



[Reviews] *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* and *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company*

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Source: *Moveable Type*, Vol.12, 'Nostalgia' (2020)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.113

Moveable Type is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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NOSTALGIAS OF EMPIRE AND ECONOMICS

Saronik Bosu

Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India.

By Shashi Tharoor. 2018. xxix + 295p. \$14.75. Scribe US. ISBN 978-1947534308

The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company

By William Dalrymple. 2019. Xxii+525p. £30.00. Bloomsbury

Publishing. ISBN 978-1635573954

Shashi Tharoor's and William Dalrymple's books continue a debate which was at the heart of several anti-colonial movements in India between the 1890s and 1920s. A generation of thinkers, led by Dadabhai Naoroji, positioned India's net impoverishment under British rule as an adaptable case study which could then be applied across several instances of colonialism. If the tenets of this study were the fact of the impoverishment and ways to better the nature of colonial rule, the premise was a kind of economic nostalgia. When employed as a deliberate strategy, economic nostalgia can repair and sublimate diverse elements of the past into a whole that is markedly different from the literal sum of its parts. Tharoor's book originates in an Oxford Union speech that called for British reparations to nations that were once its colonies: 'If India's GDP went down because it "missed the bus of industrialization," he writes, 'it was because the British threw Indians under the wheels.'¹ In layering the arithmetic of impoverishment (important to Naoroji's and Tharoor's work) with metaphors like this, nostalgia does political work. Economist Tirthankar Roy has argued that in this instance, the situation which Tharoor reads as total devastation was, in fact, a paradox: 'The migration of millions of Indians from servile labour back in their villages to mines, factories and plantations all over the empire created the possibility of real freedom [...] such freedom came packaged with the brutality of colonial rule and (the fact) that the British needed to leave for India to thrive.'²

¹ Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (New York: Scribe US, 2018), p. 34.

² Tirthankar Roy, 'The British Raj according to Tharoor: Some of the Truth, Part of the Time', The Churchill Project, Hillsdale College, 7 Aug. 2020 <<https://winstonchurchill.hillsdale.edu/tharoor-inglorious-empire/>> [accessed 22 September 2020]

Dalrymple in *The Anarchy* sets the precursory scene for this paradox, the establishment of the rule of the East India Company by the beginning of the nineteenth century. The word “anarchy” superimposes the political horror unleashed in the subcontinent due to the expansionist aggression of the Company, onto the gradual transformation of the Company itself into what is essentially a prototype of the modern multinational. ‘No contemporary corporation,’ Dalrymple writes, ‘could get away with duplicating the violence and sheer military might of the East India Company, but many have attempted to match its success at bending state power to their own ends’.³ The distancing of British exceptionalism from the unsavoury practices of the Company took several forms, including Edmund Burke’s famous indictment of Warren Hastings, governor-general of British possessions in India between 1773 and 1785: ‘He is a robber. He steals, he filches, he plunders, he oppresses, he extorts’.⁴ Naoroji would use British criticism of the Company’s rule to characterize the colonial administration of India as un-British, meaning contrary to values that liberal traditions proclaimed.⁵ In *The Anarchy*, and elsewhere, Dalrymple cuts through empire nostalgia that, since decolonization in the fifties and sixties, has seen British nationalism as antithetical to a proper understanding of the miseries wrought by colonial rule. Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and more recently Boris Johnson have characterized such understanding as symptomatic of ‘wetness’, a sensibility that includes the replacement of the spirit of nuanced historical curiosity, with a hard, streamlined nationalism immune to ambiguity.

Normative iterations of Indian nationalism at present do not have much truck with the critique of British rule of India. The cultural effects of Mughal rule, real and imagined, are a much more widely disseminated bugbear. The political aspect of Tharoor’s project has to do with a function of memory, in Britain but also globally, that is somewhat related to nostalgia in that it, too, involves a process of selection. He talks about imperial amnesia, which has been in the news recently in public conversations following the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests and the toppling of Confederate and colonial statues in the US and the UK. Tharoor’s suggestions of reparation are less concerned with money than with education on colonialism, ‘to teach British

³ William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), p. 395.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁵ Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and the Un-British Rule of India*, (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Ltd., 1901).

schoolchildren what built their homeland, just as German children are shepherded to concentration camps to see the awful reality of what their forefathers did'.⁶ Besides education, other symbolic and gestural reparations fall short of the granular material reality of what Ann Stoler has termed the process of imperial ruination, a continuous and multiform worsening of lives and futures that began with the effects of historical colonialism.⁷ Damage and potential redress, on a local level, are often made invisible by the geopolitical scale that sustains competitive moralities in the liberal world order. Tharoor uses the phrase “advancing underdevelopment,” in which the opposing vectors point to the nature of postcolonial development negotiating with not only remnants of colonial political, economic, and cultural infrastructure, but also active processes of ruination.

In describing the inauguration of these processes with the beginning of colonial rule, the historical moment where Dalrymple’s book ends, he notes the unique combination of economic and political interests that characterized the East India Company becoming an “empire within an empire”.⁸ The aggressive economic policies of despotic governor-generals like Hastings and later Richard Wellesley were chastised by the Parliament. ‘By the end of 1803,’ Dalrymple writes, ‘[...] Wellesley, the Empire-building government cuckoo in the Company’s corporate nest, was [...] recalled.’⁹ After the Mutiny in 1857, the rule of India transferred from the Company to the Crown, and in 1858 the Queen’s Proclamation read, ‘We hold Ourselves bound to the Natives of Our Indian Territories by the same obligation of Duty which bind Us to all our other Subjects’.¹⁰ Dadabhai Naoroji would later base his book on the argument that this putative political homogenization and creation of a unified grateful subjecthood across the empire, were severely betrayed by unfair and exploitative economic practices. Relatedly, imperial nostalgia smooths the transition from a grateful empire to a celebratory commonwealth, the latter a ready market for cultural products. The sombre note struck at the end of Dalrymple’s book is a response to the jubilant nostalgia that is a political cultural force evident in everything from recent debates

⁶ *Inglorious Empire*, p. 239.

⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Introduction’, *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, ed. by Ann Laura Stoler, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013, pp. 1-38.

⁸ Joseph Sramek, *Gender, Morality, and Race in Company India, 1765-1858*, qtd. in William Dalrymple, *The Anarchy*, p. 388.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 389.

¹⁰ Queen Victoria, ‘Proclamation, by the Queen in Council, to the Princes, Chiefs and People of India’, The British Library, <<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/proclamation-by-the-queen-in-council-to-the-princes-chiefs-and-people-of-india>>, [accessed 22 September 2020]

over The BBC Proms to immensely popular films and TV shows like *The Crown*. His and Tharoor's books, in respective ways, engage in battling its enervating effects.

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