

Yasmine Gooneratne's "On an Asian Poet Fallen Among American Translators": An Opprobrium of Literary Imperialism

Dr. Jadeeda Saleem
Assistant Professor of English
M.S.S. Wakf Board College
K.K. Nagar, Madurai-20

Abstract

Imperialism is a policy of extending a country's power through colonization using military force or other means. American imperialism describes the policies which aims at extending political, economic and cultural control of the United States over areas beyond its boundaries. Sri Lanka too was one of its Asian colonies and its imperialistic attitude targeted even literature which led to literary imperialism. Yasmine Goonaratne, an eminent novelist, short story writer, essayist, literary critic of Sri Lanka, and a university professor in Australia, verily fulminates against this literary imperialism of the American translators, in her poem "On an Asian Poet Fallen Among American Translators." She powerfully delineates the agony of Sri Lanka under the colonial administration of America. She gives vent to her wrath on American capitalism and literary imperialism by evincing the fact that two hundred years is sufficient for a First world country like America, to establish an empire but the same time frame is exiguous for it to master the quintessential culture, elegant tradition, dexterity in art and craft, or the geniality of Asia, as these are the innate hallmarks of the indigenous population of Asia. She not only eulogizes the culture and aesthetic sense of romanticism of her native country, Sri Lanka, but also the culture and aesthetic sense of romanticism of entire Asia.

Keywords: opprobrium, imperialism, capitalism, aestheticism, romanticism

Introduction

Yasmine Goonaratne, an eminent novelist, short story writer, essayist, literary critic of Sri Lanka, and a university professor in Australia has published more than sixteen books including a critical work on Jane Austen. She is popular in Sri Lanka for her memoirs and patriotic works in literature. She has been one of the noteworthy contributors to the English literature of Sri Lanka. Some of her books were published under the male pseudonym, Tilak Gunawardane. Few of her well-known works are, *Stories from Sri Lanka*, *The Sweet and The Simple Kind*, *New Ceylon Writing*, *The Pleasure of Conquests*, etc. Her works mainly deal with the themes of diaspora and colonialism or imperialism. Imperialism is a policy of extending a country's power through colonization using military force or other means. American imperialism describes the policies which aims at extending political, economic and cultural control of the United States over areas beyond its boundaries. Sri Lanka too was one

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Dr. Jadeeda Saleem, Yasmine Gooneratne's "On an Asian Poet Fallen Among American Translators": An Opprobrium of Literary Imperialism 198

of its Asian colonies and its imperialistic attitude targeted literature too which led to literary imperialism. Yasmine Gooneratne verily fulminates against this literary imperialism of the American translators, in her poem “On an Asian Poet Fallen Among American Translators.”

An Opprobrium of Literary Imperialism

Yasmine Gooneratne, in her poem “On an Asian Poet Fallen Among American Translators.” powerfully delineates the agony of Sri Lanka under the colonial administration of America. She commences her poem by giving vent to her wrath on American capitalism and literary imperialism by evincing the fact that two hundred years is sufficient for a First world country like America, to establish an empire in Asia, but the same time frame is exiguous for it to master the quintessential culture, elegant tradition, dexterity in art and craft, or the geniality of Asia, as these are the innate hallmarks of the indigenous population of Asia. She not only eulogizes the culture and aesthetic sense of romanticism of her native country, Sri Lanka, but also the culture and aesthetic sense of romanticism of the entire Asian classic literature. In the next stanza of the poem, she scornfully portrays the expression of Americans when they read or translate the classic Asian Literature. She scathingly remarks that as they have Puritan blood in them it impels them to make a grimace over the romance flourished literature of Asia. She further bitterly comments that the Americans have an insensitive heart which is not befitting to read or translate Asian Literature.

In the third stanza of the poem, she vehemently attacks the approach of America which lacks any venerable culture or tradition. She contemptuously observes that “there is death in your touch America.” She also severely cautions the Americans not to inculcate or impose its repugnant ideas in the minds of the Asians. She depicts her disrespectfulness and lashes out at the literary imperialism of American translators, and cautions them to take off their leprous fingers from the divine poetry of Asia. She addresses America and says:

Do you hear me? Are you there?
We are not there, never have been
nor ever shall. Take
your hands off from our shoulders
our names from your computerized prize lists
and your leprous fingers off
our poetry...”

In the ensuing stanza, Goonaradne reveals her extreme outrage towards the American translators as there is nothing worthwhile in their work. She further mockingly says that the native poets of America like T. S. Eliot has fled from his country and Ezra Pound is bewildered by his poems and Robert Frost has derived little satisfaction from the beautiful landscapes of America. Goonaradne, by echoing the lines from Frost’s poem “Stopping by the

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Dr. Jadeeda Saleem, Yasmine Gooneratne’s “On an Asian Poet Fallen Among American Translators”: An Opprobrium of Literary Imperialism 199

Woods on a Snowy Evening," points out that though "the woods are lovely, dark and deep," he was not enamoured by it because he had "miles to go." She quotes the last stanza of the poem to make explicit this idea:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

She criticizes that the Americans lack the aesthetic sense to admire or to be allured by any beautiful scenery, as their commitment to duty will forbid them from it. Furthermore, she asserts that countries which have an imperialistic attitude should implore for culture, artistry and craft from the Asian countries. She wonders for a brief period of time that how writers like Eliot and Pound are contented with the culture of the Americans. But all through their life they are unable to be the spectators of future poetry. Even after the fleeing of all the great poets, some poets are waiting in the land with a hope that the tide will turn bringing them "more than driftwood and broken stones."

Gooneratne again quotes a line from the Shakespearean play, *King Lear*, from Act iv, scene vi which reads "one who gathers samphire-dreadful trade." She indicates that some Americans wait with hope that tide will turn to collect or to gather the samphire, drift woods, shards and rubble for their possible images. All the above mentioned things are scraps and they symbolize negative images. By these images, Goonaratne points out that Americans are waiting at the sea shores to gather the discarded remnants from Asian literature. Finally, Goonaratne is so livid that she directly smashes America in the following lines that need no elucidation:

...America
empty of grace
graveyard of art
monster
living on lazar-house know-how
and hot- house pretensions
America, new found land
long lost it seems,
to poetry.

Conclusion

Gooneratne finally proves that imperialism can make anything feasible for America, but it is highly impossible for a newfound land like America to comprehend the Asian aesthetic sense, as it can be perceived only by a native Asian. Gooneratne thus wields her

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Dr. Jadeeda Saleem, Yasmine Gooneratne's "On an Asian Poet Fallen Among American Translators": An Opprobrium of Literary Imperialism 200

words like a sword, in the poem “On an Asian Poet Fallen Among American Translators” to make it an opprobrium of literary imperialism.

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