as an instrument of challenging it. However, it is imperative to note that culture is a very significant component of any society, and it is the definition of how a particular society operates. The worldview of every society differs, and everyone sees life from different lenses, and culture plays a very significant role in shaping any society. Culture influences so many things in a society such as language, food, clothing, education, architecture, philosophy, law, art, literature, and manners (Manji and Sokari, 2012). For instance, let us look at the role of culture in Greek, Roman, and British Empires; is possible that all the territories they colonized would be influenced by their cultures? Of course, their cultural power plays a very significant role in subjugating the territories and the people they had colonized. In this case, even if they tried

to establish economic and military power in those territories, it will be difficult to sustain that for a long time if cultural power is absence. For example, Roman Empire is a very large Empire, and their domination would not have been successful without using the service of the elites they met in the native community of the territory they had invaded. It was also assumed that when the Roman conquered the Greek, they also conquered their imagination, and the Roman Empire actually borrowed from the previous Empires cultures and definitely there was a cultural imperialism and influence (Patnaik, 2011). Hence, despite that these Empires used culture as a weapon of influence, it is very crucial to understand that culture itself was not the main precondition for the Empire to survive. In this sense, one will not just look at the extent of cultural imperialism but it is considerably essential to look into its limit in practice. It is good to understand that all Empires had their own different strategies of expansion and establishment in which culture is one of them. However, from this stance, every Empire tries as much as possible to conform to the laid down condition of the territory they have invaded. For instance, when the British Empire invaded India, they did not just start colonizing or governing over them, but they had to investigate and research the existing tradition and culture of the huge Indian society before they could start governing over them. It must definitely be in conformity with their native tradition and culture. However, in the 19th century, the missionaries disagreed with this pattern; they believed that they needed to convert the Indians from their ancient religion to Christian faith. They believed that was the right thing to do since they had not gotten a substantial number of the Indian elites to use. But later on, there was a disagreement that, that style was obsolete that there was no need to spread or impose British ideology to or on the Indians because it caused them trouble. They needed to be governed in confinement with their ancient tradition, culture, royalty, and ritual through their princes and princesses. Hence, what should be put into consideration is that what the Empire wants to do in culture is not as crucial as what they want to do in practice. But looking at this argument as it is, every Empire tends to make an apologia by saying that even if the previous Empires had been cruel theirs would be different and kind and tend to bring about civilization. One of the structures that the British Empire tries to defend this argument is to historically make a reference to the passed Empires that though they may be cruel but theirs would be different and nice. For this reason, no Empire accepts they would be brutal on their subjects but they tend to establish some kind of rationalization for imperialism. All these they argue, they say there may be exploitation but what they do is good and they all will enjoy. Hence, it is important to consider that Empire has been the most common system of power structure in the history of the world. Hence, it is essential to understand that Empire always occurs and it is necessary to think about the historical phenomenon of the Empires. In reference to this, it is crucial to think about Empire intellectually, if not, it means we are all vulnerable to the new form of modern Empire and it is definitely obvious that the modern Empire has been taking

a different form. Therefore, the Empire succeeds through the means of imposition in which we can see the effect of cultural imperialism. Thus, the culture of the superior power is imposed on the native people. One thing that is crucial here is that, an Empire does not depend on colonization; it is possible for an Empire to exist and it will have total control of the countries under its imperial system without actually colonizing them. In this sense, the Empire can control the economy, the road system; the Empire investors could determine their banking system without necessarily applying on the colonial system. However, cultural imperialism can happen in a way that the people would naturally absorb the imperial culture without necessarily being imposed on them. Furthermore, we must understand that the reality of imperial cultural power cannot survive without the economic strength and physical force under the imperialist system.

A. Literature and Imperialism

Imperial power evolves from one age to another, and this happens when a particular Empire is subdued by another stronger one. As this happens, different development emerges and every emerging Empire comes up with different plans to extend its territory; and in this situation, many kingdoms that are conquered will be subjected to the total control of the stronger power. Their economy, military, banking system, social order, culture, art, and literature will not be exempted. Just as Greek literature was adapted by the Roman Empire immediately after the decline of the Greek Empire, so is literature of the subdued territory may be influenced by the stronger power. Literature plays a very significant role in every society, and it also reflects the culture of the society. Despite that Empire includes many another societies, kingdoms, nations, and even races, the impact and the imperial system could be felt in every system (Pithouse, 2016). Hence, the contemporary, Western imperial power that was established in the era of the Renaissance was extended across many borders such as Americas, Africa, Asia, and toward the end of the 18th century the imperial system began to extend to the Australia and the Pacific. Beginning from the 15th century, the Spanish and Portuguese had been the first to conquer crucial territories of the foreign nations and kingdoms, and then, the French, British, and the Dutch started taking possessions of the foreign lands as well (Manji and Fletcher, 2013). After that, other European countries started conquering like their counterparts. Countries such as Germany, Belgium, and Italy were also part of these Imperialists. England subjugated Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Therefore, it can be construed that there was an internal Empire within England before it began to extend its territory beyond its border. Thus, racism began to evolve as a conceptual proposition in a contemporary world when the Britain began to consider the Irish as a race that is inferior. Factually, the European imperial powers considered all the territories under their imperial system as barbarians or savages; they consider them as inferior in terms of race. In the embellishment of the Imperial system, racist ideology began to evolve. Thus, this racist corollary gave so much strength to

imperialism. It is this that brought about the term “civilizing mission” that the Europeans claimed to have embarked on. This civilizing mission was meant to civilize the so-called barbarians or the savages from their darkness (Manji, 2015). Hence, some missionaries like David Livingstone contributed to the strength of the imperialist system. This predisposition about barbarism was strengthened by the strong opposition encountered from the natives of the land they invaded. However, the opposition was always met with serious defeat because of the weapons used by the European invaders. Thus, as contemporary racist predisposition began to evolve, it became stronger when slavery started. The major European powers such as France, Britain, and Portugal began to engage in slave trade and the importation of slaves from Western part of Africa became a norm. The slaves were used in the sugarcane and cotton farms in the Americas. However, scientific racism evolved from the natural history of enlightenment which eventually became the gregarious Darwinism and the development of the eugenics that began in the 1800s. When it was 20th century, there was a popular opinion that all the races could be analyzed through the warfare of race in which the European race always came first (Losurdo, 2014).

Hence, the emergence of imperial system gave room for the literature of resistance to start evolving from the invaded territory. According to Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* (1987), she gives some explications and propositions about literary criticism in which various kinds of resistance are presented. Some of the points, she makes in her preface of the book, maintain that literature can be used to demand independence and this does not mean to agitate for the independence alone but to be part and parcel of the independence. Of course, literature has played a major role in resisting power of subjugation and repression; there has been the emergence of the native writers from the territory where imperial system has been established (p2). This literature reflects the contents that directly resist subjugation. She explains the term resistance in which has become a model for some authors today. “The idea of ‘resistance’ provides a primary framework for the critical project of post-colonialism. Resistance is a continual referent and at least implicit locus of much postcolonial criticism and theory” (Jefferess, 2008, p. 3). Hence, Said (1978) also explains the concept of resistance. The resistance literature has been given different terms and definitions as the writers continue to find one reason or the other to establish opinions for national liberation. Writers from many imperialized countries have evolved, and their literary views have brought about resisting the power of imperial domination (Knowles and Linn, 2004). In this sense, it is very crucial to look into the meticulous delineation of this term since the main subject of this study is based on it. The issue of cultural imperialism takes a crucial space in this study and how literature becomes a major tool of resistance. Thus, the debate of the global literature was started by Barbara Harlow in which he criticized the Western literary establishment in the construct of its academy. Harlow claims that the literary body is greatly precluded not only in the conventional areas of literature established in accordance with the requirement of the nation.

In fact, it did not end there, but in comparative literary studies, it seems like there is a self-limit to only the northern areas of the universe. In this sense, one could clearly observe that the department of French never teaches literature from the Francophone countries (the former colonies of France), and it becomes difficult for the department of English to inculcate literature of the former colonies of British Empire in their curriculum; and this is obvious when American program precludes the literature from South and Central Americas (Anta, 2016). So as to accentuate the concept of this preclusion of literature, Harlow devises an outline of literary development which she calls *Resistance Literature*. Her opinions concerning this modern label are established on the principle of geopolitical contemplation. Harlow explains the agitation for national independence during the 20th century that the Western Europe and North America have domination over the sociopolitical and economic situation of those colonies; this makes an agitation for freedom justifiable (Gopinath and Nyer, 2009, p. 26). Therefore, resistance literature becomes crucial. Resistance literature is not only limited to the former colonies but also it has become a very potent tool of national liberation and resistance against imperial system across the globe. Hence, "South African cultural production, from song, to poetry, to the novel, provided a prominent mode of fostering communities of opposition to the apartheid government. Inasmuch as resistance literature or song provided representations of power from the perspective of the oppressed" (Jefferess, 2008, p. 136). Hence, Halo Barbara also reflects the efficacy of resistance through literature in which she emulates writers such as Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and Ayi Kwei Armah who have been the vocal and productive writers in the area of literature of resistance.

The literature of resistance to cultural imperialism therefore evolved as a result of political oppression and dispute from the Western powers and indigenous people of the countries they imperialized. It is an instrument of political resistance from the oppressor. Looking at its main purpose, it is mainly written for national movement across the globe. Thus, Harlow's principle of resistance literature contends the traditions of literary studies because she is able to discover authors from the historical perspective of political movement and liberation. Therefore, as the populace can protest against inadequacy of the state physically so is it necessary to voice out one's pain to stop imperial intimidation. Struggles for freedom and coordinated resistance are no longer popular like before; hence, literature can serve as this vital medium of resisting imperial repression.

Literature has established both physical and metaphysical importance in the world; it has been used as a very strong instrument for resistance. For example, clandestine literature which is a general term used for all literatures published during the Second World War under the German rule; and these literatures are used for resistance and protection of the Jewish people. The publishers are also in other countries in which they are not given permission for publishing such literature. The literature was used to resist Nazi repressive and propagandist system. The people and the writers considered

the Nazi tyrannical rule as an assault against the value and peaceful existence of life; and also against the concept of freedom of speech and expression of the people and writers. In this sense, despite that these literatures were beautifully crafted and written the Nazi rule during the Second World War did not give permission to publish them. The justice and fairness toward the people were denied. These literary texts were, therefore, used as the media of resistance against the oppressive system. However, the outrageous reactions to the works of literature by the Nazi government were to place it under strict surveillance in which so many literary writers were restricted from writing, publishing, and even selling. These texts reflected the situation where intellectual and popular expressions are integrated. Looking at its literary weight, it has been a very unique literature that reflected the state of human feeling in the time of gloomiest condition. When the oppressors instituted the concept, they forced the people into unimaginable cruelty and horror, the clandestine literature, therefore, became a weapon that can be used in stopping pain and fighting terror.

Thus, the role of literature becomes very imperative when human shared value and peaceful existence are significantly threatened by a dominant force. In this case, looking at this literature from the contemporary point of view, it becomes very significant for resistance in those parts of the world where dictatorship and oppression have become a standard practice of life. Therefore, literature can be used as a resistance against cultural imperialism in which the struggle for both cultural and national liberation is established; and literature establishes a coordinated resistance. Literature gives hope and voices to the oppressed; literature of resistance is not restricted to only political struggle but also to the development of literature itself and also the culture. Literature, therefore, represents the universal efficacy which is culture bound and history based. The definition of resistance here could be limited to literature in which cultural domination is confronted. Looking at the literature from the cultural conjecture, it is essential to understand that it is historical and we must understand the fact that it can be used for negotiation of peace in the most period of darkness (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 71).

In explaining the concept of cultural imperialism in this context, it is a concept that is used to structure and control the lifestyle of a people to establish a good and successful society but in confinement with the people in authority. Therefore, cultural imperialism can be defined as a structure established by those who try to dominate the others into the manner they wish others to live their lives. It is a system in which the lifestyle of a particular people is brought under control of a superior culture. In this sense, culture of the superior power includes the religion and education; these two components are used as a control mechanism. Once a dominated culture has deviated from its original state then it can be considered a cultural error. In this situation, there is a cultural influence in which the dominated culture tends to imitate the superior culture (Táiwò, 2013).

Thus, what role does literature play in challenging cultural imperialism? There have been series of literary texts that have challenged cultural imperialism and these texts are mainly post-colonial literature. There are a good number

of American resistance literary texts that have been used to ask for independence from the Great Britain. For example, *Common Sense* (1776) by Thomas Paine reflects the agitation for independence from the British Empire; it was a great literature of challenging the imperial domination of the British Empire. It was circulated as a pamphlet to let everyone have access to it, and this made it have a larger readership. It was the first literary text that asked the Great Britain for the independence, the text opposed and questioned the British imperial rule, and it created a way for the independence war. Henry David Thoreau also wrote *Civil Disobedience* (1849), it reflects concepts, guidelines, and thoughtful process; it served the purpose of resistance, it speaks against injustice demonstrated by the government. Harriet Beecher Stow wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), it is a novel that reflects the cruelty of slave trade. The novel serves as a resistance against slave trade in the USA. Before the Civil War, the novel drew the people's attention to the pain and terror that the slaves went through in a manner that had never been done before. It was rumored that President Lincoln postulated that the novel served as the main starting point of the Civil War. Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) also reflects the cruelty of slavery, it tells the story of a free born Black American from the New York who is tricked to embarking on a journey to the Washington D.C and from there he is abducted and sold out as a slave into the Deep South. As a slave in Louisiana, 12 years later, he is able to privately communicate his location to his people. It was published eight years before the Civil War. The author is the protagonist himself who narrates the pain of slavery from his own personal experience – knowing what it feels to be a slave and to be a freed man

III. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the reality of cultural imperialism can never be disputed due to the fact that Empires had come and gone and there were no Empires that would in existence that had not established their own cultural imperialism through different mechanisms that were meant to achieve one thing – subjugation. However, there are significant elements of subaltern that should be put into critical thinking – that is, we need to understand that imperial system cannot succeed without the use of culture, education, and probably religion. These could be used for subjugating the natives of the dominated territory. But most importantly, this paper has examined how imperial systems were established with their different cultural dominations through the mechanism that is best to each of the Empires. Therefore, how literature could be used to challenge this cultural imperialism is accentuated in which different examples of the literary texts that were written for the purpose of resistance are presented. Hence, in the post-colonial period, there are a large number of literary texts that still resist the modern cultural imperialism we are

experiencing in recent times. Therefore, it is very important to understand that in our modern social fabric, Empire is a center of cultural imperialism. In this sense, cultural imperialism still exists in which we can obviously see the influence of the superior states over the other countries of the world. There is still a notion of superior and inferior culture and this is the reason there is still a systemic imperial domination in the contemporary world. There is a serious commitment to imperial domination because there is a purpose for it – profit. The question is how do we overcome this? We challenge it through the weapon of thought – we write.

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