

Shahzeb Khan *
Azka Zia **

Hegemonizing Minds through Life Writing: The Case of *English Men of Letters* as an Imperial Text

Abstract

This article discusses the English Men of Letters series, as a representative work of Imperial Life writing, which was utilized by the British colonizers to influence local minds in favor of the colonial rule. Available studies which discuss EML series and Victorian biographies do so in the context of England, in this study, however, the colonial imperatives necessitated the publishing of English biographies which were needed in the colonies to support discursively the non-discursive and expansionist agenda of the colonizers on the ground. The paper argues that the series was a tool to materialize what Macaulay had imagined in 1835: a class English in taste, opinions, morals and intellect (Macaulay 1835). For this class to be created, rhetoric of Englishness was required which could pull subjectivities towards it in the consensual environment of an educational institution. One crucial cog in this juggernaut of colonizing Englishness was thus the EML series, the paper argues. It is thus an attempt to further understand the historical schema of imperialism with the help of biographies. The paper ends on a forward-looking note and emphasizes the need to develop a discourse on ways to resist hegemonic readings in institutional settings.

Keywords: English men of letters, John Morley, Surrogate, Life writing, hegemonic reading.

Introduction to *English Men of Letters Series*, John Morley

The *English Men of Letters* series, first published in 1878 in London, has been celebrated in available histories as "the most successful venture of the kind since Johnson's Lives of the Poets".¹ Patrick Parrinder refers to the series as "monumental" in the context of Britain's cultural history.² John Morley (1838-1923), who was the editor of the series, was considered as "...the last of the great nineteenth-century Liberals".³ The series was based on biographies of literary persons and was written by the leading literary figures of the nineteenth century. The *EML* was a huge success in England and the colonies and the first phase ran until 1892. Keeping in view the success and popularity of the first series, a second

* Dr. Shahzeb Khan [Corresponding], Assistant Professor, Institute of English Studies, University of the Punjab, Shahzeb.english@pu.edu.pk.

** Azka Zia, University of the Punjab, Azkazia96@gmail.com.

sequence was launched in 1902 which kept publishing until 1919. A total of 64 biographies were published under this project in which 39 were part of the first series and 25 were published in the second series. The Macmillan publishing house gained a huge increase in popularity through the publication of this series and established its position as one of the most successful publishing houses of England. The volumes continued to be reprinted in the 20th century in pirated and in further abridged versions. In 1905, during the publication of the second series, John Morley was also appointed as the secretary of India. Earlier, he had also been the editor of the *Fortnightly Review* and in four years of his appointment as the editor, he was successful in making the periodical a forum of radical-liberal and agnostic ideas. He was also influenced by John Stuart Mill and his ideas about liberalism and education. The aim, for him, was the wide dispersal of high knowledge. In his autobiography, *Recollections*, he described what he aimed for the readership of his series: to provide "knowledge, criticism, and reflection" to the people who were too busy and [had] less time to devote to reading. Therefore, this series would bring, as Morley stated, "all these three good things within reach of an extensive, busy, and preoccupied world."⁴ It became one important text through which literature was introduced as this "high" culture.⁵

Traditionally, the Eurocentric histories look at this period from the English point of view.^{6 7 8 9} In English history, it was a period in which "authors [were] claimed [by the state] in a period of "national rise" when "jaunty commandeering [rose] to an audible pitch.... [and] reached a collective zenith in the closing years of the nineteenth century and the first few years of the twentieth century."¹⁰

It found expression in national anthologies (The Oxford Book of English Verse); in nationally earmarked series ('Cassell's National Library', 'The English Men of Letters'); in nationally bound reference books (The Dictionary of National Biography, ...); and in courses at schools and universities.

However, the impact of such works in the colonies has so far been largely ignored. Evaluating the impact of the series and its ideology from the local standpoint would offer important insights into the way texts from dominant cultures alter the cognitive-scapes of colonized people's minds. The present paper is an effort in this regard.

The *EML* series falls in the categorization of biography as a genre. These volumes presented a sort of history of the times in which that particular literary figure was writing. However, these writings also consisted of feigned truths told by the literary writers. In the series, uni-sided view of English history, literature, and culture is represented. Individual heroism of struggling authors who worked hard against the odds to establish their worth in society and market and hence became successful can be seen as a predominant plot in almost all the volumes. The presentation of these characters as literary heroes happened in the overall textual context that glorified English literature and history and hid its darker (wars, persecution of religious minorities) aspects. It was on the basis of hundreds of texts like these, including *Biographies of Great Artists* (Sampson, Low & Co., 1879), *English Philosophers* (Sampson, Low & Co., 1881), *Eminent Women* (Allen & Co., 1883), *English Worthies* (Longman, 1885), *Great Writers* (Walter Scott, 1887), *Twelve English Statesmen* (Macmillan, 1888) and *English Men of*

Action (Macmillan, 1889)¹¹ through which the logic of coloniality—that the English writers were inherently superior and hence deserved exclusive engagement in the curriculum¹² was doled out to the colonies. Regarding the exclusive presence of the Englishmen in the curriculum, consider, for instance, an episode from the colonial past of the discipline of English at Punjab University. A translation of Sanskrit and Persian Poetry in English done by Edwin Arnold was introduced in the curriculum of MA English in 1888.¹³ The book was titled *Indian Idylls* and published in 1883. It disappeared from the syllabi the very next year after its introduction. As Khan and Raza argue, the reason for the disappearance was the imminent danger it posed to the exclusive and conspicuous Anglocentric nature of the curriculum which was designed to create pliant subjectivities subservient to English imperialism.¹⁴ This governing logic of the discipline of English would have been disturbed had a text like *Indian Idylls* become part of the curriculum. It would have refuted Macaulay's claim that "A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia,"¹⁵ as Edwin Arnold, the translator, wrote in the introduction that the book was a compilation of native Indian literature translated in English which was "seven-fold greater in bulk than the Iliad and Odyssey taken together".¹⁶ Students familiar with the literary asset of their own culture and language might have considered it to be the potential to resist cultural imperialism. Therefore, the book was taken out from the syllabus the very next year after its inclusion in the poetry curriculum of Masters in English programme of the University.¹⁷ Thus the grand narrative of the European/English Enlightenment can be seen spread all over the texts of the *EML series*. These were presented to uncritical readers in colonial classrooms who had no option but to imbibe this colonial rhetoric. These characters veiled the loot and plunder the actual colonizers on the ground and built a narrative crescendo in the name of that modernity and civilization.

The *EML* series became part of the curriculum in universities of England in 1881. John Gross states that it achieved a distinctive place within British literary education:

Right from the start, it was accorded semi-official status, and for a couple of generations it remained an unflinching standard for harassed teachers and conscientious students. No comparable series has ever come so close to attaining the rank of a traditional British institution.¹⁸

It was included in the syllabus of the University of Punjab's curriculum as early as the late 1880s along with many other Victorian biographies. The series was a means of building a self-congratulatory portrait of the national/English character. In the context of British Punjab, it was one of the first texts which instituted, through curriculum, modes of thinking about literature as an independent body of knowledge.

Biography as Material Medium of Subjugation

The publications of British biographies thrived in England in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Owing to its importance, the genre of biography was also gradually shifted from the discourse of history to the literary discourse.¹⁹ As highlighted by Schwarz, the "relations between literature and government power can be found everywhere the British state operated".²⁰ The biographies formed a

crucial component in the discursive apparatus of the colonial machinery which enabled the colonized elite getting an education in colonial universities to interact with the ennobled English men of letters, men of action, statesmen, and philosophers. To cater to the need created in the colonial educational markets around the world, Macmillan published many other series which were precise as well as cheap. *Illustrated Biographies of Great Artists* (Sampson, Low & Co., 1879), *Philosophical Classics for English Readers* (Blackwood, 1880), *English Philosophers* (Sampson, Low & Co., 1881), *Eminent Women* (Allen & Co., 1883), *English Worthies* (Longman, 1885), *Great Writers* (Walter Scott, 1887), *Twelve English Statesmen* (Macmillan, 1888) and *English Men of Action* (Macmillan, 1889) were some of the literary series published afterwards.²¹ Since the local students of English were not allowed to know about the *Indian/local* men of letters, of action, statesmen, and philosophers, they developed an ‘understanding’ that there were no men of the stature of the English caliber. These ‘learning outcomes’ rooted in coloniality were thus firmly embedded and naturalized in the discipline of English; understandably in other disciplines too. The colonial curricula were designed and fashioned in a way that served the British Imperialist agenda.

Writing about Victorian biographies, Amigoni states: “A look at the contours of the academic disciplines which these master-narratives came to be embodied would suggest that the role of biography was considerable.”²² Especially when it came to colonial classrooms, the impact was more manifest. Commonly the role of intellectuals in the shaping of discourse in England fails to see the roles which the Indian margins played in spurring literary activity in England. Jaya Mehta in her review of *The Masks of conquests* (1989), states that the English canon we are familiar with, and what is generally taught in our literature classrooms was not originally formulated as a part of English literature’s history to be taught in British classrooms but was largely a product that came into being to be exported to the colonial classrooms to assert a cultural superiority.²³

Another important dimension is that a biography is not an accurate portrayal of the person written upon, or the past. It is a recreation of sorts, an afterlife may be. Even an autobiography, in the words of Javed Majeed, “changes the status and significance of past events and deeds”.²⁴ Thus, it can be added that the surrogate Englishmen became the deputies of the colonial operations in their afterlives when they were resurrected by their biographers writing under the zeitgeist of an aggressive Englishness. What we see in EML is that the biographer takes hold of a writer’s life and exercises power over it, alters it, amalgamates it with his own ideas and the textual understanding he has developed of the author and based on the backing he receives from the institutional or corporate power (Macmillan Publishing) results in a created character. This resurrected life then becomes a useful imperial tool.

While John Morley (1838 to 1923) stated that: “nothing can be more unlike in aim, in ideals, in method, and in the matter than are literature and politics”,²⁵ he did not know that the two ‘unlike’ aims merged in his own life. As he edited the series which circulated in colonial universities creating pliant subjectivities, he joined as Secretary of the State for India and played a crucial role in Minto-Morley Reforms of 1909. His edited volumes comprised of ‘noble’ Englishman who served as

surrogates for the Englishman on the ground. The English Men of Action paved the way for English letters which in turn made way for English statesmen like Morley to strengthen and prolong the political rule of the English in India.

The *EML* series also became a shared semantic space where the British colonizers and Indian-educated elite could find a civil space for dialogue. The power that the English men aspiring to serve abroad drew from the *EML* series is mentioned by Harold Nicolson in his memoir about historical personages. He wrote that J. D Marstock had a complete set of the *English Men of Letters* series on his mantelshelf. The reason for this possession of the whole series was that he was preparing for the civil service exam of Foreign Office. His tutor advised him to thoroughly go through the whole *English Men of Letters* series as it covered major literary figures and facts about English history and culture.²⁶ Thus it can be stated that the *EML* can be understood as a text which prepared a workforce with shared cultural heritage with ready references to an assortment of maxims, witty statements, anecdotes, humour and insights that enabled them to work together. The cognitive alignment of the English and Indian minds could thus be one of the important imperial functions of the text.

The Englishman was introduced to colonial classrooms through his cognitive prowess which fulfilled a vital colonial service as it made the Englishman vanish from the colonialist operations, it “de-actualized and diffused his material presence in the process.”²⁷ As Viswanathan says, “The English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in the highest and the most perfect state.”²⁸ This had been planned by the planners of mental colonization, like perhaps John Morley himself. Expanding her argument, it might be added that these Englishmen who populated textbook series like *EML* worked as surrogate agents to colonial administrators. They had an exclusive presence in the curriculum and enabled the actual colonial administrators to hide their acts behind the literary skill of these letters. Had the local writers been included in the similar curricular spaces, the oracles of colonization would have had a difficult time in creating pliant subjectivities. Curriculum, had thus to be cleared of any local, literary counter-politics to ensure an advantage for the English men of letters so that they could hide the reality of their fellow countrymen as subjugators and alien rulers. This clouding of the English men of letters and the colonizers effectively removed the latter from history.²⁹ The curriculum was thus insulated from the literary texts which were produced locally and which offered resistance to the *English* men of letters, a fact lamented upon by the great poet of resistance Akbar Allah Abadi:

As I proudly read out Saadi’s couplets

You boastfully recite Milton’s lines

As Spencer’s³⁰ and Mill’s ditties are being sung at the party

Who would listen to Ghazali and Rumi?³¹

The material reality of Englishmen as subjugators and alien, exploitative rulers could never have been exposed through English literary texts which were created in a different Spatio-temporal locale. Texts which had the actual existence were in

abundance in literature of native origin. One can think of Akbar Allahabadi who wrote a sharp critique of English education in his poetry due to its deceitful nature. He charged English education with the agenda to alter subjectivities. Translated below is a couplet to demonstrate his insightful understanding of what was happening in the name of official/colonial education.

We consider such books worthy of confiscation

Which teach the sons to call their fathers fanatic^{32 33}

The second line of the couplet highlights the replacement of an earlier epistemological framework with a newer one. The revered personalities of the past who had been part of the collective memory were systematically belittled, ignored or forgotten due to this new education system which comprised of texts like *EML* which introduced a new breed of revered literati. This can be equated with epistemological disruption or rupture which dismantled an existing structure of knowing. Spivak says that the most important object of knowledge is a human being.³⁴ If we pivot this discussion on the subject of who is a human being with regards to *EML* and local literature, we may arrive at a valuable result in the context of the present debate.

Johnson, we are told in the first *EML* volume on him, “was a man of the world”, represented “the secular rather than the ecclesiastical type”. He is quoted to have said that “No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money”, and thus he wrote a story “Rasselas” to meet the expenses of his wife’s funeral, wrote the famous dictionary of English for “fifteen hundred and seventy-five pounds”.³⁵ So this was a ‘modern’, ‘secular’ man who sold his writing for subsistence. This utilitarian ‘man’ must have played its part in the construction of the most important ‘object of epistemology’, the man. This idea of a man writing for money was squarely opposed to the native non-capitalist view of writing where it was largely considered to be a mark of refinement and prestige and not just a skill to be sold in the market.

Similarly, Leslie Stephen, Johnson’s *EML* biographer quotes his pronouncement: “...men eminent by nature or fortune are not generally happy” because

... apparent superiority incites great designs, and great designs are naturally liable to fatal miscarriages; or that the general lot of mankind is misery, and the misfortunes of those, whose eminence drew upon them an universal attention, have been more carefully recorded because they were more generally observed, and have in reality been only more conspicuous than those of others, not more frequent or more severe.³⁶

It is not difficult to see how such an understanding of “eminent men” must have been diametrically opposed to the local world view which equated the right moral conduct with contentment and inner nirvana. This idea that good deeds and even great deeds for ones community and kin are always rewarded by the contentment of heart has been firmly rooted in the native imagination and psyche since the times of Bhagvatgita and is so common that it perhaps does not deserve many examples to support it. The reading of any eastern mystical texts would prove the point beyond doubt³⁷.

Resisting Hegemonic Reading

At the end of this paper, and by way of its conclusion, it would be pertinent to mention what Stuart Hall had said in his seminal essay on Encoding/Decoding that in the “symbolic form the message has a privileged position in the communicative exchange” and the institutional “codes serve to reproduce hegemonic definitions”—objects of epistemology in our case—and thus “ideological reproduction” happens.³⁸ The hegemonic viewpoint is also defined by Hall in the same paper: “a ‘hegemonic’ viewpoint is (a) that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe of possible meanings of a whole society or culture; and (b) that it carries -with it the stamp of legitimacy - it appears coterminous with what is ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, ‘taken for granted’ about the social order.”³⁹ What this conclusion of the paper would highlight is the possibility of what Hall calls “oppositional code”, or what we would call an oppositional reading in which a reader would “perfectly ... understand both the literal and connotative inflection[s] of a text but would “determine to decode the message in a ... contrary way”.⁴⁰ We argue that such a reading would have been possible had the students of British Punjab/Colonial India/Punjab University been given access to texts which offered resistance to the ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, and ‘taken for granted’ objects of epistemology which featured in the EML narratives.

Many of such ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, and ‘taken for granted’ objects of epistemology continue to be known by the same rationale and their extant status in the colonies, like the two concepts from Johnson’s biography mentioned above, continue to be embedded in our postcolonial consciousness. In the absence of epistemological audits of colonial disciplines, colonies of the mind could not be uprooted. Similarly, the theorization of how a text from a powerful culture transmogrifies in a weaker culture, into a hegemonic tool, and ways in which it could still be consumed in the weaker culture without its detrimental impact is an extremely significant need that should be prioritized by decolonial scholars. Such an exploration would pave the way for equal cultural exchange, non-hegemonic ways of reading and would ensure better circulation of ideas without the detrimental impact of stronger cultures bulldozing weaker cultures by leveling out, homogenizing, appropriating whatever it deems of value in the weaker culture. In a world that is extremely lopsided, where the onslaught of neoliberalism is erasing difference and diversity, it is essential to protect diversities of ideas, cultures, languages, and ways of reading too.

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