Available online at http://www.ijims.com
ISSN: 2348 – 0343

Tintin Needs His Other: A Study of Othering and Colonial Politics in "The Adventures of Tintin"

Debottama Roy
Faculty of English, Higher Secondary Section ,Kamala Chatterjee School for Girls, Kolkata

Abstract

I aim to show in this paper how the identity of Tintin as the white savior is predicated upon the othering of the colonized peoples and the formation of derogatory racial stereotypes. I have also included concepts like mimicry, resistance and hybridity.

Keywords*:* colonialism, orientalism, othering, stereotype, racism, imperialism, white saviour

Article

Edward Said's contention in *Orientalism*, that the representations of the Orient in European literary works, travelogues and other writings were a help in the construction of a sense of difference between Europe and it's Others, finds special resonance in *The Adventures of Tintin*. Said argues that this disparity between the Orient and the Occident is not only crucial to the construction of European culture, but is also necessary for maintaining and establishing power over the Other. The Tintin series has managed to retain its popularity for many decades now. Loved mostly for Tintin's feats of adventure, Captain Haddock's extremely lovable antics and the Thompson twins' hilarious misadventures, the Tintin books continue to attract readers of all ages. However, it is possible to discern in these books, elements that make them more than just innocent tales of adventure. In fact, on closer scrutiny the books reveal features which helped to justify and aid Europe's exploitative colonial mission in the East.

The Foucaultian insight that knowledge is not innocent but intricately connected with the operations of power is particularly relevant to *The Adventures of Tintin.* Tintin is a white European investigative journalist. Professionally, therefore, he is involved in the handling of 'facts'. His work requires him to observe and to report. Observation and reporting is inseparably bound with the game of power. In a colonial society, it is the colonial master who always possesses the power of surveillance and language. Tintin's observations and representations of the Other could go a long way in creating an image of the Orient and giving it currency.

Tintin is like the Orientalist scholars. He visits foreign lands to make the 'truth' known to the world-the truth that would help Europe to create and establish its superiority in relation to the East and also create at the same time a manageable Other which could be conveniently controlled and subjugated. In fact, the very basis of Tintin's identity and the interest of these books lie in Othering. His personality is built up on a series of subtle contrasts with his others. Edward Said's fundamental argument is that Orientalism, or the 'study' of the Orient, the other, was eventually a political vision of reality whose structure encouraged a binary opposition between Europe and the East. In his phenomenal work Orientalism, Said shows that "this opposition is crucial to European self-conception: if colonized people are irrational, Europeans are rational; if the former are barbaric, sensual and lazy, Europe is civilization itself, with its sexual appetites under control and its dominant ethic that of hard work; if the Orient is static, Europe can be seen as developing and marching ahead; the Orient has to be feminine so that Europe can be masculine."[1] Orientalism is a discursive practice which operated in the service of the West's hegemony over the East. Orientalism serves to produce the East discursively as the West's inferior Other. This is done principally by essentializing the identities of the East and the West, which is achieved by

establishing racial stereotypes. Stereotyping is the simplification of images and ideas to a simple and convenient form. It is actually a strategy of processing information. Stereotypes very subtly perpetuate a false sense of disparity between self and other. "The gathering of 'information' about non-European lands and peoples and 'classifying' them in various ways determined strategies for their control. The different stereotypes of the 'mild Hindoo', the 'warlike Zulu', the 'barbarous Turk', the 'New World cannibal', or the 'black rapist' were all generated through particular colonial situations and were tailored to different colonial policies. In Africa and India, by attributing particular characteristics to specific tribes and groups, colonial authorities not only entrenched divisions between the native population, but also used particular 'races' to fill specific occupations such as agricultural workers, soldiers, miners, or domestic servants."[2]

Ironically, the huge success of the Tintin books has a lot to do with the stereotypes in which they abound. The image of the white saviour who braves the seven seas and battles frightening adversities in order to save helpless non-Europeans is a notion which nourished European imagination and protected it against the actual reality of colonial violence. The aim of this paper is to show how in the various Tintin books, stereotypes consolidate Tintin's identity, the plots depend upon othering and how various strategies of language, selection and arrangement vindicate the imperialist venture.

I would like to begin with *The Cigars of the Pharaoh* for it exploits certain very basic yet effective stereotypes to manipulate and construct the reader's responses towards the Orient as well as the Occident. The stereotype of the noble ruler in the colonies, benevolent yet ineffectual, was widely propagated by the colonizers to justify their intervention in native affairs. Indian history bears testimony to this for the British rulers used the situation to their advantage when the local Indian kings sometimes failed to handle their affairs. Lord Wellesley's subsidiary alliance required a signatory prince to avoid any diplomatic relation or alliance with any other Indian power without the approval of the company. An English resident, residing at the court of the prince was to advise him on all matters of administration. In return the British would provide the native prince with an English army led by an English general for his protection. In this Tintin book, the maharaja of Gaipajama is drawn upon these lines. The maharaja is kind, honest, dutiful yet not competent enough to crush the opium trade that runs illegally in his kingdom. In fact the king's father and brother had also not seen the light of success when they too, had tried to subdue this evil trade. It is the white saviour in the form of Tintin who manages to find entry into the secret meeting of the culprits and expose them. The maharaja's son is kidnapped but it is not the maharaja who tries to rescue him. It is Tintin who brings the prince back and earns the eternal gratitude of the maharaja. Being a foreigner, it would be extremely unlikely for Tintin to know the detailed geography of the maharaja's kingdom; it would be natural for the maharaja to send a rescue party and get back his son. But the author probably has a well-defined purpose: to explain and justify Tintin's presence and interest in the kingdom of Gaipajama. Tintin's methods of combat are not very unusual: he uses a dummy to save the maharaja, disguises himself as a member of the gang and pursues the kidnappers by car. The maharaja is extremely indebted to Tintin. He says:

Maharaja: "As for me, Tintin, I owe you my life. The dummy you put in my bed was hit by the arrow…the arrow intended for me."[3]

When Tintin bids goodbye, the maharaja and the crown prince restrain him:

Crown prince: "No, no Tintin, I don't want you to go!"

Maharaja: "Allow me to insist, Tintin. You must stay for a few days at least."[4]

(A special mention must be made here of the fact that since the Tintin books are in the comic format, I have used dialogues in order to represent the words of the characters.)

The author very subtly succeeds in giving the impression that the European in the Oriental court is desired by the Orient. The stereotype of the helpless maharaja very effectively contributes towards the construction of Tintin's identity. While the maharaja is noble yet weak and slightly incompetent, Tintin has presence of mind, is active and is competent enough to handle any situation.

The stereotype of the fakir has been very politically employed all through the Tintin books. The concept of the fakir is purely Eastern and more specifically Asian. There is no concept akin to the fakir in the West. The fakir occupies a very ambivalent position in society. The fakir originally meant a person who left everything behind in the quest of god and lived on charity. He was thought to possess superhuman powers. Never part of mainstream society, the fakir gradually came to be dissociated from respectable society. Eurocentric representations of the fakir went a long way in vilifying him. In this book the fakir is initially set apart from others by his clothes. His appearance is very shabby and he is clothed scantily. Further, with his powers of hypnotism, his magic rope and rajaijah, the poison of madness, he tries to overpower Europeans but not for long. Tintin soon brings an end to all that. Hypnotism and magic are pitted against courage, intelligence and common sense. Tintin the European, in contrast to the fakir, emerges victorious.

The other stereotype used is that of the holy cow. This stereotype is employed in a more sophisticated way in *Tintin in Tibet*. Hindu tradition greatly attracted the European mind, but most of the rituals and features are usually distorted to suit Eurocentric purposes. The holy cow in this book is used in such a way that the Orient emerges as primitive, irrational and an object of wonderment. Snowy bites the holy cow and is subsequently captured by the people who wish to sacrifice him on the altar of Shiva. This religious fanaticism is rarely encountered in India and Shiva as Nataraja is seldom worshipped on an altar. The intention of the author is fairly obvious: he wishes to make the Orient a passive object of gaze and also tries to build an image of India that is primitive, irrational and insane. Tintin's personality and by implication European disposition, that of a carefree, sensible, uninhibited globe-trotter is valorized without explicit comment. The fact that the Indian is tricked by the Thompson twins, just as he is about to sacrifice Snowy is very effective to construct the foolishness of Indians. Providing comic relief in the Tintin series and getting fooled by everyone, it is indeed 'shameful' to be fooled by the twins:

Indian: "Die, infidel dog!"

The Thompson twins (from behind a curtain so that the Indian believes it is Shiva speaking to him): "Stay your hand servant of Siva! The god will not accept so mean a sacrifice!" [5]

The Prisoners of the Sun is set in South America, where Tintin and Captain Haddock have come to search for their friend professor Calculus. The professor has been abducted, probably by the Incas. Now, the setting seems highly unrealistic in the 20th century. The Incas are long since dead and gone; what remains are a few mummies which survive mainly as museum artifacts. This strategy of setting the story in some bygone era is quite effective to put the reader off his guard. The reader is tempted to sit back and enjoy the book as a purely fictitious account. Yet, the Inca does not solely exist for amusement. The Inca Prince, his people and the Temple of the Sun symbolize all those people and cultures Othered by the Europeans for their imperialist venture.

The notion of the white saviour persists all through this book. Tintin saves natives, and in return receives their eternal gratitude and help. Zorrino, the little orange-seller is bullied by two non-European foreigners. The attire and appearance of these foreigners speak volubly about their non-European identity. Tintin comes to Zorrino's rescue who in turn takes on the responsibility to guide Tintin and Captain Haddock to the Temple of the Sun. The absurdity of Oriental law and customs is brought out through the persona of the Inca Prince. The Prince suspects that Tintin, the Captain and Zorrino have entered the Temple by trickery. But Tintin informs him

that they had entered the Temple quite by chance. The Prince accepts this piece of information but still insists that in Inca law, the only penalty is death. The irrationality and imbecility of the ways of the Other is constructed:

Tintin: "I…er…Noble Prince of the Sun, we found the entrance quite by chance when I was swept into a waterfall."

The Prince: "Be that as it may, our laws decree but one penalty. Those who violate the sacred temple where we preserve the ancient rites of the Sun God shall be put to death!"[6]

Very subtly, without direct comment, the sensibility and fairness of European law is established.

Verisimilitude is sacrificed in the cause of exoticism. The Incas were sun worshippers and in this book we find the temple of the sun dedicated to the worship of the sun. Yet, the Prince and his people are surprisingly unaware of the solar eclipse, so that they are fooled by the Europeans. Tintin chooses to die at the moment of a solar eclipse and pretends that the sun god had hid his face because he was displeased by the Incas. The mighty Inca Prince, ignorant of the phenomenon of an eclipse, is reduced to his knees and says:

Prince: "Mercy, O stranger, I implore you!...Make the sun show his light again, and I will grant whatever you desire !"[7]

In this way Tintin secures their freedom and also the allegiance and admiration of the Incas. This is an instance of how the colonizer's control over science and language in the colonies contributed towards their power over the natives and how colonial rule was in reality hegemonic: it was perpetuated with the consent of the natives. Towards the end of the book, there is an explicit defense of imperialism through the mouth of Tintin. The Prince says that he had punished the seven scientists because they had plundered the 'sacred treasures' of the Incas:

Prince: "These men came here like hyenas, violating our tombs and plundering our sacred treasures. They deserve the punishments I have meted out".

Tintin: "No, they did not come to plunder, noble Prince of the Sun. Their sole purpose was to make known to the world your ancient customs and the splendours of your civilization."[8]

Now this comment of Tintin's is very strategically placed. Tintin's expertise, strength of friendship, and goodness of character has already been established in the book when he saved Zorrino, embarked on a difficult quest for his friend and saved both his friends and himself from being burned to death. Coming from a person of such stature in the book, this comment is imbibed subconsciously by all readers. Very delicate politics is at play here. The third world is surreptitiously made to adopt the European point of view. Willing subjects are created and hegemonic domination is made possible in this way.

Tintin is the saviour in *Tintin in Tibet*. In fact, he makes a journey round the world only for his Chinese friend Chang, who he believes has somehow survived an air crash and is in dire need of help. The image of Chang is very crucial to the plot-Chang, although a dear friend of Tintin's, can never match up to Tintin either in terms of physical agility or mental alertness. The visual representation of Chang contributes towards this idea. With a wild shock of hair and a slight frame to match it, Chang's appearance seems to reflect his helplessness. In fact Chang's personality puts into relief Tintin's own. Possessing immense strength of mind and courage, Tintin is ready to battle all odds in order to save Chang, something that no Chinese friend of Chang's dares to attempt.

The humour of this book arises entirely out of deliberate Othering. The adventure is built up by a deliberate selection of facts. The incident of the holy cow, the porter who shouts in Hindi, all contribute towards the construction of Otherness. The stereotype of the holy cow is exploited in a more sophisticated way in this book, so that the Orient is successfully placed in mythical time, and thus beyond any serious consideration. Tintin and

the Captain find their road blocked by a cow. When the Captain asks someone to move the cow, he is informed that a holy cow should not be disturbed:

Captain: "I say, can't someone move the old girl along? We're in rather a hurry…"

Indian: "Sacred cow sahib….Do not disturb….You wait till she move."

Captain: "Wait? That's a useful suggestion! Our plane leaves in twenty-five minutes."[9]

The image of the East as slow, lazy, impractical is reinforced by the stereotype of the holy cow. Such an incident is almost an impossible occurrence in India, where cows are not only worshipped and revered but also reared and domesticated for practical day to day purposes. The whole image is juxtaposed with the punctuality and familiarity of a plane taking-off.

The dangers which wait for Tintin in his mission and his commitment and bravery are carefully evoked with the help of a series of contrasts between Tintin and his Others. The insincerity and cowardice of the porters establish Tintin's courage and strength of friendship. The author manipulates real facts to construct Tintin's identity. The Sherpas are a class that epitomizes bravery, valour and courage. Tharkey, the best Sherpa in the district, is shown hesitating about his decision to accompany Tintin, while Tintin is dauntless. This fact serves a dual purpose in the book: it creates a sense of foreboding so that the readers are bound to confront the immensity of Tintin's task, while at the same time it brings out Tintin's courage and nobility of soul. A certain dichotomy is deliberately employed to achieve the desired effect. The Grand Abbot of the monastery is sincerely revered by all, his power and dignity is carefully established. Tintin and Captain Haddock are also respectful towards him, although very surreptitiously the 'absurdity' of the pomp and grandeur of the Tibetan monastery is evoked through Captain Haddock. Although respectful towards him, the Captain can never manage to remember the title 'Grand abbot, and keeps calling the monk 'Grand Admiral', or 'Grand Vizier' and sometimes 'Grand Mufti'. The power and position of the Grand Abbot is established only so that the immensity of Tintin's achievement can be brought out. The Grand Abbot hardly ever comes out of the monastery but when Tintin succeeds in rescuing Chang, the Abbot himself appears outside to felicitate Tintin:

Tintin(on seeing the Abbot): "The Grand Abbot! It must be something very special, to bring him out in full procession."

Grand Abbot: "Greetings, O Great Heart…following our custom I present you with this scarf of silk. Blessed Lightning told us of your approach, and I have come to meet you, so that I may bow in deference before you."

Tintin: "Before me, Grand Abbot?...But…."

Grand Abbot: "Yes, what you have achieved few would have dared to undertake. Blessings upon you Great Heart, for the strength of your friendship, for your courage, and for your steadfastness."[10]

All bow before the Grand Abbot, he bows before Tintin. He heartily praises Tintin. It is Tintin, a white friend, who is brave enough to battle the odds-no coloured friend dares it.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon has shown how the process of colonization necessarily entails a destruction of indigenous identity and culture. The handling of the myth of the yeti is a case to the point. The image of the yeti is built very carefully. The yeti or the migou does not make an appearance until the very end of the story, but he looms large in the imagination of the natives. The monks, villagers, coolies are all scared of the yeti. A porter tells Tintin and Haddock when they laugh at the yeti:

Porter: "Him very big, Sahib. Very strong. Him kill yaks with his fist…Yeti very bad. Eat eyes and hands of men he kill."[11]

Actually the myth of the migou or the abominable snowman forms part of oriental culture. But this eastern myth is demystified. The yeti, so big and fearful to the natives can be frightened by a mere flash of the camera and a

sneeze of Captain Haddock's. He turns out to be quite a sentimental fellow. This treatment establishes the East as irrational, timid and unadventurous.

Language in this book is used more as a tool of establishing the Other, rather than as a means of establishing reality. Pidgin, given to the Sherpa and the porters, is used as a cultural signifier. Being a Sherpa, Tharkey must have been exposed to English, but still the language he speaks is broken. Hindi is spoken by the porter to shout at the Captain. The humour arises out of the very Otherness of the language, by the fact that the foreigners are not being able to understand it.

Edward Said's contention that the Orient is made a passive object of gaze finds validation in the Tintin books. The Orient is here an object of fascination and wonderment. Questions of power are integrally related to this because it is always the powerful side which has the power of gaze. In *Tintin in America*, Tintin moves to red Indian territory with Snowy, where he spots a 'real' Red Indian and clicks a photo of him in wonder. He tells Snowy:

Tintin: "Just look, Snowy…A real Red Indian."[12]

The idea of gaze is important at the beginning of *The Blue Lotus*. The fakir is seen performing for the benefit of the European man. Images like that of the fakir with his supernatural powers and tattered clothes could go a long way in conditioning the European idea of the Orient.

It is interesting to scrutinize how acts of native resistance do not post-date colonial oppression but rather begin with it. In *Tintin and the Broken Ear*, Ridgewell is the model colonizer, who professes love for Arumbaya ways in order to stay with them. He tries to 'civilize' them with European ways-he teaches them golf but the natives *appropriate* it and use it to attack Tintin. This act of mimicry undermines and threatens the stability of colonial rule. In his keynote essay 'Of Mimicry and Man', (1985), Homi Bhabha mentions that "the colonial system required that the colonized aspire to remake themselves in the image of the European, to become at once secondary to the colonizer, and also (necessarily) other to what they were before. Yet, as they were not in fact European, or indeed white, there was always a slippage or *hybridization*, however subtle, in the meanings that they thus worked to reiterate. Once again, this 'not- quite sameness', brings about a severe instability within the colonial consciousness or psychic regime, in so far as the colonizer, who requires the colonized to reflect a certain 'pure' image back at him, encounters only a disturbing distortion: an almost sameness, a not-quite otherness." [13]

The comic book format of Tintin is very effective for certain purposes of the author. Characters appear to have agency but actually they are manipulated and controlled by the author. They aid the imperial enterprise. The words of Tintin cited at 8 above, at the end of The *Prisoners of the Sun* are an example. Tintin in this instance is a mouthpiece of the author, justifying the colonial process by saying that the aim of the Europeans was not to plunder but to bring to light the ancient splendours of Inca civilization.

Nevertheless, in the author's defense it may be said that he sometimes showed genuine awareness of the colonial situation. In *Tintin in America*, Tintin accidentally discovers an oil well in Red Indian territory. Within ten minutes capitalist businessmen smell it out and compete with each other to get it from Tintin for huge sums. When informed that the well belonged to Red Indians, they force out the Indians from their own territory for only twenty-five dollars!

In *The Blue Lotus*, there is a definite attempt on the author Hergé's part to erase the misunderstandings between the Orient and the Occident. Tintin saves a Chinese boy called Chang, who is surprised to be saved by a European. He tells Tintin that he thought all white men were wicked. Tintin tells him that Europeans similarly had certain wrong notions about the Chinese:

Chang: "I thought all white devils were wicked, like those who killed my grandfather and grandmother long ago…."

Tintin: "But Chang, all white men aren't wicked. You see, different peoples don't know enough about each other. Lots of Europeans still believe that all Chinese are cunning and cruel and wear pigtails, are always inventing tortures and eating rotten eggs and swallows' nest…the same stupid Europeans are quite convinced that all Chinese have tiny feet, and even now little Chinese girls suffer agonies with bandages…designed to prevent their feet developing normally. They are even convinced that Chinese rivers are full of unwanted babies, thrown in when they are born. So you see Chang that's what lots of people believe about China."

Chang: "They must be crazy people in your country."[14]

In spite of these attempts, the books bear evidence against the claim of objectivity of any Western scholarship. In the guise of popular adventure tales, the books help in the perpetuation of European hegemony over other countries. However, whatever these books might contain, their essential charm cannot be denied. And it is this intrinsic lovability of these books which will ensure their survival in the years to come.

Notes and References

1. Loomba, Ania. Colonialism/Postcolonialism. 2nd ed. Oxon: Routledge, 2005. 45. Print.
2. Ibid. p85
3. Hergé. Cigars of the Pharaoh. Great Britain: Methuen Children's Books Ltd., 1971. 57. Print.
4. Ibid. p60
5. Ibid. p50
6. Hergé. The Prisoners of the Sun. Great Britain: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1962.48. Print.
7. Ibid. p59
8. Ibid. p60
9. Hergé. Tintin in Tibet. Great Britain: Methuen Children's Books Ltd., 1972.7. Print.
10. Ibid. p61
11. Ibid. p23
12. Hergé. Tintin in America. Great Britain: Methuen Children's Books Ltd., 1972. 16. Print.
13. Elleke Boehmer, 'Postcolonialism'. Theory Literary & Criticism. Ed. Patricia Waugh New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. 356. Print.
14. Hergé. The Blue Lotus. Great Britain: Methuen Children's Books Ltd., 1983. 43. Print.