



From Familiar to Foreign': Exploring Colonialism and Identity in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) as a multifaceted critique of colonialism, rationalism, and Enlightenment ideologies, focusing on Jonathan Swift's use of irony, satire, and parody to arrive at the intricacies of identity constitution when confronted with the complex categories of race and gender. Swift destabilizes colonial, Eurocentric, and Enlightenment claims to superiority by constructing binaries between the 'self' and the 'other,' which often collapse into mutual reflections. Through Gulliver's encounters with the Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, Laputans, Houyhnhnms, and Yahoos, Swift exposes human flaws and contradictions, challenging assumptions about European rationality, colonial benevolence, and progress. Swift's use of grotesque imagery, manipulation of scale, and burlesque undermine the travel narrative's claims to authenticity, while his exploration of gender and race critique systemic inequalities and hypocrisies of colonial empires. While challenging Europe's claims to rationality and morality, Swift intertwines themes of misogyny, race, and power dynamics, showing how colonial oppression often mirrors broader societal flaws. Ultimately, the article leaves readers questioning the nature of human civilization and reason, offering no resolution but a profound critique of humanity's failures.

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[T]he first instance he gave of his Genius and Spirit was sh—g in his School-Master’s Slippers... He proceeded to other Exploits; stole the Neighbour’s Hens; poison’d their House-Dogs, and was at last whipp’d, and turn’d out of school, for pinning the Cook-Maid’s Petticoats about her Ears, as she lay sleeping by the Kitchen-Fire... [He] grew intolerably insolent and vain on account of his Writings; in so much that he turned light-headed, and in his mad Fits, abused Every Body that came in his Way, sometimes spit, and sometimes piss’d in their Faces, and kick’d all the Dogs that he met. (Smedley, 1974)

– Such was the biographical account, given of Swift, in response to his venomous publication, *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). Some marked him a misogynist, some a misanthrope, and some raised questions about the stability of his mind. After going through a whirlwind journey with Gulliver, meeting the minuscule Lilliputians, the colossus Brobdingnagians, the science-maniac Laputans, the immortal Struldbruggs, the dead historical figures, the repugnant Yahoos, and the rational, speaking horses, one comes to doubt one’s own sanity as well and is left bewildered amidst an environment of fruitless nothingness. Written “to vex the world not to divert it.” (Swift, 1963) *Gulliver’s Travels* raised questions about almost all the contemporary events — be it politics, gender, Eurocentrism, colonialism, scientific positivism, authenticity of history, politics of genre (travel narrative), anthropocentrism, and the European claim to rationality and superiority. By putting on the mask of an innocent traveller, the ‘gullible’ Gulliver successfully ‘gulled’ the world, destabilizing all established institutions and notions and exposing man as he really was, only *rationis capax* and not *animal rationale*.

Gulliver was not evidently a character; he was only a space where all the conflicting forces and events met. He was an agent of Swift, sent to unmask the hypocrisy of man and make him stand stark naked in front of the mirror that Swift held for him. Even though Swift’s sense of national loyalty was that of an English settler, his Irish background and experience contributed a great deal to his rhetorical rage. Macaulay thought that Swift had “a heart burning with hatred against the whole human race, a mind richly stored with images from the dunghill and the lazar house” (Foot, 1967) and Thackeray charged that Swift “enters the nursery with the tread of gaiety of an ogre ... as for the moral, I think it horrible, shameful, unmanly, blasphemous” (Thackeray, 1853, p. 40). So, the perspective that Swift offered on the issues presented was that of a critic, making the aporias visible but often coloured with his own venom and pessimistic ideologies. Ireland’s condition of being under the perpetual threat of English intrusion and oppression made Swift raise his voice against it, and his was identified as the first anti-colonial voice in the 18th century.



Readerly curiosity for distant places and Oriental beings was created by authors from time immemorial. Travel narratives, unreliable as they most often were, addressed a crucial cultural thirst, implicitly dismantling English conceptions of normativity and proposing a seductive array of potentialities of ‘otherness’ in all its forms. The cynical Swift played with the genre and its operations, raising questions about its authenticity, since a great number of the books on travel and exploration were written by authors who had never left the safe chambers of their homes and whose facts were in most cases shamelessly inaccurate. So, one is well aware of the irony of Richard Sympson, who apologized for the travels as “a little too circumstantial” while he excused the tediousness, in some measure, on the ground that “the author was so distinguished for his veracity, that it became a sort of proverb among his neighbours at Redriff, when any one affirmed a thing, to say it was as true as if Mr. Gulliver had spoke it.” (Simpson, 2003) Gulliver’s narrative was as true as Sir Walter Raleigh’s hearing of a people who were “reported to have their eyes in their shoulders and their mouths in the middle of their breasts” and, long ago, Mandeville’s writing of “foul men of figure without heads, and they have eyes in their shoulder one, and their mouths are round shaped like a horseshoe, y-midst their breasts.” (Greenblatt, 1992, pp. 2-4) Swift engaged in burlesque plagiarism for quite a few pages, directly reproducing passages from Dampier and other travel writers. He never for once said that all travel books are lies and fabrications but illustrated in his book, by absurd parody, how this ‘weaving of untruth’ is done. So, Gulliver never encountered normal human beings in all his travels. He either met ultra-small men, or ultra-big men, or neurotic scientists eating formulas and breathing theories, or magical immortals, or historical apparitions, or savage brutes, or personified rational horses. The ‘other’ had to be different from the ‘self,’ as only then could the discourse of Orientalism be formulated. But the theory of the binary formation is not that simplistic in Swift’s work. The ‘other’ often became the reflection of the ‘self,’ and the ‘self’ dissolved into the ‘other;’ the journey to the exotic land could often be read as the journey within England or within Gulliver’s mind, and the boundaries erected could be broken with every wave.

Gulliver’s Travels was a playground for Swift where he played a game all by himself, needing no opponents. He put the various civilizations on display, created the binary, but only to dissolve it and play the game according to his own self-made rules. He played the game against himself, the sole target of which was to defeat that animal called ‘man.’ In the “Beasts’ Confession to the Priest” (1732-1733), Swift declared that mankind was even more degraded than animals. If only he could raise up Aesop from his tomb, Swift claimed:



I would accuse him to his Face
 For libeling the Four-foot Race.
 Creatures of ev'ry Kind but ours
 Well comprehend their nat'ral Powers;
 While We, whom Reason ought to sway,
 Mistake our Talents ev'ry Day;

Our Author's [Aesop's] Meaning, I presume, is

A Creature bipes et implumis;
 Wherein the moralist design'd
 A Compliment on Human-Kind:

For, here he owns, that now and then

Beasts may degen'rate into Men. (Sullivan, 1984, p. 507)

That mankind “whom reason ought to sway” behave worse than animals, is the point of Swift’s indictment, and it is the misemployment of reason rather than reason itself, the issue that he condemns. Thus, the Enlightenment was marked by an intrinsic contradiction and duality. Though, this 18th century philosophy, “understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth radiates under the sign of disaster triumphant,” (Adorno, 1993) Adorno and Horkheimer beginning the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) on this note, went on to prove the failure of the Enlightenment project, demystifying and dismantling all its high-sounding philosophies, calling it the ‘negative dialects.’

According to the duo, all human progress and modernity are customarily associated with power relations and the exercise of control. Enlightenment, marked as the beginning of modernity, was no exception. Infused with reason it rather more deteriorated the scenario by an irrational use of power, leading to an unprecedented curbing of liberty, both human and natural. To dispel the fear of the unknown, the people engaged in ‘gnosis’ or knowing; this knowledge was then rationalized and systematized, leading to the restriction of freedom by constructing normative behavioural patterns. Thus, human progress and knowledge in the Enlightenment, being inevitably linked to power relations gave rise to a pattern of blind domination, a system of triple domination in fact: the domination of nature by individuals, the domination of nature within individuals and the domination of some individuals by



others. The motivating force behind the functioning of this triple domination was nothing but the fear of the unknown. This fear-driven domination continued over human and non-human alike fed by a burgeoning capitalist economy, scientific research, and latest technologies. Jonathan Swift, being born much ahead of his age, gifted with a foresight and clairvoyance, could clearly read these lacunas, the invisible spaces of domination, which his contemporaries overlooked being the victims and the avid adherents of the ethic of the Enlightenment. So, Gulliver was just a product of Swift's calculated aesthetics: his journey had a specific purpose, and this purpose had a reciprocal effect on his character. He could never for once be trusted as an impartial and neutral observer and his representations were invariably opaque and fell under suspicion. His representations purposefully brought the grotesque 'other' into the forefront and in due course of time, the grotesque gained destabilizing power causing a mental disbalance in the functional character, Gulliver.

Swift's text provided anything but authentic geographical and anthropological data, even the cartographical claims were obviously ludicrous. Gulliver's neurotic hankering to provide the exact latitudinal and longitudinal measures and his exact narration of every detail was deliberately done to critique the eighteenth-century travel narrative's claim to veracity and empiricism. In all his voyages he invariably sailed for the eastern and southern continents and in case of a shipwreck he "swam as Fortune directed ... and was push'd forward by Wind and Tide" (Swift, 2003, p. 17) and inevitably landed in Oriental continents. Like Crusoe, his travels were also motivated by the pursuit of wealth and his ambition to rise above his middle station. The quest of "Fortune" led him to the different civilizations, which were at once the reflection of the 'other' and of the 'self.' Travel turned out, in this narrative inversion, not to create knowledge of alterity or the Orient, but that of home. Imagining 'otherness' returned one to native, English affairs and finally to the self.

What Swift used in the first two books was a literary manifestation of the 'Theory of Relativity.' In the land of the Lilliputs, Gulliver's ratio of size in respect to the Lilliputians was 12:1. He was the proud Westerner, whose achievements in the fields of science and technology gave him an immense power in respect to the tiny Lilliputians. Of such magnitude was his hunger that, all the wealth of his own Nation was unable to quench it, so he had to shift his greedy gaze to the fertile Orient, but soon the Lilliputians apprehended that his "... Diet would be very expensive, and might cause a Famine." (Swift, 2003, p. 26) Gulliver could have easily ruined the kingdom anytime he wanted, but did nothing like that since Swift did not want him to. While laughing at the corrupt political, religious, and educational practices of the Lilliputians and demeaning their achievements, the foolish Gulliver, failed to realize that he was in fact laughing at a miniaturized representation of the European systems and institutions. When



critically scrutinized, the entire novel is technically flawed and ambiguous in several ways, but one must never forget that technical accuracy was not Swift's primary concern, he was more bothered with his efforts to bring home a few lessons and voice his disgust against the institutions and the culpable people.

Mary P. Nichols remarked:

Gulliver's Travels represents Gulliver's mental wanderings among alternative ways of life in the guise of voyages to different lands. He has moved away from real voyages to imaginary ones, from concrete existence to fantasy Lilliput is based on Lockian commercial principles, Brobdingnag is premodern and technologically undeveloped, the lands of the third voyage caricature a Cartesian paradise, and the land of the Houyhnhnms is modelled on Plato's Republic. (Nichols, 1981, p. 1161)

Thus, Gulliver's journeys are through the different aspects of European civilization, naively reproducing them, but in fact demystifying them of all their claims to superiority and prophesied utopia.

Gulliver was held hostage in almost all the places he went, even the insignificant Lilliputian Emperor "hoped I should prove a useful servant, and well deserve all the Favours he had already conferred upon me, or might do for the future." (Swift, 2003, p. 37) Gulliver always craved to get back his freedom, which was held as an essential pre-condition for the Enlightenment. So, "the first Words I learnt were to express my desire that he would please to give me my Liberty, which I everyday repeated on my knees" (Swift, 2003, p. 27), at a time when Britain was integrally related to the issue of slavery and the slave trade. Thus, ambiguity was intrinsic to Enlightenment's emphasis on human freedom, since the 'human' of the Enlightenment was more European than universal. Therefore, Gulliver felt no reserve, when, while leaving the island of Blefuscu, he wanted to carry a couple of those micro-beings as samples but had to be contented taking back only a few animals, and emblems of the two empires, as specimens. Here the micro-beings and the objects became almost synonymous — just what was happening in an extremely materialistic society, anticipating the ensuing capitalist ethos. Gulliver, obsessed with things, even after been taken off all that he had with him, had a few items left in his hidden "private Pockets" which escaped their notice. These included "a pair of spectacles ... a pocket perspective, and several other little conveniences." (Swift, 2003, p. 31) Of all the other things the "pocket perspective" or the optical glass was of the utmost importance in the 18th century because it was used to bring the distant places near, that is, it brought the faraway continents within the observation and subsequent grasp of the 'magnanimous' Europeans. As opposed to its function of magnification, when viewed from the other end, the optical glass, made the objects observed diminished in size. Thus, the



optical glass was instrumental in the functioning of the principle of the manipulation of scales and it underscored the ‘Theory of Relativity.’

Swift peeped at Gulliver and his voyage to Brobdingnag from the other side of the “pocket perspective,” this time reducing the prior glorious Gulliver to a scrawny, helpless creature, as against the magnificent and colossus Brobdingnagians. Through a clever manipulation of scales, Swift, sometimes exaggerated and sometimes undermined the glories and achievements of the Europeans. It is a matter of relativity and it is a matter of what side one is taking at a particular point of time. The proud European of the first chapter, is here, suddenly denied of all his glories and debunked as “an Embrio, or abortive Birth,” or a “Lusus Naturae” (a freak of nature). (Swift, 2003, p. 86) The Lilliputian Emperor’s desire to convert “Blefuscu into a Province, and governing it by a Vice-Roy,” “by which he would remain the sole Monarch of the Whole World” (Swift, 2003, p. 44) evoked laughter in the English representative, Gulliver. Transported to the land of Brobdingnagians, one could ascribe those words to England, her war with Spain and her desire to establish an Empire, where the sun would never set. Now the irony of Gulliver’s laughter is realized in all its true spirit; it is a ‘black,’ horrid laughter incurred at one’s own expense, and the satire is directed not only at Gulliver, or England, or Europe, but encompasses the entire human race. Thus, the Brobdingnagian king inferred: “I cannot but conclude the Bulk of your Natives, to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth.” (Swift, 2003, p. 111)

It is shocking to see a critique of imperialism and human degeneration at such a nascent stage of imperialism. Swift could not share the imaginary space of the ‘other’ as was constructed by Defoe, Pope, or other implicit imperialists. His marginalized voice, screaming loud to be heard, his protestations against colonialism, came not from London but from Dublin. Interpreting space involved interpreting the use or uses to which space could be put, and it also involved differences of individual perceptions, that is, to create a space is more precisely to limit a space and, by limiting, to define it. Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) imagined the colonial space as a site which was, often, uninhabited — deliberately denying the existence of the natives and their claims over the land and justifying the rights of the colonizer. In all his works he attempted to convince the English people how that exotic East can be with ease, “Possess’d, Planted, Secur’d to the British Nation ... and what Immense Wealth and Increase of Commerce might be Rais’d from thence.” (Alam, 1989, p. 12) Defoe’s portrayal of the colonial subject was deliberately restricted to his imagining the natives as invariably as savages who needed English domination to be civilized and redeemed. Crusoe’s hunger was not quenched by merely consuming things and spaces, he further went on to consume human freedom as well, establishing



himself as the undisputed Lord and arbiter of justice. The guiding principle of colonialism can thus be concluded as the creation and the hoarding up of wealth, which the ruthless colonizers kept hidden behind the facade of the white-man's burden to civilize the savage nations.

The French adventurer Lahontan, in his book, *Conversation between the Author and a Savage of Sound Common Sense*, exposing this hypocrisy, said: "It is the so-called civilized nations that are the real barbarians, in fact, may the examples set by the savage peoples teach them to recover their own human dignity and their freedom." Swift was of the same opinion with Lahontan as regards the first part of the statement, that about the barbarity of the civilized nations, but he could not be so sure about the second part which idealized the 'others.' So, all the civilizations that Gulliver encountered, were projected as, fundamentally flawed in some way or the other. The Lilliputian religious, political and economic enterprises, Brobdingnagian's grotesqueness, the Laputan's obsessive dependence on science, the falsity of history, and the idealistic, rational Houyhnhnms, all came under the butt end of his satire. This was more due to Swift's misanthropy which found no goodness in the whole world.

Swift presented even the apparently utopian Brobdingnagians as not completely free of faults. The ethic of the reckless pursuit of wealth permeated in their sphere as well and was depicted through Gulliver's Masters business of displaying Gulliver, an abnormal creation of nature to earn money. Even the Brobdingnagian dwarf made Gulliver's stay in the island all the more nightmarish, every time playing some trick on him, making him realize how vain and relative human glory is and that the "Philosophers are in the right when they tell us that nothing is great or little otherwise than by Comparison." (Swift, 2003, pp. 72-73) "Brobdingnagian gigantism," as Laura Brown contended, "is intimately linked" to Swift's misogyny. (Brown, 1990, p. 426) The notion of the "female grotesque," was illustrated through every mention of women in this chapter. There was provided no romantic idealistic version of female beauty, instead of that, there was the representation of the odious, gigantic, grotesque female body which was disconcertingly nauseating. The image of a woman giving suck to her baby was described by Swift in all its grotesqueness:

I must confess no object ever disgusted me so much as the sight of her monstrous breast, which I cannot tell what to compare with, so as to give the reader an idea of its bulk, shape and colour. It stood prominent six foot, and could not be less than sixteen in circumference. The nipple was about half the bigness of my head, and the hue both of that and the dug so verified with spots, pimples and freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseas ... This made me reflect upon the fair skins of our English ladies who appear so beautiful to us only because they are of our own size, and their defects not to be seen but through a magnifying glass. (Swift, 2003, pp. 76-77)



Swift had a dual motive to execute — first, to make the women the site of social degeneration, and secondly, to intricately weave his tale of misogyny into the wider fabric of colonialism. Brown observed that “Swift’s misogyny unconsciously function ... to displace responsibility for the historical consequences of capitalism upon womankind, to make her a locus for the male anxieties of Empire.” (Brown, 1990, p. 428) The horrific fantasy of female corruption in the picture of the “...woman with a cancer in her breast, swelled to monstrous size, full of holes, in two or three of which I could have easily crept and covered my whole body,” (Swift, 2003, pp. 93-94) was identified by Brown with the Yahoos of the last chapter. The “nauseous scent, the disease and corruption, and the hideous corporeality” of the Brobdingnagian maids were embodied in the Yahoos’ “offensive smell, their naked corporeality, their connection with disease, and their uncontrolled sexuality.” Therefore, she concluded: “The Yahoos are the prototypical women of Swift’s works.” (Brown, 1990, p. 426) But Gulliver’s identification with the Yahoos, near the end of the fourth chapter, led to a corresponding inclusion of Swift’s misogyny in his greater scheme of misanthropy.

Swift’s scatological poems including ‘The Lady’s Dressing Room’ (1732) and ‘A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed’ (1734) confirmed the charges of misogyny against him. So blatantly indecent was his description of the female body that the readers were shocked and felt revolted, and made Middleton Murray describe them as “so perverse, so unnatural, so mentally diseased, so humanly wrong.” Gulliver could easily be substituted for Strephon in ‘The Lady’s Dressing Room,’ when he picked up the magnifying mirror and exclaimed:

The Virtues we must not let pass,
Of Celia’s magnifying Glass.
When frightened Strephon cast his Eye on’t
It show’d the Visage of as Gyant.
A Glass that can to Sight disclose
The smallest Worm in Celia’s Nose,
And faithfully direct her Nail
To squeeze it out from Head to Tail. (Swift, 1732, p. 426)

Swift’s misogyny was not exclusive to the chapter on Brobdingnag. He was of the same opinion with Pope on the definition of the female as a form of absence: “Most Women have no Characters at all.” (Pope A. , 1999) So, Mary Gulliver lamented his intrigue with the treasurer’s wife: “Not touch me! never Neighbour call’d me Slut! / Was Flimnap’s Dame more sweet in Lilliput.” (Pope A. , 2003, pp.



25-26) The Brobdingnagian ‘Maids of Honour’ enacted the scene of climactic female obscenity when: “They would often strip me naked from top to toe and lay me at full length in their bosoms; wherewith I was much disgusted; because, to say the truth, a very offensive smell came from their skins.” (Swift, 2003, p. 98) The women and daughters of Laputa were depicted as equally licentious, well-illustrated through the incident in which the wife of a prime minister twice deserted her indulgent but preoccupied husband to take up her abode with “an old deformed footman, who beat her every day.” (Swift, 2003, pp. 139-140) Swift’s use of scatology provided psychoanalytical criticism with ample evidence of various forms of “dysfunction and neurosis” in him and textual proofs of his own misogyny and distorted sexuality. So as Pope suggested, Gulliver’s “Visits to the Sorrel Mare” and his preference for the “Litter to the Marriage Bed,” was by no means innocent, and was in fact motivated by his sexual perversion, when he had Mary say:

Where sleeps my Gulliver? O tell me where?
The Neighbours answer, with the Sorrel Mare.

.....

‘Tis not for that I grieve; O, ‘tis to see

The Groom and Sorrel Mare preferr’d to me! (Pope A. , 2003, pp. 47-48, 59,60)

Swift’s representation of gender was intricately entwined with his representation of race. As to the presentation of the Yahoos, Brown noticed: “Gulliver makes much of their nakedness, distinguishing himself from the Yahoos by emphasizing his own clothes. Their bodily hair, their ‘strange disposition to nastiness and dirt,’ their stench — especially the ‘offensive smell’ of the female Yahoos — all belong to the eighteenth-century accounts of racial difference focusing on the Negro.” (Brown, 1990, p. 337) Even the Yahoos physical descriptions, their countenances, “flat and broad, the nose depressed, the lips large, and the mouth wide” (Swift, 2003, p. 195), resembled closely the Negro features. The classic example of the intersection of gender and race was depicted in the scene of miscegenation — where the female Yahoo almost raped the male European.

According to David Croly, the term miscegenation derived from “the Latin *miscere*, to mix, and *genus*, race, is used to denote the abstract idea of the mixture of two or more races.” (Hawley, 2001, p. 286) Miscegenation was rhetorically used to invoke the negative sentiment about racial mixing and the contamination of supposedly ‘pure’ racial ancestry. The white men, narcissistically conscious of the superiority of European blood, were haunted by a constant fear of miscegenation when confronted by the Oriental ‘other.’ But the matter is a bit complicated in *Gulliver’s Travels*, since the miscegenative



apprehension in it constantly refers back to the issue of Swift's misogyny. What happens here is an infringement of the sexual categories, where a reversal of the gender roles (a female Yahoo virtually raping a male Gulliver) addresses the dynamics of "identification or interchangeability" of Gulliver with the woman. (Brown, 1990, p. 329) The incident, on the one hand, depicts the lasciviousness of the woman, and on the other hand, implicitly echoes the Negro's lust for the feminized white European. Swift was trenchantly critical of both — condemning female licentiousness, as well as the Europeans' 'Vanity' about the superiority of their blood which generated in them a fear of racial contamination. This entire subject may be said to find a perfect narration in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Though the context and the text were of a much later time, the psychological function are quite similar and may be said to have begun at the very onset of colonialism:

The look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible. The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly always on the defensive "They want to take our place."
(Fanon, 1967, p. 30)

The Houyhnhnms enacting the role of the idealized Europeans and Gulliver that of the proud Englishman, denounced the Yahoos, assigning to them the unenviable role of the savage 'other,' depriving them of all comforts and keeping them in a state of perpetual bondage. No wonder such deprivation would stir a desire for revenge in the 'other.' In the scene of the near miscegenation, it is possible to read a culmination of all such provocative factors. The fantasy of possessing a white woman (in this case a feminized European Gulliver) cherished by a black man (sexual role reversals; here the female Yahoo playing the role of an Oriental man) was offered by Fanon as a primal scene of colonialism: "When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine." (Fanon, 1967, p. 22) And from behind all these complications of misogyny, miscegenation, and role reversals, what was struggling to be heard, was, Swift's protestations against the protean injustices of colonialism.

Swift's unique anti-colonial voice became more explicit in the third chapter of *Gulliver's Travels*, 'A Voyage to Laputa,' though there his attitude to women was not at variance from the traditional outlook that patriarchy possessed for womankind from the very beginning of time. He not only supported the restriction of the female space, he also referred to it as the site of all corruption and filth, taking away all the sanctity and dignity from the female species. Swift actively took his stance against colonialism in this chapter where Gulliver visited the floating island of Laputa, generally



understood as *la puta*, the Spanish for ‘the whore.’ The name was aptly suitable for a kingdom obsessed with the polymorphous perversion of all knowledge. Here knowledge was perverted to produce scientific distortions, philosophical misconceptions and brutal colonies. The very concept of a flying island, ruling from afar, the dominions below, was akin to the colonial situation of ruling through deputies. The Laputan king, “seated on his throne” with “Globes and Spheres, and Mathematical Instruments of all kinds,” (Swift, 2003, p. 134) was the prototype of a European Emperor speculating how to colonize the various parts of the world and how to run those colonies sitting at his own palace, in Europe. It is here that the irony and absurdity of the Empire can be realized, which tried to bring the two hemispheres under its grasp and Gulliver mused, “...those People suppose, that because the smallest Circle hath as many Degrees as the largest, therefore the Regulation and Management of the World require no more Abilities than the handling and turning of a Globe.” (Swift, 2003, p. 138)

The Laputans demanded payment, from the dominions on the Earth, to fund their scientific endeavours, all the while being unaware of the conditions of the people below who were reduced to dire poverty. Ruthless extraction of profit, without minimal consideration of the wellbeing of the natives, made the colonies a site of poverty and sorrow. Gulliver noted: “I never knew a Soil so unhappily cultivated, Houses so ill contrived and so ruinous, or a People whose Countenances and Habit expressed so much Misery and Want.” (Swift, 2003, p. 148) To keep the colonized people under subjugation, the Laputan’s kept them under constant threat, by pelting stones, blocking the sun and rain and in extreme cases “letting the Island drop directly upon their Heads,” which caused “a universal Destruction both of Houses and Men.” The extreme step was usually never taken as that would damage their own Estates for the colonies were the source of profit for the Empire. Also, the “fear of breaking the Adamantine bottom,” (Swift, 2003, pp. 145-146) of the Island, that is, the fear of a rebellion which might jeopardize the sovereignty of the Empire, was the other cause behind their not taking the ultimate measure. It must be noted here that the episode on the ‘Lindalinian Rebellion’ was edited from the book, which narrated the revolt of the Lindalinians against the tyrannical Laputans. Exasperated with oppression, they erected four great towers, upon the peak of each, they fixed a huge loadstone and a considerable quantity of inflammable fuel, planning to burst therewith the Adamantine bottom of the island. This was possibly Swift’s suggestion for an organized rebellion in Ireland, being under the constant threat of English imperialism. The book thus revealing so many uncomfortable truths about English tyranny, raised a fear of rebellion, so much so that it was banned in Ireland.

Swift aimed to “vex the world” (Swift’s letter to Pope) and vex he did, though how much he could “mend the World” (Swift’s letter to Charles Ford) is a matter of much doubt. By exposing the



corruptions of mankind and all institutions, Swift shut all doors of a possible escape, but provided no alternative way out of this predicament either. The fourth voyage dealt with the discrepancy between an impossible ideal and the actual world. The Houyhnhnms modelled on the ideal citizens of Plato's Republic, sacrificed the private for the public good and believed in "Temperance, Industry, Exercise, and Cleanliness." (Swift, 2003, p. 227) Their grand maxim was "to cultivate reason, and to be wholly governed by it." (Swift, 2003, p. 225) Their marriages were also guided by the common interest, and to prevent overpopulation, childbearing was regulated. Thus Swift, furtively took away all dignity from the Houyhnhnms. Their complete rejection of passion made them obsessed characters, verging on the ludicrous. The European Gulliver, idealized the Houyhnhnms, being thoroughly hegemonized, a term used by Antonio Gramsci, to refer to the process by which a social class attained predominant power and influence, not merely by coercion, but by a constant interpellation of its ideologies in the society, by means of the Ideological State Apparatus[es], so pervasively that the subordinated classes unwittingly accepted and participated in their own oppression. Gulliver, a prey to the Houyhnhnms pretence of superiority and perfection, engaged in a blind hero-worship and welcomed his own colonization.

The Yahoos were still in a better position than Gulliver, still clinging on to their indigenous culture, even though it be a culture of degeneration and Gulliver "naturally conceived so strong an Antipathy" (Swift, 2003, pp. 189-190) against them. E.E. Sullivan identified "The filthy, greedy Yahoos devouring everything they can sink their claws into, and sucking roots" that make them "howl and grin, and chatter, and reel, and tumble, and then fall asleep in the Mud" with "the notoriously drunk low life" in that "wretched, dirty doghole and prison, Ireland." (Sullivan, 1984, p. 508) Thus, the binary between the colonizer and the colonized is reinstated yet another time; this binary is not divinely ordained, but is created by man, often falsely, to justify the need for colonization. So, the 'softer than soft' readings attempted to discredit the Houyhnhnms and vindicate the Yahoos. Sullivan wrote: "the Yahoos might be as rational and civilized as mankind, were it not for their enslavement by the horses." (Sullivan, 1984, p. 498) That the Houyhnhnm tongue had no vocabulary for "Power, Government, War, Law, Punishment, and a Thousand other Things" does not necessarily mean that these things were not present at all. The 'soft school' arguing about this, according to Richard H. Rodino, claimed:

Punishment? Why, the Houyhnhnm master has no trouble imagining that any Yahoo who dared venture on a Houyhnhnm's back would shortly be squeezed to death. As for government, what else is the Grand Assembly or Representative Council that meets every four years and, despite Gulliver's insistence that disputes are unknown among the Houyhnhnms, regularly debates exterminating the Yahoos? (Rodino, 1991, p. 1065)



Racial prejudices too, seem to be prevalent among the Houyhnhnms whose marriages were determined by parents and comrades who chose “such colours as will not make any disagreeable mixture in the breed.” (Swift, 2003, p. 226) Though the Houyhnhnm Master was in favour of an equality between the male and the female on an explicit level, his implicit gender biases are manifest in the allocation of different values to the different sexes: strength in the male and attractiveness in the female. On the absence of lying, Reiss remarked that “the use of a paraphrase [the Thing which was not] is hardly proof that the idea is absent: on the contrary, it suggests rather that the idea is being concealed for some reason.” (Reiss, 1982, p. 341) Thus, the ideal embodied in the superrational beings is also found to be corrupted at its core and so the horses make no effort to improve the conditions of the Yahoos; on the contrary, they keep the Yahoos under perpetual slavery, calling them the most “unteachable of all Brutes.” (Swift, 2003, p. 226) The scene of a Houyhnhnm, sitting on “a kind of Vehicle drawn like a Sledge by four Yahoos,” (Swift, 2003, p. 196) is the classic scene of ultimate colonial exploitation, and the hypocrisy of the Europeans claim to civilize the indigenous people through brutality and oppression, get exposed. The Houyhnhnms treatment of the Yahoos was guided by their pride, rising from the possession of their rationality, and unknowingly Gulliver pronounced the true cause behind the eternal hostility between the rich Westerners and the poor Orientals: “Poor Nations are hungry, and Rich Nations are Proud, and Pride and Hunger will ever be at Variance.” (Swift, 2003, p. 208) The lusty, malicious, savage Yahoos stirred a feeling of hatred and disgust in Gulliver. But when his Houyhnhnm Master, placed him opposite one of these animals, Gulliver to his “Horror and Astonishment,” observed “in this abominable Animal, a perfect human Figure” (Swift, 2003, p. 195) After his encounter with the female Yahoo, whose sexuality stood as a proof of his ultimate identification with the ‘other,’ Gulliver withdrew in shame, and to prove his difference from that abominable creature engaged in an unabashed mimicry of the perverse ideals of the Houyhnhnms. Thus, Gulliver proceeds towards becoming, more than anyone else, the most colonized by the so called benevolent Houyhnhnms, or was there in this discourse of mimicry and inaccurate imitation, a possibility of a counter discourse of resistance?

Mimicry is defined as a process of imitation where the person imitating is both the same and different. This chasm between the two positions unsettles the power of the colonizer. The colonized subject, on the one hand, conforms to the imperial regime, and on the other hand, misappropriates and misrepresents the dictates of the colonizer. Naipaul’s ‘mimic men,’ while helplessly engaged in the act of imitation, challenged, and undermined the colonial power even as they copied. Bhabha spoke of ambivalence, claiming that mimicry is always partial, and the presence of this very difference counteracted the narcissism of colonial authority. So, Gulliver’s imitation of the Houyhnhnms was not



perfect, it was largely distorted, even though he tried to “imitate their gait and gesture.” (Swift, 2003, p. 235) Seeing the distorted image of the ‘self’ in Gulliver, the Houyhnhnms were, probably subconsciously aware of the counter discourse that was slowly but certainly emerging. So, they did not want Gulliver to join the Yahoos either, only because they did not want him to lead the Yahoos against their cattle. Since Gulliver and the entire humankind misused the “small Pittance of Reason,” of which they made “no other Use than by its Assistance to aggravate” their “natural Corruptions,” (Swift, 2003, p. 234) the Houyhnhnms casted him out of the island. Gulliver, not aware of the threat that he posed to the rational horses, continued with his pursuit of mimicry, speaking in an English which resembled much the “neighing of a horse.” Infused with pride, Gulliver at last “descended to treat” Don Pedro, his kind rescuer “like an Animal which had some little portion of Reason,” but kept his “nose stopped with rue, lavender, or tobacco leaves” while the sight of his family filled him “only with Hatred, Disgust, and Contempt.” (Swift, 2003, pp. 242-244)

Gulliver deliberately tried to differentiate himself from the Yahoos, knowing perfectly well that the binary is only falsely constructed to validate colonialism. He failed to see the reflection of England in the Lilliputian laws and institutions, laughed at the ignorance of the Brobdingnagian King, enumerated the foolish endeavours of the projectors of the Royal Society, refused to accept his resemblance with the Yahoos and, instead, worshipped the personified embodiment of the absurd ideal in the illusory figures of the magical horses. But that worship, too, perhaps goes off at a tangent! Gulliver made some very pertinent observations on the multiple injustice entailed by colonialism, but at the same time he wilfully succumbed to his own colonization. Describing contemporary colonial mission he said:

Ships are sent with the first Opportunity; the Natives driven out or destroyed, Princes tortured to discover their Gold; a free License given to all Acts of Inhumanity and Lust; the Earth reeking with the Blood of its Inhabitants: And this execrable Crew of Butchers employed in so pious an Expedition, is a modern Colony sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous People. (Swift, 2003, p. 248)

Although conscious of the negative connotations of colonialism, the inconstant Gulliver praised England in the role of a colonizer: “But this Description, I confess, doth by no means affect the British Nation, who may be an Example to the whole World for their Wisdom, Care, and Justice in planting Colonies.” (Swift, 2003, p. 248) He is sometimes the powerful European in the trivial land of the Lilliputs, while sometimes the Lilliput became a micro-representation of Europe; sometimes Gulliver himself is reduced to a tiny Lilliput in the land of the giants, and the giants are too, found at times, not completely



immaculate; sometimes in his naivety he exposed the absurdity of the scientific projects and mocked at the human desire for immortality and sometimes he engaged in a wilful colonization of the self and the practice of pride, though possessing strong opinions against both.

The boundaries between the ‘self’ and the ‘other,’ the colonizer and the colonized, the denunciation and then the adoption of pride, all seem inconstant and in a state of flux in *Gulliver’s Travels*, the attitude being somewhat like Byron’s attitude:

I hate inconstancy — I loath, detest,
Abhor, condemn, abjure the mortal made
Of such quicksilver clay that in his breast
No permanent foundation can be laid;
Love, constant love, has been my constant guest,
And yet last night, being at a masquerade,
I saw the prettiest creature... (Byron, 1980)

The reader too is left unsettled; Gulliver is found conversing with his horses in his own stable and one has doubts regarding the sanity of his mind. Swift was declared to be of “unsound mind,” so was Gulliver: “Some think you mad, some think you are possest / That Bedlam and clean Straw will suit you best.” (Pope A. , 2003, pp. 35-36) The reader given no alternative to escape the ‘morbid Inferno’ is on the verge of madness too. Therefore, to ascertain otherwise, he desperately wants to identify Gulliver with Sion, the liar of Troy, but fails to contemplate the irony of it. Sion did assert his truthfulness to the Trojans by bringing in the horse, so what if it be a wooden horse, causing the destruction of the Trojans. Gulliver too, brought in the horses and learning from the Trojans’ mistake, one knows that it is better not to accept them. But one wonders as to what should be accepted instead. Gulliver, busy playing with his mules, does not answer, nor does Swift, and the reader, in order to survive, wants to dismiss the entire story as an utter lie, though all the time, knowing fully well — Swift was no liar.

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