



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Ambivalent Colonial Encounters: A Postcolonial Rereading of  
Mircea Eliade's *Bengal Nights***

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**ABSTRACT**

Being inspired by the Western hegemonic discourse, the Romania novelist, Mircea Eliade's Eurocentric line of thought renders the Others/Indians as uncivilized, primitives and exotic in *Bengal Nights*. The present study upholds that the novel offers ambivalence-based stereotypical colonial-expressions and the interactions between Eliade and Devien vision such a third space of enunciation, which not only exposes the instability of colonial discourse from within but also underscores the hybridization of the contacting cultures simultaneously. Bhabha's theory is congenial in bringing to light the stereotypical thinking of Eliade about colonial India. Therefore, the objective of the study is to discover how Eliade's construction of colonial discourse depicts his ambivalent self-articulation. By doing a re-reading of the novel, it has been found that despite the permeability of the colonial relationships suggested by Eliade's adventure, cultural and racial divisions between East and West seem to be collapsing, paving the ways for hybrid colonial encounters

**Introduction**

"Post-colonialism (or often post colonialism) deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007, p. 168). For Whitlock, postcolonial criticism is a comparative and promising reading exercise that breeds resourceful relationships and links through communication between colonizers and colonized (2015, p. 2). Edward W. Said is considered the founding figure of postcolonial studies. In his classic work *Orientalism*, he revolutionized the field by demonstrating how the Western discourse on the Orient was a mode of the former exercising power and domination over the latter (Ashcroft et al, 2007). Said (1978) regards the East and the West as having two distinct cultures with an unbridgeable gap between them. Following Said, Homi K.

Bhabha (1994) took up the issue of post colonialism and made a significant contribution to the field. His concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry transformed the field by challenging the authority of colonial discourse as a dominant form of knowledge-creation (Selden, 2005, p. 228). Bhabha (1994) differed from Said in seeing hybridity instead of binary oppositions as the formative element of colonial encounters. Instead of concentrating on the idea of purity of the interacting cultures, Bhabha (1994) directs our attention to what happens on the frontiers of cultures, that is in-between cultures or what he terms as “liminal space,” (p. 4) meaning the boundary or threshold. For Bhabha, while such an interstitial space is the source of symbolic connections, it also acts as a connective tissue that creates the difference between superiors and subordinates (p. 4). But, the difference so drawn decanters the fixed identifications of colonizers as well as colonized and offers an opportunity of cultural hybridity in which self/other binaries breakdown, leading to new cultural implications without any presumed or imposed hierarchy.

Thus, colonial discourse carries the seeds of its own instability from within, due to the presence of ambivalence; that is the process of repulsion and attraction toward a thing simultaneously. As this discourse is based on the stereotype which serves as the principal discursive strategy for the colonizers to establish a form of knowledge and identity which fluctuates between what is already known/fixed ‘in place’ and something that must be anxiously reiterated, hence it is the “process of *ambivalence*” becomes “central to the stereotype.” For example, it is as if the brutish erotic license of the Africans and the essential deceit/treachery of the Asiatic need no evidence at all (Bhabha, 1994, p. 66). Accordingly, Kato maintains: “hybridity is a reminder that “fixities,” such as the notions of nation, race, ethnicity, culture, or even religion are simplistic “grids” that have been superimposed upon realities that are actually more complex and subtle than human minds can usually comprehend” (2016, p.14). Closely related to the concept of hybridity is Bhabha’s idea of third space of enunciation. To explain this, he used Freud’s *das-unheimliche* and pointed out that what involves in the composition of hybrid self is an “estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world – the un-homeliness – that is the condition of extraterritorial and cross-cultural initiations” (Kuortti & Nyman, 2007, p. 8). As a result, colonial authority is not monological but seems to be double-voiced. For Bhabha, cultural differences cannot be inscribed to a new third term, but unceasingly continue to linger on in a hybrid third space of enunciation; a zone of negotiation and exchange (1994, p. 37). McLeod maintains that for Bhabha; “the boundary is a place of emergence, rather than the terminus of sense” (2007, p.17).

To this end, the Romanian philosopher, historian, comparative religion scholar and novelist, Mircea Eliade came to reside in India; to learn Sanskrit language and Indian philosophy from Surendranath Dasgupta, an erudite Sanskrit scholar and historian of Hindu scriptures. His novel, originally published in Romanian in 1933, and subsequently translated into English in 1993, is a seemingly semi-autobiographical love story. This article uses the 1995 edition of the novel published by the University of Chicago Press. The novel described his encounters

with his Sanskrit teacher's daughter, Maitreyi, "a talented poet with whom he fell in love" (Azim, 1996, p.1035). Their love remained unrequited; this gave the story a tragic end. The underlying contention of this research is that his novel is a Eurocentric colonial outgrowth. Remarkably, it is the ambivalence that decanters the colonial supremacy and presents the Western culture as hybridized in the context of colonialism; a situation in which colonizers and colonized come in contact with uncanny cultures and often get influenced by them. The following lines from the novel reveal how hybridization-process affected his own personality:

I had learnt a whole set of *rituals*: I knew, for example, that if knocked into someone, I must bend down and *touch his foot* with my *right hand*, that I should never, even in jest, execute the gesture of a kick - and several other such *precepts* and *prohibitions*. (p. 69) (emphasis added)

Hence, it is upheld that this celebration and confrontation based novel not only records the novelist's imperial estimations to the phenomena of colonialism but also discloses how his efforts to remain loyal to the European world ultimately resulted in his ambivalent self-articulation. The current study would therefore, be instrumental in giving postcolonial hybrid perspectives to the novel, i.e., the promotion of indigenous and foreign cultures in such a third space that belongs neither to the colonizers nor to the colonized on exclusive basis. Notably, the objective is not to downplay the former interpretations of the novel, but to suggest an alternative standpoint to it. The practice of stimulating counter discourse in relation to colonized nations is not new. For example, Achebe (1975) and Said (1993) have picked out and exposed the Eurocentric threads to the public eye through their re-reading of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Mansfield Park* (1814) respectively. In "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" through his rereading, Achebe has successfully proved that Conrad's partial attitude towards Africans is based on his personal disliking of the African race and culture. Similarly, the chapter, "Jane Austin and Empire" in Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, discovers the relationship between manor home (master) and plantation (slave) in Austin's *Mansfield Park*. In view of that, the present postcolonial rereading of Eliade's novel shows how it is tainted with racial discrimination and is replete with ambivalent stereotypical colonial discourse which makes the writer's own self as hybrid in the wake of colonial encounters.

## **Literature Review**

The novel under discussion has been interpreted on multifarious levels. Sarkar's (2013) review of the novel concludes that it is an example of encoded mysteries written only for Eliade and his sweetheart, Devi. Likewise, Aguirre (2001) in his MA-dissertation critiqued the novel utilizing Jacques Derrida's insights into the study of binary logic. But, his analysis fails to address how the novel exposes ambivalent psyche of Eliade, while dealing with issues relating colonial encounters.

Fleming's (1994) article, titled "He Said, She Said" suggested that Eliade's orientalist gaze reduced Maitreyi, the Indian heroine of his novel to "a giggling

schoolgirl", who was otherwise an earnest scholar at sixteen years of age. Buruma (1994) in his appraisal of the novel wrote that it was a story of inner turmoil, passions as well as indecisiveness. His reading suggested that the novel is a subgenre of confessional literature. Azim (1996) inscribed in her analysis of the novel that Eliade revealed Bengali/Indian cultural values to his countrymen, performing an anthropological task. Basu's (2001) study established the point that the novel could be classed with the exotic narratives of colonial India and the hallmark of such texts was that the Others were denied any presence or speaking part in the narratives and were accordingly registered as absent from the very land that they inhabited. Nevertheless, Basu's reading of the novel did not go beyond the traditional questions of east/west dichotomy and hence failed to deal with the striking colonial mysteries i.e. mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence and their effects on the European-novelist's identity and culture.

As the above-reviewed works did not comprehensively delineate how the writer's discursively formed stereotypical-knowledge against the colonised unearths his ambivalent self-expressions. To this end, I claim that the novel has not been studied from the perspective of Bhabha's postcolonial hybridity discourse. It is argued that the novel is a colonial hybrid text, which not only described the personal love story of the writer, but also distorted and disfigured the identity of the colonized. But in doing so, it envisages the ways for in-between relations/third space to which the novelist resides in order to document his estimations to the phenomenon of colonial encounters. Accordingly, in the novel, the contradictory thoughts such as-hybridization-and-purification works simultaneously. Here, hybridization refers to the mixing of practices between colonizers and colonized and purification stands for the mechanisms that construct the colonizers and colonized as two distinct ontological zones, "but such 'difference' blurs categorical distinctions and creates continuity and a permanent ambivalence" (Frenkel & Shanhav, 2006, p. 4).

### **Material and Methods**

The research is qualitative in nature and the theoretical framework consists of Postcolonial Critical Theory garnered from the postcolonial re-readings of colonial texts. Although, the theory supplies a cornucopia of several theoretical strands, emerging out of theoretical models presented, among others, by Bhabha (1994), Spivak (1988) and Said (1978); the big three who form the holy trinity of postcolonial theory (Boehmer & Chaudhury, 2011, p.9). But the researcher aims to analyze and interpret the selected novel from the perspectives of the classical postcolonial theorist - Bhabha, owing to his classification of colonial discourse as intrinsically flawed and disruptive of colonial authority, as he does not does not construct rigid borderlands between the West/East cultures. Frenkel and Shenav (2006) maintain: "Orientalism is founded on a binary epistemology that necessitates a sharp distinction between colonizers and the colonized, whereas Bhabha's work represents a hybrid epistemology, taking into consideration the fusion and the mutual effects of colonizers and the colonized" (p. 1). It is a text-based study and

the selected novel serves as the primary source of data, for which close-reading is used as analytical method. The emphasis in closer reading is on paying attention to the individual words and the sentences that unfold the ideas. Special attention has been paid to Bhabha's conceptions such as ambivalence, colonial discourse, hybridity and mimicry and their reflection in the novel under the study.

## **Analysis of the Text**

### ***Bengal Nights: An Ambivalence-Based Colonial Hybrid Text***

According to Young, the term "ambivalence" is used in psychoanalysis to describe a state of mind in a person, who wants one thing and its opposite simultaneously (1995, p. 161). In other words, it is an attraction to and repulsion from a person, object or an action instantaneously. For Bhabha (as cited in Ashcroft et al. 2007, p. 10) ambivalence "describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizers and colonized". Bhabha (1994) applied the idea to theorize the relations between colonizers and colonized in the broader context of colonialism: "In the colonial situation, the marks of anxiety and ambivalence give power to the colonized agent" (Huddart, 2006, p. 52). Bhabha (1994) vehemently questions- "Must we always polarize in order to polemicize?" (p. 19). He proposes to put an end to the discourse that constructs colonizers and colonized relationships in binary oppositions and suggests that "the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulating, or translation, of elements that are neither the One (unitary working class) nor the Other (the politics of the gender) but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both" (p. 28). By making the shifting margins of cultural displacements as the starting point of his theory, he asks "what the function of a committed theoretical perspective might be, once the cultural and historical hybridity of the postcolonial world is taken as the paradigmatic place of departure" (p. 21). As a result, the frontiers should be taken as productive sites rather than merely being reductive places: "the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing" (p. 5). In what follows, we would see how the novel presents ambivalence-based colonial expressions which in turn create identity-crisis for the novelist and hybridize his colonial experiences about India.

In this respect, Eliade did not condemn the horrific scenes of violence and *lathi*-charge by the mounted colonial police on the nationalists, and their subsequent imprisonment on the charges of mutiny. In this regard, his categorical assertion that he lost his "clarity of judgment" (p. 102) is an indication that although, the events enraged him, yet he remained indecisive as whether to support the indigenous movement of freedom or side silently with the colonists who were committing atrocities against the Indians/locals. One can see that ambivalence is the crucial factor in the novel which effectively disrupts the absolute authority of colonial discourse. Thus, for the colonizers, it is an unwelcome aspect, as it challenges their domination over the colonized. Bhabha (1994) asserts: "It is a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of simultaneously embracing two

contradictory beliefs, one official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and divisions" (p. 80). It is also notable, that in return to his beloved, Maitreyi's Indian style greetings, Eliade also wanted to "execute an Indian greeting," (p. 13) but he dropped the idea on the ground that it might give him a ludicrous look. Likewise, when Maitreyi told her foreign lover, Eliade that for the continuity of their love, they should get married according to the Indian traditions, otherwise, their secret relations would be considered as corrupt and immoral/sinful. On this point, Eliade did not agree with her, because, he thought that her considerations about the marriage are actually the outcome of her fear from the "ancestors" (p. 105). He even termed Indian marriage traditions as mere "superstitions" (p. 105). Thinking about the rigid Indian customs of marriage, Eliade says; "I wondered where an honest expression of the senses, a real innocence of the body, was to be found-*in Indians or in us, the civilized*" (p. 97). (My Italics). Accordingly, ambivalence is an important feature of the novel. This is what Bhabha (1994) has suggested that colonial discourse is ambivalent in its very essence, for, it always fails to produce in its occupied subjects the exact copy/replica of its culture: "These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal-that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites for collaboration and contestation" (pp. 1-2). If we look at the novel, we see Eliade constructing stereotypical colonial discourse which at the same time exposes his own ambivalence. For instance, he termed India and its inhabitants as, "cruel and innocent" (p. 15). Besides, he was "also sure that the encounter of this ancient world" (p. 15) of India with Europeans' "modern work had yet to find its novelist" (p.15). Although, he claimed that the India that he "Discovered" (p. 15) was quite different from the one he read about in the books, yet, he failed to get rid of the colonial mentality and continued constructing his ethnic others on stereotypical lines. Boehmer has therefore affirmed that,

One of the most significant aspects of *European self-projection* was its representation of the people who inhabited the lands they claimed: *the natives, the colonized, the subaltern*. They too were interpreted by way of metaphoric or--the more precise term in this instance--*stereotypic reproduction*. The familiar labels at once marked and *masked the unsettling strangeness* that colonized peoples represented. (p. 75) (My italics)

Similarly, according to him, the Indian plains "have never inspired a song in anyone"(p. 3). This tells us that it was only on his arrival, that India found a singer/writer who with an enthusiasm as a "solitary colonial" (p. 6) would discover and explain its mysteries to the Europeans: "Obviously colonialism has been a political and economic relationship, but it has importantly depended on cultural structures for its coherence and justification" (Huddart, 2007, p. 24). As the ancient India's encounter with his advanced civilization needed a candid novelist, so just like an ethnographer he decided to continue documenting his observations about Indian peoples and their customs so that he can write a book about his "real life"

(p.17) in India. For this purpose, he preserved myriad anecdotes and photographs and drew up the genealogies of the Indians that he encountered in his private diary (p.15). In this way, the long-neglected land was able find a novelist for itself. However, he admitted the fact that the more he tried to understand India the more challenging it became for him: "the deeper I ventured into this *wild domain*, the more consuming became a hitherto *unconscious* notion of *mysuperiority*, the more violently assertive a pride of which I would never have believed myself capable" (p.15) (Emphasis added). As a result, he found himself no more a social being with impeccable self-control on the European way of life: "The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention" (Bhabha, 1994 p. 112).

Furthermore, Eliade's visit to Devi's house shatters his colonial supremacy by posing a serious threat to his readymade opinions about Indian etiquettes and artistry: "I experienced my first doubts about my way of life. I remember that I went home rather despondent" (p. 6). The remarks clearly show that it is his divided self that forces him to land in a place which Bhabha (1994) calls "the third space of enunciation" (p. 37) in which cultural differences are not inscribed to a new third term. Rather they unceasingly continue to linger on in a hybrid space which functions as a zone of negotiation and exchange between colonizers and colonized: "It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance" (p. 38). According to Kuortti and Nyman in order to explain his concept of third space, Bhabha points out that the hybrid self involves an alienating sense in which the home and the world are repositioned and this repositioning leads to the un-homeliness, an imagined place where extraterritorial and cross-cultural originations take place (p. 8). Eliade's being "despondent" (p. 6) about European way of life is an indication of his un-homeliness and this shows that colonial authority is not monological but double-voiced. Bhabha (1994) emphasizes that hybridity questions customary analysis of colonialism which simply reverses the relationships between colonizers/colonized: "The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention" (p. 112).

### **Colonial Mimicry and Ambivalence in *Bengal Nights***

According to Bhabha (1994) throughout colonial history it had been a manifest agenda of colonial discourse to force its subjects/indigenous people to adhere to and reproduce the assumptions, values and habits of their masters/colonists by mimicking them as accurately as possible. However, such colonial discourse has produced reluctant subjects whose mimicry/slavish imitation is not far away from mockery which is also an instance of ambivalence that fundamentally disquiets the colonial dominance. We encounter Maitreyi's ambivalence and colonial mimicry in the use of English language, which of course is not far away from mockery. Once, she expressed her love-feelings for Eliade

using the English language as a medium of communication and his observations on her English were as follows; "She had spoken in *English*, and *reddened* at the *crude turn* of phrase she had used" (p.109) (emphasis added). In fact, she herself accredited his views, when she said; "My *English* is very *bad*, Alain. Who knows what *disagreeable* things you must have understood?" (p.109) (My Italics). It is evident from the above dialogue that mimicry may not always amount to the exact reproduction of the colonists and therefore it carries the seeds of mockery within itself. Therefore, to Bhabha (1994, p. 86) the ambivalence of mimicry does not simply challenge the hegemonic discourse; rather, the anxiety is transformed into such an indecision which fixes the colonial subjects' partial-presence. So to Bhabha (1994, p. 88) the nuisance of mimicry acts like a double-edged sword. It not only discloses the ambivalence-based colonial discourse, but also unsettles its authority.

Similarly, Khokha, yet another Indian character in the novel preferred to wear European clothes, and his slavish imitations of foreign culture rendered his appearance to Eliade "totally ridiculous" (p. 114). Khokha also used to send letters in English to him and his English is termed as "atrocious" (p. 174). This is because Eliade was unable to completely decipher his use of English language. To Byrne, the colonized's mimicry of the colonisers is enough to disrupt and subvert the self-acclaimed authority of colonial discourse (2009, p. 88). Eliade also tells us that while wandering in the suburbs of Calcutta, he was shouted at by the children as "white monkey" in "garbled English" (p. 158). The above-cited specimens from the novel clearly express that mimicry of the colonizers' language/culture by the colonial subjects, (Maitreyi and Khokha) contains within itself the seeds of hybridity and ambivalence: "Western civilization is not unique, nor simply Western, and its 'superiority' is not something that can be confidently asserted when other civilizations are so similar" (Huddart, 2006, p. 2). As mimicry appears to be a parody of whatever it mimics, so, the result is a blurred copy which not only establishes colonial discourse as essentially flawed and fissured but also weakens the colonizers' control to discipline the behavior of the colonized. In this respect, to Bhabha (1994) "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (p.86) and its 'menace' is traceable in its double-vision which besides exposing the ambivalence/anxiety of colonizers' stereotypical discourse also disrupts and destabilizes the structures that nourish colonial thoughts: "a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them (Bhabha, 1994, p. 89).

It would be worth-mentioning here that for Eliade, India along with its mysteries was a source of unending fascination and to a greater extent exploring Indian world was the mission of his life. He remained busy in translating/elucidating this alien culture to the West, throughout his lifetime. Through Indian mystery, he could foresee his own destiny: "that mystery of which I knew nothing except that it was there for me to decipher and that in deciphering it I would at the same time reveal to myself the mystery of my own existence." (Eliade,



1990, p.153) The Indian society fascinated him once and for all. Therefore, the friendship of Indians was of an “inestimable value” (p. 54) for him. This is how the binaries such as East/West break down in the novel, indicating ambivalence as the formative feature of colonial expressions. In this way, Eliade’s novel seems to be operating in a space that Bhabha (1994) terms as the “third space of enunciation” (p. 37), where characters from across the globe meet and express their respective worldviews, giving birth to ambivalent cultural exchanges and hybridization of the interacting cultures. In this respect, Eliade not only learnt Bengali language from his beloved, Maitreyi but also the Indian cultural manners of properly greeting others (p.69). Both the examples prove that hybridization-process does not spare even the colonizers. He seems to be in a state of in-betweens, in Bhabha’s (1994) words, “neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between” (p. 219). We can say that Eliade started experiencing transformation in his personality, the moment he decided to decipher the Indian alien culture for himself. Hence, any claim of cultural purity is akin to illusion: “Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledge’s enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority - its rules of recognition” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114). All the same, the following lines from the novel reveal how his contact with Indian culture posed a strong threat to his self-supposed superior western civilization and created such a psychic-metamorphosis in him that he started harshly criticizing his own culture:

The *white world* is a *dead world*. I have *finished* with it. If I am admitted, as I pray God I will be, into an *Indianfamily*, I will *refashion* my life. Until now, it has been based on *stupid* interests, on *abstracts* -I want to begin everything afresh, believe in something, and be happy. (p.103) (My Italics)

Bhabha (1994, p. 1) is therefore of the view that one needs to go beyond the notions of “originary” and “initial subjectivities”, so that politically crucial and theoretically innovative processes that in turn produce the cultural differences can be given new critical positions. The recognition of such split-space of enunciation/expression on theoretical foundations may pave the way to conceptualizing cultures as always in a flux: “one should remember that it is the 'inter-dicta'- the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space-that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (p.38). We can say that Eliade who was very proud of his nationality and his European origins (p. 2) and who arrived in India, with grand objectives of carrying civilization to its inhabitants, succumbed to ambivalence and was helpless before the irresistible presence of hybridity. Since, all his grand objects seemed to him “illusory and useless” (p.158); when he encountered the Indian unfamiliar world. He himself became the victim of what Huddart (2006) calls “hybridity’s on-going process” (p. 4). In short, in the background of colonial encounters, it is very hard, rather impossible to maintain strict frontiers between cultures and this creates identity crisis for both the colonisers and colonised: “on the one hand, Bhabha examines colonial history; on

the other, he rethinks the present moment, when colonialism seems a thing of the past" (Huddart, 2006, p. 2).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, we can say that Eliade's un-acknowledging of imperialism as a humiliating and alienating institution for the natives/Indians was a deliberate move as it provided him with an opportunity to present colonial encounters as charming and balanced transactions for European readers. He fails to radically question colonial culture of which he himself was a part. For, a categorical dismissal of imperialism would have meant renouncing the romanticized European subjectivity of which he was proud of and what the empire was working hard to transplant into the colonies. Consequently, the use of stereotypical colonial discourse in the novel not only links Eliade's sympathy with the imperial self but also discloses his own ambivalence towards the Europe as the only center of civilization. It has been found that the ambivalent spaces of colonial encounters between the colonizers and colonized can be seen as working forms of hybridity; the best model to assert shared (post)colonial conditions in order to delocate and dismantle the cultures from their respective spatial, temporal, geographical and linguistic settings. After rereading the novel from Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, hybridity and ambivalence, it has been established that the text under perusal is purely a colonial hybrid product in the history of British colonialism in India, as it undermines any notion or possibility of maintaining cultural purity in the wake of colonial encounters.

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