

**Critical Survey On Adventure Stories: Post Colonial And Multicultural Discourses  
Coral Island And The Other Side Of Truth**

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**ABSTRACT:**

The term ‘post-colonial’ refers to ‘all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day’ (Ashcroft et al Empire Writes 2) and post-colonial studies are regarded as ‘a way of addressing the cultural production of those societies affected by the historical phenomenon of colonialism’ (Ashcroft Post Colonial Transformation 7). It covers a vast panorama and is fundamentally idealistic in nature since it strives to right the wrongs of the past. If colonial literature was characterized by imperialist dissemination of the ideology of supremacy over the colonized races, post-colonial studies attempt to reassess colonialism for its hypocrisy and racist outlook. There is a long history of writing about the experience of colonization for children. In nineteenth century, British books for children and young people enforced imperialist thinking through novels of adventure and exploration in places such as India, Africa and Australia.

**Keywords:** Adventure, Stories, Post-colonial, Coral, Island, Multicultural

**INTRODUCTION:**

The chief belief of colonial discourse was that the language and cultures of colonized peoples were primitive and inferior and this notion was implicated in policies and practices that banned the use of ‘native’ languages in schools. Knowledge was translated into power exercised by educators and administrators. Edward Said’s significant book Orientalism sheds light on how Orientalist discourses uphold power relations over ‘Orient’ by ‘making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it’ (Said 3). During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the imperial history pervades major genres such as adventure and exploration stories of G. A. Henty, Ballantyne’s Coral Island and Stevenson’s Treasure Island. In the colonized countries the reliance on British books and literary precedents continued to influence cultural production well into

the twentieth century and tracked the cultural shifts of the former colonies which established themselves as independent nations over a passage of time. Imperialist history and themes have continued to resonate in contemporary writings by both indigenous and non-Indigenous authors and permeate through varied genres and modes including adventure stories, historical novels, picture books and neo-colonial political books such as Serrailier's *The Silver sword*, Holm's *I Am David* and Beverley Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth*. The principal aim of the researcher in this chapter is to critically evaluate and juxtapose the two adventure stories for children produced in two different periods - R. M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island* (1850) and Beverley Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth* (2000) via the lens of post-colonial and multi-cultural theory. The researcher has attempted to demonstrate the significance of colonialism and imperialism on the nineteenth century Victorian children's writings and its impact on the contemporary children's texts through an in-depth analysis of the concerned texts drawing on a wide-ranging selection of primary and secondary sources.

### **CRITICAL SURVEY:**

R. M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island* (1858) written during the rise of British empire in the 1850s is an exciting adventure story for boys and can be regarded very much a product of its time, conveying the imperial ideas and the Victorian values to the juvenile readers. The novel narrates the adventure of three young British boys, the only survivors of a shipwreck, who find themselves isolated on an island in South Pacific. The story is narrated from the perspective of a fifteen year old boy, Ralph Rover, who retrospectively looks back on his boyhood adventure on coral reef of the large uninhabited Polynesian island. The novel can be considered to be a typical Robinsonade and a quest novel, inspired by Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which portrays the civilizing effect of Christianity and 19th century British Imperialism. However today when explored under the light of post colonial theory it can be looked upon as a novel replete with colonial and racist undertones. The author through the portrayal of the native inhabitants in contrast to the three white protagonists, has created stereotyped image of the natives as primitive savages. The *Coral Island* was regarded as both entertaining and educational book for children and it promoted the imperialist ideology and the white supremacy of its time as well as the Western 'obligation' to civilize the natives through Christian Conversions. Ballantyne by contrasting the customs of the natives with that of the three British boys, creates a demonized image of the natives as 'Other'. Although the novel had been well- received at the time of its publication and has often been considered as a classic of children's books, it comes across as a colonial, didactic text which conveys the moralizing aspects of the Victorian ideals and the white superiority values. The classic status of the novel can be highly questioned today when viewed through the lens of post colonial theory.

In *The Coral Island*, Ballantyne created an instructive and moralising book intended for young boys. The *Oxford Companion to English Literature* notes that the novel was "designed to teach readers

about geography, natural history, religion, morality and the responsibilities of the empire "(Birch, "Ballantyne, R. M."). The novel to a great degree replicates the empire-building spirit of the age and the three young British boys after being shipwrecked on the Coral Island become colonisers themselves, claiming the land in the name of the King.

Ankhi Mukherjee in her article, "What is a classic?" : International Literary Criticism and the Classic Question" reflecting upon John Coetzee's definition of classic points out that, " the classic is that which survives critical questioning (Mukherjee 1028). Mukherjee also discusses Sainte-Bauve's concept of classic, according to which, classic as a work that contains common values contemporary with all times (Mukherjee 1030). Keeping this view in mind, the classical status of *The Coral Island* can be questioned.

The novel does consist of the heritage of the past and thus, it should be historicized in terms of the outmoded values and ideas it contains. However, its classical status does not necessarily convert its past values into universally accepted values. Instead, they should be viewed as ideas based on the ideology of its time and should be studied critically in the present times . Critical analysis of the historical value of the novel, brings us to the question as to how much of that ideology is still present in the contemporary society. This has led the researcher to critically evaluate contemporary multicultural novels such as *The Other Side of Truth* in terms of post colonial and multicultural discourses in the second section of this chapter.

Peter Hollindale remarks that a writer covertly or unconsciously puts across his own ideology and values when he creates a work of art. ( "Ideology and" 1992, 27-32). Hollindale argues that a young reader should be taught to read critically so that he does not readily agree with the narrator's opinions and approve them ( "Ideology and" 1992, 23;27;37).

*The Coral Island*, from the beginning explicitly articulates the imperial ideas and Victorian values to the young reader. On reaching the Coral Island, Peterkin, the youngest of the three boys expresses the empire-building spirit of the age:

"I have made up my mind that it's capital—first-rate—the best thing that ever happened to us, and the most splendid prospect that ever lay before three jolly young tars. We've got an island all to ourselves. We'll take possession in the name of the king. We'll go and enter the service of its black inhabitants. Of course we'll rise, naturally, to the top of affairs: white men always do in savage countries. (*Coral Island*, Kindle edition 10).

The young British boy through his declaration expresses his Victorian values - patriotism and a faith in white supremacy of the British. Though fourteen year old Peterkin has been portrayed as a funny and mischievous boy, his declaration echoes the belief of all the three boys - 'claiming the land', the

undiscovered territory as their own. This idea is further perpetuated when eighteen year old Jack Martin, the eldest of the three, urges all to commence their new life on the island: " But come," said Jack, rising; "we are wasting our time in talking instead of doing. —"( The Coral Island, Kindle Edition 10 ). This domineering attitude of the British boys can be interpreted in terms of Edward Said's explanation that it is " the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" that has led to the establishment of their political and cultural dominance. Ballantyne's young heroes are augmenting this notion of the cultural superiority through their adventure on the Coral Island. Elleke Boehmer in his book *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* remarks that in the Victorian adventure stories, " the young male hero was portrayed as a British 'lad of spirit', 'full of life and energy', who from an early age proved his integrity and fearlessness" (Boehmer 67). Ballantyne's young British heroes - Jack, Ralph and Peterkin are also made of the 'same stuff' - courage, wisdom and reason. The surrounding natural opulence of the coral island help them in procuring all the necessary supplies for leading a comfortable life. On learning about the contents of coconuts from wise Jack Peterkin exclaims: "Meat and drink on the same tree!" cried Peterkin; "washing in the sea, lodging on the ground—and all for nothing! My dear boys, we're set up for life! It must be the ancient Paradise—hurrah!" (The Coral Island, Kindle Edition 15). The young Britons with their practical knowledge, reasoning abilities and sensible conduct manage to surmount the obstacles they encounter. They devise strategies of using the natural resources, ways of constructing a boat, successful hunting methods as well as means of lighting a fire. They succeed in perpetuating the myth of the 'British Boyhood', and the 'lad of spirit' dictum of Boehmer. They also embody the Victorian values of self-sufficiency and perseverance.

The three boys also possess other ideals - leadership, loyalty and comradeship. These boys project the idea of masculinity built on the images of manhood. Ralph Rover, who is the narrator of the story describes his two companions of the island:

Jack Martin was a tall, strapping, broad-shouldered youth of eighteen, with a handsome, good-humoured, firm face. He had had a good education, was clever and hearty and lion-like in his actions, but mild and quiet in disposition. Jack was a general favourite, [...] My other companion was Peterkin Gay. He was little, quick, funny, decidedly mischievous, and about fourteen years old. But Peterkin's mischief was almost always harmless, else he could not have been so much beloved as he was (The Coral Island Kindle Edition 5).

Ballantyne through the boys, especially Jack Martin promotes the British vision of boyhood which can transform into the muscular, Christian masculinity capable of subduing and running the British Empire. These are boys who honour their parents, love their mothers and sisters, and are chivalrous when on rare instances they face females. Jack is well educated, clever and hearty and lion like in his conduct which makes him the leader of the group. The two younger boys look up to him and have

complete trust in his abilities in the hour of peril and difficulty on the island. Jack saves them in their encounter with the shark during a fishing excursion and also when they are stuck in bad weather at sea. Ralph, the narrator is portrayed as a boy having an agile mind, good observant power and a scientific bent of mind. He also personifies the image of a good Christian boy and he is also the moralizing and at times didactic voice of the narrator. Ralph not only regularly prays to God but also experiences a sense of gratitude and pleasure towards him for the exotic wonders of nature that surround him:

While here and there, in groups and in single trees, rose the tall forms of the cocoa- nut palms, spreading abroad, and waving their graceful plumes high above all the rest, as if they were a superior race...( The Coral Island Kindle Edition 43).

The young boy heroes are assigned the role of colonisers. They become the administrators as well as the explorers of the unknown territory. They observe and examine the animal life and vegetation. The boys being cast upon a very fruitful island, a new home which is like a garden with extensive supply of meat, fruit and vegetables.

The three boys together become the role model for the Victorian boys: loyal, brave, sensible, possessing the scientific interest and rationality of the colonial explorer, the features of the adventurer and the leader and morals of the good Christian. Though all the boys do not hold all these qualities individually, they together form the ideal group of settlers, which Elleke Boehmer looks upon as embodying "the best of the West".

Although Ballantyne's imperial ideas are communicated in the beginning of *The Coral Island*, it is in his portrayal of the native's that his ideology of the white superiority comes to the forefront. In the Victorian period the novel was looked upon as conveying the idea of benevolent imperialism in the form of humanitarianism. But today when viewed through the lens of post-colonial theory, we discern an ideology of racism and cultural dominance at work. Ballantyne by ascribing the natives with demonised characteristics and attributing them with cannibalistic and diabolical customs, creates an image of these south sea islanders as 'other' in comparison with the three virtuous young Britons. The image of the islanders as savages is tarnished time and again in the course of the novel. Ralph remarks while witnessing the bloody battle between the two tribes, " they looked more like demons than human beings"( *The Coral Island*, Kindle edition 125). This image is again reinforced in describing the cannibalism of the natives: " Scarcely had his limbs ceased the quiver when the monster cut slices of flesh from his body, and, after roasting them slightly over the fire devoured them" (*The Coral Island*, Kindle edition 120). Bill Ashcroft in *The Empire Writes Back* remarks that : "In order to maintain authority over the Other in a colonial situation, imperial discourse strives to delineate the Other as radically different from the self [...]. Otherness can thus only be produced by a continual process of what [Homi] Bhabha calls 'repetition and displacement' [...]" ( *The Empire Writes Back*

103). Ballantyne, thus attempts to establish and perpetuate the Western superiority and authority by creating repetitive and distorted image of the natives which are disjointed from truth and reality. In the episode of the three boys' intervention in the battle of the warriors and Jack's glorious victory over the gigantic chief, the white boys' superiority over the natives is accentuated. The three boys are not only victorious, but later they also prevent the natives from 'devouring' their enemies and endeavour to teach and civilize them and thereby promote the idea of conversion to Christianity and adopting western traditions as the only true path of living. Commenting on the usefulness of attempting a critical evaluation of ideology of a past classic text, Patrick Brantlinger observes: " the retrospective critique of ideology cannot alter or improve upon the past, of course, but perhaps it can help change patterns of domination and racist thought in the present by revealing that the past is, for better or worse, our inheritance" ( Brantlinger x-xi). In the second section of this chapter - the discussion on the contemporary multicultural novel-The Other Side of Truth by Beverley Naidoo can precisely begin on this note - the dialectic between the racist past and multicultural present.

The Other Side of Truth (2000) by Beverley Naidoo, built on the framework of an adventure story is a refugee story dealing with the horror of war and repressive states, and the issues of fear, freedom and identity. Naidoo, a white South African exile to England, had been an antiapartheid activist in South Africa before starting her career as a writer for children in 1985. Her first published novel - Journey to Jo'burg, was followed by a string of novels for children set in South Africa and critical of the apartheid rule. Naidoo wrote The Other Side of Truth in England in the post-apartheid period which tells the story of two Nigerian refugee children who arrive in Britain to seek security and shelter after the political killing of their mother and the imposed disappearance of their journalist father. The chief concerns of the novel are topical issues such as political tyranny, racism, war, displacement, migration and building a new life as a refugee. The author poignantly juxtaposes the innocence of the migrant children with the harassment enforced upon them by their peers in a British school. Naidoo succeeds in portraying the sensitive political issues of oppression and gross injustice inflicted upon the weak - 'other'( savages in the Victorian period and migrants in the contemporary period ) by the dominant bureaucratic state and culture. The roots of power equation depicted in contemporary moral-political fictions such as The Other Side of Truth can well be traced back to the Imperialist past of the Victorian era.

Contemporary ethnically plural society and the ethnic literatures can be looked upon as a result of Transnational processes like colonialism, devolution and immigration. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, race and ethnicity surfaced as major concerns of British literary and cultural studies. Writers from the ethnic minority groups such as "Asian-British," "Caribbean-British" and "African-British" attempted to defy the negative stereotypes of post-war immigrants to Britain by depicting the alternative representations of the experiences and the lives of the "others.". Writers like Buchi

Emecheta, Wilson Harris, Ben Okri, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and others depicted the living conditions and practical concerns of minority groups in their essays on race relations as well as in their fiction. Blanka Grzegorzcyk in her book *Discourses of Postcolonialism in Contemporary British Children's Literature* observes:

If decolonization and successive waves of overseas immigration into Britain in the second half of the twentieth century had a direct impact on the construction of English national identity, this was also the time when the pervasive tendency to demonize mainstream Britain's cultural others, forcibly maintained as a part of the cultural discourse of Englishness, contributed to the making of what Rushdie, in an essay from 1982, defined as "the new Empire within Britain" (Grzegorzcyk 37).

However it was not until 1970s that the interest in the study of literatures of ethnic minorities in academia gained momentum. This was a consequence of developments in late 1970s of the new approaches of literary criticism such as postcolonial and multicultural approaches which evaluated the cultural, political and economic legacy of empire and its aftermath. Since then numerous works have been created by minority writers which focus upon the concerns of ethnic minorities and the politics of identity and show these minorities as complex, hybrid products of colonialism, global migrations and the ideology of multiculturalism. Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), is a semi- autobiographical story of a young girl-Anita, who is of Indian origin. She is growing up in a comparatively narrow working-class neighbourhood in the Midlands in U. K. in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The protagonist plays the role of a cultural mediator, with

privileged access to the Punjabi culture of her migrant parents and to the white working- class community in which she lives.

Novels like Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* (2001), Beverley Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth* (2000) or its sequel, *Web of Lies* (2004) have similar concerns as their central preoccupation. They reflect on the encounter between diverse cultures and they focus largely on the experiences of young protagonists traveling from Third World countries and moving across into the territory of the West in the twentieth century. *The Other Side of Truth* narrates the story of two refugee children, twelve-year-old Sade and her ten-year-old brother Femi. Sade and Femi flee from Nigeria, their home country and arrive in Britain. The corrupt military government in Nigeria attempted to assassinate their journalist father but killed their mother instead. *Web of Lies* picks up Sade and Femi's story after they spend two years in London. The story perpetuates the contending claims which plagues the migrant identities. The novel also investigates how the traditional communal values are distorted by what Naidoo herself called the " 'might is right' world" of the London streets ("Writer's" 340). The stories are narrated through the eyes of young immigrants who are trying to make their way in the London of the late 1990 through the urban and suburban geographies in Britain. "These young protagonists are shown to be particularly vulnerable, and together the novels throw light on how marginal subjects

who erupt at the former imperial center have been dismissed, if not outright ignored, and how they have had their identities and bodies threatened by the human and geographical forces in an unaccommodating Britain" remarks Blanka Grzegorzcyk. (Grzegorzcyk 49-50).

Naidoo poignantly depict the young immigrants' experience of alienation within their new environment in the face of the harshness of Britain's cold weather and of its urban and suburban landscape. In *The Other Side of Truth*, Sade and Femi compare the tortuous streets of London to a "thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle," noticing that while their home town in Nigeria "was full of huge buildings . . . surrounded by light, air and space," here each building "was packed up against the next" and that together they "loomed over the narrow pavements like a thick forest of brick, concrete and glass" (*The Other Side of Truth* 54). Sade and Femi's sense of being unwelcome in London is underpinned by the hostility at asylum hearings and by the humiliation of waiting for getting fingerprinted at an asylum screening unit (*The Other* 102-103). Thus it becomes very difficult for the protagonists to look upon Britain as a place of refuge which they had often been told in Nigeria. Sade and Femi are recognized by the authorities as independent subjects only after they claim a political and cultural place for themselves by narrating their stories on television programs and in the local or national press.

According to Head post-war immigrants "viewed England not merely as a land of opportunity, but also as a kind of home, a mother country whose history, culture, and literature was familiar to them from their school textbooks" (164-165). Sade, Femi, and their father undergo the same experience. Sade's father remarks after arriving in London, "When I was a schoolboy," [...], "I grew up believing the streets of London were paved with gold. Our teachers from England impressed on us that everything was perfect in the 'mother country.' If we were caught fighting, our teachers lectured us that 'children in England don't behave like savages'" (*Web of Lies* 41). Sade and Femi's father's views about England which were based on his textbook readings about England go awry when he closely views the life of London. It turns out to be very different from what he expected. In *Web of Lies*, he remarks that back in Nigeria he had always drawn a picture of England as a desirable society that promotes interracial and intercultural harmony. "As for savagery," he says wistfully, "when young people fight [in London] nowadays, it is normal to use knives, broken bottles, even guns" (41). Sade and Femi's experiences of 1990s England are marked by bitterness. Sade, who believed Oxford to be a symbol of the English intellectual, academic and humanistic tradition, is shocked to learn that Heathlands Detention Center, the place where their father is imprisoned for attempting to join them in England, is located near Oxford. Little Femi remembers how he and his friends talked endlessly about football in Lagos but in London people talk more about fights, street gangs and revolting school authorities. The mood of disappointed hope is further accentuated when Sade and Femi have to face

the racist remarks about refugees from school children and defend themselves against school bullies. Sade often notes in her diary: “[H]ow different it is at home,”:

Over there, our family was like a branch of a giant tree. Grandma and her generation were the trunk. All our aunts, uncles and cousins filled up our branches. All our friends from school, Mama’s church, her hospital, Papa’s newspaper and their families filled up the other branches. Whenever you met someone new, it was always “Oh, you are Solaja’s daughter!” or “So, you are Yomi’s auntie’s child!” or “Ah, you are Mama Sola’s mother’s brother’s granddaughter!” ( *The Other* 71) .

In London, there is no giant tree. It’s more like a giant fortress, with millions of people in separate cells behind their walls. Even the Community Centre has

barbed wire here! The mentality is so different. I think the barbed wire gets into some people’s brains. It’s like they don’t know the word RESPECT. (Web 102).

Lawrence Phillips (2006) remarks that the disappointment of migrants with London landscape is the result of an “acute failure to correlate the expectation created by the literary and cultural significance of the [imperial] metropolis, and the material reality of the city” ( phillips 107). Sade and Femi during their first trip across London, think: “Now here they were on a bus just a bridge away from Big Ben itself,” [...], but “[n]othing made sense except the terrible aching inside [her]. Certainly none of the images that slid across the window screen outside the bus made any sense. The things she saw might just as well be cardboard cutouts on a film set that they had entered by mistake. The problem was that there was no exit” ( *The Other* 58).

As newcomers to the city, Sade and Femi are not able to feel any connectedness or association with the city as a living space. The young protagonists' fantasy image of Britain breaks down when they encounter London life in reality. In a store in London the kids because of their being black are charged of involvement in robbery and violence done by the blacks. Time and again Sade and Femi retrospect about their home country, their home town and its people. The children had grown up reading about conventional images of Englishness in texts of school and English Literature books. As a result they were not ignorant about London's urban space but the problem lay in mediating between their constructed image of London life and the actual society. Therefore Sade finds its buildings and architecture as “tower[ing] like castles,” “menacing and grim . . . as if phantoms might be lurking behind the doors” ( *The Other* 188, 193).

## **CONCLUSION:**

Many dialogues in *Web of Lies*, hinge on the imperial discourse. For example the squawking of a group of ravens above the entrance to the Tower of London makes Sade think of the cries of people

killed inside, but it reminds her father of Britain's imperial past. Sade tells us that "[W]hen the guide invited them to admire the brilliance of . . . the Crown Jewels," "Papa murmured that the ravens could be cawing for people in Africa too." He asked, "How many people have lost their lives because of diamonds? If only we could eat the wretched stones, they would offer us life, not death!" (Web of Lies 87).

Naidoo's novels refuse to join what Sandra Muller (2011) called the " 'happy multicultural land'-chorus" (Muller 12), which opened up a space to create a unique multicultural identity against the forces of cultural assimilation to the white middle-class norm. In *The Other Side of Truth*, Sade holds on to the physical reminders of Nigeria, even after travelling far away from her homeland and she persistently draws on her native culture by recollecting her parents' favourite proverbs. Both Sade, Femi and their father exhibit initial reluctance to identify with the multicultural milieu and the middle-class British society. *The Other Side of Truth* and *Web of Lies* raise important questions about the racial intolerance and the social inequality experienced by young refugees newly arrived in Britain. However, in their different ways these novels, too, foresee the eventual emergence of a productive cultural exchange, and multicultural space.

Moreover, migration and minority stories are intended to play a critical role in the acculturation of young members of migrant and minority communities in Britain. Finally, as Blanka Grzegorzczuk remarks, "the novels establish grounds for thinking critically about the impact of migration, dislocation and cultural contact on both the British mainstream and diasporic culture as well as on their composite sense of identities" as well as the inheritance of the past into the present.

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