

The White Man's Gaze and Hergé's Tintin: Analysing Comics of Colour

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Abstract:

This article aims to discuss the 'Othering' in Hergé's comic books series *The Adventures of Tintin* from the postcolonial point of view. The notion of 'the East' and 'the West' will be discussed in this article. Edward Said's idea of 'orientalism' represents the colonial ideology of 'the West' and it also strongly emphasizes on the Occidental notion of Orient which constructs the Eastern world as the land of mystery and evil, and its inhabitants as barbaric, lazy, and superstitious. I have selected two adventures of Tintin – *Tintin in the Congo* and *Tintin in Tibet*, to establish my ideas. I also seek to examine the nature, landscape, and the biogeographical locus of Tintin's adventures. My focus is on the idea of whether Tintin, a boy-scout, is superior to the so-called 'others' or it is a mere representation.

Keywords: Other, Orient, White man, Imperial gaze, Representation.

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Several African countries, Asia and South America were dominated by the Europeans. In those countries, modernity had been introduced by the rule and dominance of the colonizers over the native cultures. Colonialism thus can be described as the process of settlement by Europeans. “Colonialism is a violent conjugation where the sense of self develops through negotiation rather than a separation, a relation rather than a disjunction, with the Other.” (Nayar, 2010)

This settlement was the mechanism of exploitation — exploitation of economy, cultures and natural resources. Non-native settlers did this based on culture, race and knowledge. Having reinforced racial discrimination, the colonial masters possessed the power to govern the natives. They represent the colonial subjects as non-white races who needed to be saved from their misery. Gradually, the natives internalized the false representation propagated by the Europeans through renovated education systems, Christian missionaries and the law. In the twentieth century, however, the question of cultural representation and domination gained traction within the colonized countries, mainly in Asia and Africa. This critique of racial representation has come to be known as the postcolonial theory.

In an earlier time (1750-1850), ‘orientalism’ was the discourse of ‘discovery’ and the Europeans ‘discovered’ the East. The Orient was mysterious and demanded exploration and study. Orient has discovered, recorded, described, defined, imagined, produced and more specifically, ‘invented’ by the West. In the book *Orientalism* colonialism is an undeniably military-political project. The discourse of the ‘Orient’ — the production of ideas, knowledge and opinions that constructed it as primitive and pagan. Europe accepted that the eastern world had its great past for centuries, but they manipulated these facts when it came to documentation. What the European world wanted to represent ‘Orient’ was as “a place frozen in time with no progress or change”. (Nayar, 2010) Said argues that European identity was considered superior to the non-Europeans. The ‘Europe’ and the ‘Orient’ were discursively represented in literature and history as binary opposites. Said noted how the ‘Occident’ represented the ‘Orient’ as evil, mysterious, barbaric and superstitious while projecting themselves as virtuous, civilized, progressive and scientific.

Another postcolonial theorist Franz Fanon, in his *The Wretched of the Earth* and later in *Black Skins, White Masks* was fascinated by the psychological effects of colonialism on both the colonizers and the colonized. Fanon argued through colonialism, the very soul of the natives was destroyed. The constant representation of the natives as non-human annihilated their

identity. The psychology behind colonial representation has been quite simple. The colonial master paints the native as pagan, primitive and evil. As a result, they lose their identity and see themselves through the eyes of the colonial master. Geopolitical existence of the East is also a Western representation. The West always highlights 'East' as 'exotic, distant and antique'. Said writes: "...in European culture, one of which is to confirm the Orient as an essentially exotic, distant, and antique place in which Europeans can mount certain shows of force". (Said, 1994)

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said raises the question or links between imperialistic attitudes and the narratives of both visual and fictive geographies. The imperial gaze, that is, an imagination of the colonized territories through painting, sketching, cartography or map-making, and photography has largely ignored the existence of the east and the western empiricism dominated by othering. The characteristics of 'the Other' and the quality and condition of Otherness, is the state of being different from the social identity of a person and the identity of the self. Otherness alienates oneself from everything. If a person is labelled as 'the Other', he or she must be alienated from the centre of the society and he or she is placed at the margins of society. The term 'Othering' describes an action or practise where an individual or a group is excluded from the mainstream society.

Europe invented the othering of non-white people from the racialist perspective during their imperialistic era. It was supported by the pseudo-science of phrenology. Phrenologist claimed that the head-size of non-European 'Other' differs from a White-man's head. In effect, it indicates inferior intelligence of the non-European 'Other'. The Western imperialism requires the cultural subordination of the non-white 'Other'. The Oriental 'Other' exists in opposition to the Western self. Through empirical ideology and cultural imperialism, orientalism fetishizes its people. Othering establishes inequality among the colonizers and the colonized natives. Thus, with the help of empiricism, colonial ideology, power-knowledge and hegemony the European settlers othered the natives and established themselves as superior to serve their political agenda.

By engaging in a close reading of the comic books series of Tintin by Hergé, I have observed the themes and setting of the books are often related to the colonial discourse. George Remi, popularly known as Hergé, was the creator of the character Tintin. Hergé was a Belgian reporter. *Adventures of Tintin* series first appeared in French in *Le Petit Vingtième*. Tintin is the comic version of Hergé and the storylines are somewhat inspired by his personal life. Tintin

is also a Belgian reporter. As mentioned earlier, the present paper is going to deal with four books of the adventure series — *Tintin in the Congo* and *Tintin in Tibet*. Hergé was accused of racism for his portrayal of various ethnic groups throughout the adventures of Tintin. In *Tintin in the Congo*, Hergé represented the Congolese as “good at heart but backward and lazy, in need of European mastery”. (McCarthy, 2011) Again, in *Tintin in Tibet*, Hergé had drawn the eastern world as mysterious which also came from the Orientalist point of view.

In this paper I want to show:

1. Representation of Tintin as superior.
2. How being a boy scout Tintin became a symbol of innocence and morality.
3. How Tintin's attitude towards the ‘Other’ is imperialistic.
4. How the comic books of Tintin, despite being written lightly, are affected by the colonial construction of the 'East'.

Some writings related to *Adventures of Tintin* have helped me formulate my preliminary ideas. Michael Farr in his book *Tintin the Complete Companion* says:

Tintin's universal appeal, stretching from his birthplace in Brussels to corners of the world far more obscure than those he reached in his globetrotting adventures, has a rock-solid foundation, in reality, enabling him to transcend fashion, age and nationality. (Farr, 2001)

Again, Farr says: “It became his main preoccupation, even passion. Its code, principles and enthusiasm were his and were soon to be embodied in Tintin, as much a boy scout as he was ever a reporter” (Farr, 2001). Farr quotes Remi's point of view on Tintin's universal appeal “He said Tintin was aimed at 'all young people aged from seven to seventy-seven”’. (Farr, 2001)

Debottoma Roy in her article writes: “The image of the white saviour who braves the seven seas and battles frightening adversities to save helpless non-Europeans is a notion which nourished European imagination and protected it against the actual reality of colonial violence”. (Roy, 2015)

In the second adventure, *Tintin in Congo*, Tintin is a photographer, reporter of *Le Petit Vingtième*. He and his dog Snowy are sent to the Belgian Congo to report on events in the country. As we know, Congo was a colony of Belgium at that time. Incidentally, Tintin was also a citizen of Belgium. Though Tintin was sent to Congo to unearth the diamond smuggling, his encounter with the native Congolese people, wild animals and his attitude towards the

native is the area of focus for my paper. This text became very controversial in the late 20th century for its racial colonial attitude towards the Congolese and also for its glorification of big game hunting. The European world describes Africa as a continent of darkness and Congo is massively called the country of darkness. But the European settlers colonized the African countries again and again because of its rich sources of raw materials. In this book too, there are colonialism and colour bar. The natives were projected as uneducated, superstitious, lazy whereas Tintin, an outsider, is projected as intellectually superior. Even Snowy gets a witty voice being a European dog. Natives called Tintin as “good white man”. (Hergé, 2002) The native people inherited the idea that Europeans are good. On contrary, when the train collided with Tintin's car, there was chaos. Tintin’s behaviour towards native is: “Be quiet! We'll mend your rotten little engine for you” (Hergé, 2002) and then he ordered “come on to work...are not you ashamed to let a dog do all the work?” (Hergé, 2002) There is a command in Tintin's voice which sounds like a colonial master. And to him, Snowy is more preferable to Tintin than natives. Snowy is given voice but other animals can only make a sound: “gnouf...braw...braw!” (Hergé, 2002) which is also a process of othering. Being a pet of colonizer, Snowy can think and speak but the animals in the Congo do not have any ability like thinking and speaking. Physical activity is the only medium of communication. Tintin killed a huge number of antelopes, crocodile and many other animals. Tintin brutally killed a monkey and a snake to rescue Snowy. According to him, Snowy is poor whereas, other animals are wild monstrous and savage. Even, Snowy is projected as braver than an African lion. Though the Europeans called themselves civilized, they never thought of the pain of the animals. In Tintin in the Congo, some technology like a gramophone, bioscope, a projector was used. Congolese were unaware about these kinds of technologies. They amused to see those machines and they were new to them. By the use of science and technology, the European world makes them superior to their colonies. Being a superior European Tintin also interfered in the problem of the natives and showed his power of judgement. As Congolese were unprivileged, they were ignorant of the fever. Once a native people had a high fever and his family thought that it was some 'juju' i.e., some evil soul captured his body: “him sick! ... him dying! ... bad juju living him!” (Hergé, 2002) Tintin always carried his fast-aid box. When Tintin saw this, he gave a small dose of quinine and the native recovered from his illness, the family members thought Tintin was next to God and they worshipped him: “white man very good! ... him cure my husband! White master is boula matari”. (Hergé, 2002) This speech of sick person's wife shows how colonialism works in those countries. They were good and polite to the natives, but through their science and ideologies, they exploited the natives and became “White-master”.

Tintin in Tibet is an adventure where Tintin again meets his old friend Chang. He had met Chang in *The Blue Lotus* and became friends. It is a story of friendship and commitment of Tintin towards Chang. In this adventure, Tintin has a bad dream that Chang is in danger. A plane has crashed in Nepal. In that plane there was Chang. Every character of the adventure leaves the hope of Chang's survival. But it is Tintin who strongly believes that Chang is alive. In this adventure, we are introduced with Captain Haddock and Professor Calculus. Tintin's encounter with the Buddhist religion which is very important from the point of ethnic culture and its representation. While going to Nepal Tintin and Haddock arrived in India. There was a cow episode which shows the superstition of local people and their legacy. We also find Tintin was over-sanguine about Chang's life more than that of a professional Sherpa Tharkey. Flying monk, Tibetan rituals and their belief and most importantly the notion of Yeti also questioned the representation or misrepresentation of the 'East'. Hergés tendency to show the East as lazy and slow is deliberate. Like *Tintin in the Congo*, where he also described India as a regressive country through the cow episode. In the early part of the comics, when Tintin and Haddock were going back to the airport, on-road there was a cow and they were very anxious whether they were able to catch the flight on time. They asked one Indian man about the situation and that man replied "Sacred cow Sahib, do not disturb...you wait till she moves." (Hergé, 2012) This line is a reference to slow and orthodox Indian tradition. On the contrary, Haddock's attitude shows that Indians are very lazy and they do not have any value of time. In Nepal, Tintin and Haddock had met with a professional Sherpa, Tharkey to find out Chang. But Tharkey had warned Tintin that the place where the plane had crashed, no one could be alive. But it was Tintin who was stubborn in his point that Chang was alive. This situation had been created by Hergé again and again in this volume. It shows the Eastern world is afraid of and have no courage to face the troublesome situation. Here, Hergé gives Tintin extra marks. He sketches Tintin as superior even being a non-professional. The idea of Yeti and its representation is an illusion. No one ever saw a Yeti. Tintin addressed Yeti as "The Abominable Snowman!!" (Hergé, 2012) Haddock used the word for Yeti as "Cannibal". The word cannibal is being used for a man-eater. It is a total generalisation about the East. European world misrepresents the East. Hergé also shows in his book that country like India, Nepal and Tibet are very traditionally superstitious and their rituals are odd. Tibetans worshipped snow as "The White Goddess". (Hergé, 2012) The flying monk episode is very important in this context. A monk who could not see and hear but he had inner sight. This representation of the monk is very questionable because the west represents the East as mysterious and magical. These can never happen in the West. With Chang's scarf, that monk had a vision that a boy is in danger.

He was a very weak and even the flying monk could see the Yeti. And at the end when Tintin found the place where the Yeti kept Chang. Captain Haddock said Tintin if Yeti came, he must click a picture of that Yeti. Hergé again shows that a Yeti is afraid of a camera's flash. At first, Haddock described Yeti as 'cannibal'. It means that the creature is very furious but Yeti is coward. This is also a misrepresentation.

The two adventures of Tintin are written in a light-hearted manner but all of them have their original backgrounds. Hergé had a friend named Chang who had died in a plane crash. On his memory, he had written *Tintin in Tibet*. Being a Belgian, he cannot resist his colonialist attitudes while writing Tintin in the Congo. But it is important to re-research the events that being a single-handed Tintin can easily escape all the troublesome situation and it is also pointing to be noted that Tintin's common sense is extremely sharp. But Hergé has projected Tintin as superior because he is a European. In *Tintin in the Congo*, Tintin killed a monkey, several crocodiles and he fought against a shark for Snowy's life. Again, in this adventure, a native African called Snowy as 'master dog'. This shows how colonialism worked in African countries. Their mindset had changed by othering in their own country. Congo was eighty times bigger than Belgium but it was the ideology that did the work. But when Tintin was in trouble white father, Father Sebastian came to rescue him, not a native. It is also a misrepresentation of the East by the West that only a white can save a white. This thing is also present in the *Heart of Darkness*. To rescue Kurtz in Congo, Marlow was sent by Belgian colonisers. The tendency of taking a picture or collecting the note on every moment is also a process of colonialism. Tintin took many pictures in the Congo and Tibet. If Europeans notice any odd which did not match with their notions, they collect that or describe in their way. Taking picture of the Yeti is also a misrepresentation of the unknown.

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