

'MIMESIS' IN COLONIAL WRITINGS AS AN ASSERTION OF POWER: POSITIONING PLATO AS A POSTCOLONIAL THINKER

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ABSTRACT:

Plato is one of the most influential thinkers since the Classical time of Greece. Most of the literary criticisms came after him were trying to reply Plato to defend the moral authority of poetry. This paper is an attempt to intertwine the two seemingly unparalleled stream of thoughts club into a common politico-critical space. Plato, the Athenian philosopher, who lived somewhere around 428/427 or 424/423 – 348/347 BC might be a strange figure in the socio-political context of the second half of twentieth century. But his critical thoughts, especially his literary criticism, find an interesting parallel in Postcolonial stream of literary criticism. It's an attempt to read Plato from a Postcolonial angle and positioning him as a critique in Postcolonial critical space. This paper analyses Plato's Book X of *The Republic* and the position taken by Socrates, the central character of Plato's Dialogues. Plato's ideas on Mimesis and his other major criticism against poetry are juxtaposed here with postcolonial criticism of Edward Said, Michel Foucault, Chinua Achebe and other major postcolonial critiques.

INTRODUCTION:

The influence of Plato in the European tradition of thoughts and ideas has been so enormous that the 20th century intellectual A. N. Whitehead had famously declared that the whole of the European philosophical tradition was little more than a series of footnotes added to the writings of Plato. Plato's exploration of

Mimesis and his findings of how it corrupts the minds find an interesting parallel in postcolonial critiques of canonical narratives. Plato's Writings are mostly in the form of dialogues. With perhaps only a major exception being the work titled "Apology". In Platonic dialogues, we usually see the figure of Socrates occupying the centre stage. In *'The Republic'* for instance, we do not directly hear the voice of Plato himself. What we hear primarily is the voice of Socrates. The problem that he identifies at the heart of poetry is its imitative nature. And the Greek word that refers to imitation is 'Mimesis'. This will be a key word to understand Platonic view in the postcolonial reading as well. One of the major reasons for Plato to banish poetry from his republic was none other than its feature of Mimesis. For Plato, Mimesis is the real source of corruption in more than one way. Plato has a problem with poetry that imitates men and their actions, and show how these actions produce good or bad results, thereby creating joy or sorrow for an individual. In the same chapter Plato also states, the reason why he has a problem with such kind of imitative poetry, "The imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but things the same thing at one time great and at another small. He is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth (Book X, *The Republic*). For Plato, imitative poetry is problematic because of two reasons. Firstly, he argues that imitative poetry has a corrupting effect upon audience. It "implants an evil constitution" (Book X, *The Republic*). Secondly,

Plato argues that imitative poetry manufactures images that are far removed from the truth. 'Mimesis' is corrupting because of two distinct, but interconnected reasons. The first reason has to do with the nature of reality or nature of truth. And this is associated with a philosophical theory that is usually referred to as Plato's theory of form. If we follow the theory of forms in colonial context, what the colonial writer tries to make is in fact, a miniature copy of the life of the natives in the colonized lands.

Plato explains his theory of forms taking a cue from the Painting of bed. Plato rejects the painter's copy of a bed on the ground that since material bed is a specific representation of the ideal form, it only represents an aspect of the universal, that is to say a very small part of the whole. When the painter in turn imitates the material bed, he imitates not the material bed as it is in reality, but rather as it appears to him. For instance, the painter standing next to a material bed will only paint the bed as it appears to him from that angle. This appearance does not encompass the entire reality of the material bed. This argument finds a parallel in postcolonial criticism against master narratives. It can be pointed out thus: The argument is that though life in colonized land is a material reality, colonial author only sees an aspect of the native life, that is to say a very small part of the whole and a perspective from the writer only. That cannot be the universal perspective and the experience in totality.

The character Socrates in Plato's *The Republic* considers Mimesis to be corrupting for two distinct but interconnected reasons. The first reason is that Mimesis deals in appearances rather than in reality and is situated at a third remove from the true form of a thing. So in the colonial context, the depiction of colonized land in the writings of colonial authors at second removes from the truth.

They write what is appears before them from a distant land and culture. But there is more than one hindrance to them to depict the native land. One is the distance that is literally there in between the writer and the native land. Second barrier is the language and culture. But the British authors tried to make sense about their colonized lands without taking these considerations. The huge amount of documents that the academic Orientalism produced was acknowledged in Europe as the most authentic way of knowing about the Orient. So much so that someone like the British philosopher James Mill could justify writing a multivolume history of India just by consulting the available documents on India that were available in England without ever visiting India, without ever living there, without ever knowing a single Indian language. This is what Mill writes in the preface to his *History of British India* justifying his position: "This writer (Refers himself) has never been in India; and has a very slight and elementary acquaintance, with any of the languages of the East. Yet it appeared to me, that a sufficient stock of information was now collected in the languages of Europe, to enable the inquirer to ascertain every important point, in the history of India." (Mill: 1817). If this statement juxtaposes with the Platonic point of view, the very audacity of this claim will be revealed. That is to know all the important points about the history of India without ever living there or without ever knowing any Indian languages is a morally flawed authority. Yet such claims to knowledge about the Orient was to become commonplace during the late 18th and 19th century.

The second reason for which the character of Socrates in Plato's *The Republic* considers Mimesis to be corrupting is because he thinks that it confuses our sense of distinction between knowledge and ignorance. Consider these lines that Socrates utters in Book X of *The Republic*: "A painter will paint a

cobbler, carpenter or any other artist though he knows nothing of their arts. And if he is a good artist, he may deceive children or simple persons when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance. And they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter” (Book X, *The Republic*). In fact, what Socrates is referring here is the painter’s ability to make us believe that he is so knowledgeable in the art of carpentry that the man he has painted as a carpenter. It is precisely what an ideal carpenter looks like in real life. Similarly, the colonial text can also make the world believe that it knows the colonized land and culture so well that its portrayal is a true representation of heterogeneous culture. According to Plato’s point of view, this is problematic and is in fact, a deception in itself. But here comes the power politics to play. The colonial author’s perspective becomes the only accepted, authoritarian view on the land and its culture. Later, the ‘Master’s version’ of the land becomes the assertive truth about the colonized life. So the ‘Master Narratives’ are something which is deceiving, something which is morally not right as in the case of Plato’s argument on Mimesis. And indeed, in this regard, James Mill’s *History of British India*, whose first volume was published in 1817, can be very well clubbed together with Thomas Babington Macaulay’s *1835 Minute on Indian Education* which dismissed the whole tradition of Indian or rather Sanskrit and Arabic literature without knowing any of these languages. So it is important here to note that the rise of Orientalism as an academic discipline during the late 18th and during the 19th century did not mean that the earlier form of Orientalism which was prevalent in Europe since the Classical time completely disappeared. The style of thinking about the Orient as a dark, backward, sinister and barbaric other of the Occident continued to underline the new form of academic

Orientalism and it informed whatever systematic enquiry was going on about the Orient.

So, from the Platonic views of Mimesis, in the context of realistic paintings, we arrive at two main arguments. The first argument is that Mimesis deals in appearances that are situated at a third remove from the reality. The second argument is that mimetic artists lack true knowledge of the things that they imitate though they might fool one into believing that, they are greatly knowledgeable. Now, take these insights on Mimesis, and see how they apply to the works of some colonial writers. The Character Socrates points out in Book X of ‘*The Republic*’ that a virtuous character is difficult to portray through imitative poetry. And this is because a poet depends on imitating the outward actions and emotional expressions of a man to portray his characters. So, they cannot portray a virtuous character if there is no great outward manifestation of that virtuousness. What the poets therefore, end up representing as virtuous characters are characters, which act in an exaggerated manner and try and express the inner nobility of their character through those exaggerated actions. According to Socrates’s worldview, this exaggerated outward manifestation of the inner life represents not a virtuous soul at all, but rather its opposite, it represents a soul, which has not achieved the inner harmony that is essential for virtue. This ‘inherently exaggerated outward manifestation’ is translated in the form of wild and exotic representations of the Orient in the modern texts. This is one of the ways in which modern writers like Joseph Conrad ‘deceives’ his reader even while apparently sympathetic towards the native cause while portraying the African life.

“Whenever someone tells us that he has met a person who knows all the crafts as well as the other things that anyone else knows and that his knowledge of any subject is more exact

than any of theirs is, we must assume that we are talking to a simple minded fellow, who has apparently encountered some sort of magician or imitator and been deceived into thinking him omniscient and that the reason he has been deceived is that he himself cannot distinguish between knowledge, ignorance and imitation.” (Book X, *The Republic*). Thus the representation of the native land can be more accurately possible not in the writings of imperial authors but in the works of natives only. According to the character Socrates, the second way that the imitative poets deceive and ultimately corrupt the audience is by posing to be knowledgeable about virtues. Often we confuse mimetic portrayal of virtue with true knowledge about virtue and, therefore, we start regarding the poets like Homer for instance as good teachers. This confusion, Socrates suggests, can have serious consequences for the impressionable minds of young men. Similar way, often the modern readers end up with confusion of colonial portrayal of the third world nations. Actually these writers are portraying those lands in their works without a sound knowledge of the heterogeneous native system. Michel Foucault pointed out that the discourse that is generated, circulated and ratified by the institutions of the powerful is the discourse which gains acceptance as the truth. Similarly, after the European conquest of the Orient in the 18th-century it was the discourse of Orientalism which was validated and circulated by the institutions of the Occident and therefore the discourse of Orientalism, with all its prejudices, with all its problematic research methodology gained acceptance and validity as the truth, the authentic truth, about the Orient. “I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. But I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I have never found one among them who could deny that a

single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.” (Macaulay: 1835) As a member of the Governor General’s Council, Macaulay’s statement enjoyed the institutional validity in 1835. But this assertion of power was deceptive and it came from a morally flawed authority. Michel Foucault pointed out that the discourse that is generated, circulated and ratified by the institutions of the powerful is the discourse which gains acceptance as the truth. Similarly, after the European conquest of the Orient in the 18th-century it was the discourse of Orientalism which was validated and circulated by the institutions of the Occident and therefore the discourse of Orientalism, with all its prejudices, with all its problematic research methodology, gained acceptance and validity as the truth, the authentic truth, about the Orient. The above Platonic view proves this validation of ‘Truth’ of Colonial Masters actually comes from a deceptive/ fake moral authority.

Socrates in *The Book X of The Republic* also raises another objection against mimetic poetry. For Socrates, to develop into a virtuous individual one should be guided by reason, and keep in control that irrational part of one’s nature, which gets easily excitable under the influence of images and appearances. Thus, according to Socrates, when confronted by calamities a rational individual would try to keep calm rather than get swayed by it. He would use his reason to keep in check the desire for weeping and wailing and showing exaggerated manifestation of his grief. “Poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up poetry let us them rule although they ought to be controlled if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue” (Book X, *The Republic*). This exaggerated manifestation of colonial aggressive masculinity is visible in the poems like ‘White Men’s Burden’ of Rudyard Kipling. On the other hand this ‘feeds and

waters the passions of the aggressive nationalism' of the colonial- racist thought that even lead to the two world wars. This aggressive nationalism still poses great threat to the indigenous communities and their culture at the national level and to the global peace at international level.

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