



THE CONCEPT OF 'HEGEMONY' AND GAURI VISWANATHAN'S *THE MASKS OF CONQUEST*

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ABSTRACT

The present article is a humble effort to explore as to how using Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' Gauri Viswanathan has argued in her first and popular work, Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India (1989), that the English-Literary canon in India was an imperial tool, a method by which a collaborating class was brainwashed into accepting the cultural superiority of Britain. Exploring that the religious conversion had ever been a clever step, she astutely strives reading between the lines, and shrewdly sees in it both a mode of resistance and an alternative epistemology. She has ever been popular about her views on issues like Colonialism, Hinduism, and the problems of Historiography. One of Gayatri Spivak's colleagues at Columbia, Gauri Viswanathan, whose official title is "Class of 1933 Professor in the Humanities" visits India regularly and, like many of these global scholars, astutely inhabits something inclusive that could be called East -West.

INTRODUCTION

Gauri Viswanathan is a Professor of English and Comparative Literature in Columbia University, New York. Having done her Bachelor and masters from Delhi University the renowned scholar went ahead in 1985 for her Ph D under the guidance of internationally acclaimed writer (of *Orientalism*) Edward Said at Columbia University; and since then has held numerous distinguished visiting professorships. Besides education, religion and culture, she has shown keen interest in the 19th century British and colonial cultural studies and the history of modern disciplines dealing with the themes as variedly as exercise of 'hegemony' by colonizers and reinterpretation of conversion centering on colonial subjects in British India as well as on minority communities within Britain.

In his Prison Notebooks Antonio Gramsci argues that a class can exercise its power not merely by the use of military force but by an institutionalized system of moral and

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intellectual leadership that propagates certain ideas and beliefs. For Gramsci "cultural hegemony" is maintained through the consent of the dominated class which assures the intellectual and material supremacy of the ruling class. "It refers to the processes", points out Parmod K Nayar "through which the dominant classes maintain power through the consent of the people" (Nayar 130) What is more important is that such a domination "is not necessarily through threats of violence or the law but by winning their consent to be governed and dominated." (130) In other words it works less through coercion than through consent. In her path breaking work Viswanathan uses this Gramscian model of 'hegemony' to analyze the relationship between British political and commercial interests and the establishment of English Literature as a discipline in India.

To begin with Viswanathan opines that the literary curriculum was introduced in India not to demonstrate the superiority of English culture but to "mask" the economic exploitation of the colonized. The propagation of English literature among the "natives," beginning with the secularized government schools to the uneasy and uncanny attempts by the Christian missionary ones, was a deliberate and masked effort to ensure the authority of the British government and to pave way for a state in which British mercantile and military interests could flourish. These efforts were masked and wrapped in such a cunning garb that even the intellectuals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy advocated strongly and unhesitatingly for English instead of Oriental education and hence for the establishment of Christian missionaries in India; and curiously enough how the Christian missionaries were considered as men of character to steer the 'native' out of pagan and superstitious terrains:

" the settlement in India by Europeans should at least be undertaken experimentally ... on mature consideration, therefore, I think I may safely recommend that educated persons of character and capital should now be permitted and encouraged to settle in India, without any restriction of locality and any liability to banishment, at the direction of the Government" (Iyengar 27)

In the later part of the book, however, Viswanathan astutely points out the inherent contradictions in the colonial project of creating educated elite; and highlights how such an education resulted not only in a dissatisfied class deprived of any suitable employment opportunities but also unearthed the kind of literary curriculum which advocated both social control and social advancement. Furthermore, she has been duly careful not to oversimplify the British educational objectives in India and highlights the compulsion of continual modification of the British educational goals. Her attention to archival material and historical details can be seen as a deliberate effort on her part to read between the lines highlighting such an instances when a certain Nobinchunder Dass of Hooghly College, Calcutta is found



to be effusively praising the colonizer's culture. Interestingly, Viswanathan here lays a greater emphasis on imperial representatives than in the material conditions that produced their work. In this way she successfully highlights the ideological motivations behind the introduction of English literary education in British India and robustly explores the obscure corners as to how and why at later stages the colonial officials prescribed English literature infused with Christian imagery. It must be noted that Indians, in the beginning, studied English literature using poetical devices, such as rhyme, alliteration, and reduplication. As the time went the missionaries, however, “decried such secular practices and insisted upon a more religious reading of English literature.” (Web Sources) As a result, for almost two decades between mid 1830s and the mid-1850s, “government schools in India used English literature to explain Christian teachings and emphasize the higher levels of historical progress and moral standards of English society.” (Web Sources) By the end of the 1850s, however, British administrators again changed their stance and advocated a secular reading of English literature to encourage commercial and trade literacy. This reversal of stance “occurred as British officials realized that a religious reading of English literature did not provide Indians with the proper knowledge to join the colonial administrative services.” Besides, after the 1857 Indian revolt against foreign rule, British officials “did not wish to adopt policies that might ignite fears of conversion among Hindus and Muslims.” (Web Sources)

In her work various debates that influenced the introduction of English literary study in India are explained and highlighted by Viswanathan. She astutely and thoroughly examines the stances of Utilitarians, Anglicists, and missionaries; the absence of chronological events, however, eludes the reader from understanding the shifts in education policies in British India emerging eventually. An important shift, however, could easily be perceived that more recently changed our way of studying British educational policies in India. Scholars in the past used to study the transformative effects of British education to understand the historical function of educational policies. Undoubtedly a shift of mind occurs with Viswanathan emphasizing that “it is necessary to examine the discourse and the context of the formulation of educational policies to better understand educational history” (Web Sources); and that educational systems and curriculum developments must be judged in historical perspective. Viswanathan's path breaking work is therefore “both a compelling account of the relationship between power and culture and an indictment of the exploitative tendencies of ruling class interests”; and robustly argues that “no serious account of its growth and development can afford to ignore the imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England, a mission that in the long run served to strengthen Western cultural hegemony in enormously complex ways.”(Web Sources) The author ably demonstrates that English literature is inextricably and undoubtedly linked to the politics of Empire exploring astutely how certain humanistic functions traditionally associated with literature- say, character- building or the act of developing aesthetic or ethical sense - were



considered essentially the issues of socio-political control; and how the colonizer justified his guardianship and need of his very presence through course of 'hegemony'.

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