



CRICKET, COLONIALISM, AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF *BEYOND A BOUNDARY*

Dibyadarshan Das

M.A in English Literature, Independent Researcher, Tezpur University, Tezpur, Assam, India

Abstract

Cricket, a sport introduced by the British during the colonial era, symbolizes resistance and nationalism in postcolonial English literature. This study, focusing on C.L.R. James' *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), investigates how Cricket evolved from the British Empire's civilizing tool into a weapon for articulating anti-colonial sentiment and postcolonial identity. Through a close reading of James alongside postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon, the paper reveals how Cricket functioned as a site of mimicry, where the colonized both imitated and subverted imperial ideology. The discussion also extends to the racial and caste-based exclusions in the sport represented by the likes of Learie Constantine in the Caribbean and Palwankar Baloo in colonial India.

Keywords

Cricket, Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Cultural identity, Resistance, Hegemony, Diaspora, Hybridity, etc.

Full Article

"What do they know of cricket who only cricket knows?"

— C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*

Cricket, like language, was one of the many cultural tools the British Empire used to assert its control over its colonies. It has created lasting cultural imprints on its many postcolonial societies. What started as a tool of colonial dominance soon became a means through which the colonized subjects resisted and formed their identities. C.L.R. James's *Beyond a Boundary* (1963) is a landmark work on Cricket's role far beyond the sports field. It mixes memoir, cultural history, and political critique. Set against the backdrop of James's Trinidadian upbringing, the book situates Cricket at the heart of West Indian society, examining its connection with colonial rule and the construction of national identity, by which they eventually resist.

In English literature, the sport of Cricket is a metaphor for more important socio-political concerns. Cricket, introduced by the British as a symbol of cultural superiority, was established in colonial lands to promote European notions of sportsmanship and fair play, along with the sub-humanization of the social hierarchy. The cricket field near colonial administration posts became centers for spreading imperial ideology. Although the colonized were encouraged to play, they rarely enjoyed an equal standing with their colonial masters. Instead, the framework for the game was shaped by the racial and class divisions in colonial rule. Hilary McD. Beckles, in "A Spirit of Dominance: Cricket and Nationalism in the West Indies," writes, "The British invented the game with moral and political values and openly employed it to impose these values on their colonial populations." The thesis further notes that "elite groups played a significant role in introducing



and supporting the game” and that “the indigenization or domestication of the game ranged from subtle adjustments in style to a complete transformation of the game” (Beckles, 3).

As George Orwell remarked in his essay *The Sporting Spirit*, international sport is often “war minus the shooting.” As Orwell rightly points out in his essay, Cricket, like any other sport, does not stay away from all these discourses, especially when it went on to the oriental nations of the significant European colonizer, England. Just like the colonial oppressors used the English language to further their ends, so too was Cricket unceremoniously wielded as a tool of oppression against the unconscionable. James writes, “Our masters, our curriculum, our code of morals, everything began from the basis that Britain was the source of all light and leading, and our business was to admire, wonder, imitate, learn; our criterion of success was to have succeeded in approaching that distant ideal – to attain it was, of course, impossible” (James, 30).

This passage exposes how Cricket, like any other colonial institution, was used to instil a sense of inferiority among the colonized by positioning British culture as the unattainable standard. James further describes, “the primary injustices... were ones relating to racism, stemming directly from the desire-and the systemic need-of those in power to maintain the status quo, and by extension their supremacy.”

However, like other facets of colonial culture, Cricket was adopted and transformed. In several postcolonial countries, Cricket became a nationalistic tool. It served in anti-colonial agitation. First considered subordinates, players from the colonies began to contest the idea of Cricket as an English game. Research by SatadruSen in “Enduring Colonialism in Cricket: from Ranjitsinhji to the Cronje Affair” argues that Cricket in the decolonizing world functions as a “metaphor of war” and provides marginal populations with the means to overcome their marginality in global culture. This transformation of Cricket from a colonial imposition to a postcolonial assertion is evident in literature. Authors utilize the game as a narrative device to critique imperialism. As discussed by postcolonial scholars like AshisNandy, Brian Stoddart, and ArjunAppadurai, Cricket is an example of colonial mimicry, a term coined by Bhabha to discuss the ambivalent relationship between colonizers and colonized.

This paper explores Cricket as a cultural site in the politics of empire and race. Through a close analysis of *Beyond a Boundary*, supported by the theoretical frameworks of Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci, and GayatriSpivak, the study looks at Cricket's dual role as both a mechanism of colonial control and a stage for postcolonial resistance.

Cricket as a Colonial Imposition:

Cricket is the vehicle of cultural hegemony and later postcolonial resistance. The British administration saw Cricket as a means of inculcating discipline, moral rectitude, and loyalty among the colonial subjects. The colonial forces subsumed it within what Antonio Gramsci calls “cultural hegemony”: the process whereby the ruling class imposes its values and norms upon the subjugated. However, as postcolonial literature demonstrates, Cricket was no longer in a static position of oppression. It started to grow into a site of resistance. This duality is seen in C.L.R. James’s *Beyond a Boundary*.

The British Empire introduced Cricket to its colonies as an extension of its “civilizing mission.” As Governor of Bombay and a leading figure in imperial cricket administration, Lord Harris “always believed firmly in the civilizing mission of cricket. He saw it as a game which had the power to unite classes and colonies and uplift the native races of India.” Harris explicitly stated his intention “to extend his patronage to the promotion of cricket in India so far as lay in his power,” viewing the sport as a means of promoting British values and social order within the colonial context. In *Cricket and Politics in Colonial India*, RamachandraGuha notes that “the colonial authorities promoted cricket as a means of social control, teaching Indians to revere the



etiquette and discipline of an Englishman” (Guha, 157). Segregation was emphasized even more at clubs composed exclusively of European members, such as the Bombay Gymkhana, which denied participation to Indians and showed that the game of Cricket mirrored the broader structures of colonial exclusions.

C.L.R. James critiques this ideological imposition in his *Beyond a Boundary*. He claims that Cricket was the mechanism of imperial indoctrination: “Cricket had plunged me into politics long before I was aware of it. When I did turn to politics, I did not have too much to learn” (James, 65).

His claim, therefore, is that the British had required that their colonies learn British values through Cricket, much like what Homi Bhabha calls “mimicry,” where the colonized are expected to imitate the colonizer but will never be entirely accepted. Bhabha, in his essay *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse* writes that: “Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 3).

This “not quite” reflects the ambivalence of colonial power. The colonizer seeks to reshape colonized subjects in their image but denies them complete assimilation. While colonizers demanded strict adherence to Cricket’s rules, they paradoxically feared the colonized mastering the game. Bhabha argues that mimicry “coheres to the dominant strategic function of colonial power” but also “intensifies surveillance” because the colonized subject’s imitation is always incomplete, revealing the fragility of colonial authority.

Bhabha’s “third space” emerges here: Cricket becomes neither wholly British nor entirely local but a contested arena for negotiating postcolonial selfhood. James subverts this by showing how Cricket became a means of resistance in the West Indies, where black cricketers mastered and reformed the game to spite the colonial expectations. Kenan Malik writes, “James views West Indians as not only victims of imperialism but agents able to seize the tools of the oppressor and use them for self-assertion and self-development. That is the lens through which he understands Cricket. In its story, he sees West Indians adopting and adapting the culture and technology of their masters, making it their own, turning its disciplines to their purposes.”

Cricket in literature is not only a medium of nationalism but also serves as resistance against social and political injustices. One such example is South African Cricket during apartheid. It was during this period that Cricket maintained racial segregation by removing any non-white player from the national team and domestic competitions. The political exclusion thus matched the broader worldly injustices done to a non-white who was deprived of all possibilistic rights. Literature from this period aims at racism and its implications for higher-order constructions within society. Authors and historians have dealt with the resistance by these non-white cricketers, who, upon becoming aware of the partisan nature of the prevailing authority in the sport, formed their leagues and began creating their position of cultural significance through Cricket. From the 1970s onwards, as international condemnation of South Africa escalated, the cricketing engagements of the country were summarily terminated. This sign of “international alliance against apartheid under the thumb of leaders like Peter Hain shows how Cricket could become a rallying point for political resistance” (Dean). His *Stop The Seventy Tour* campaign successfully disrupted apartheid-era sporting engagements. It demonstrated how Cricket could be a vested interest in international cooperation and resistance against racial injustice. In 1985, these same objectives were enshrined in law by the International Convention against Apartheid in Sports.

Hence, Cricket’s racial and caste politics also form another instance of investigation in C.L.R. James’ *Beyond a Boundary*, which raises some pertinent questions about the game’s history regarding race, empire, and caste.



Cricket, Caste, and Race in Colonial India and the Caribbean:

The caste structure within colonial India was represented through Cricket. The upper-caste elite monopolized the game, and the lower-caste players struggled for recognition. The Quadrangular Tournament of 1911, whose organization was based on religion and race, was meant to divide Indians rather than unite them", according to Guha in his account of *Cricket and Politics in Colonial India*. It is to be said that, among divided lines of race and religious community, it was here that Indian cricketers began to assert themselves against British aggression. These tournaments were where the first challenges were laid down, which saw the emergence of cricketers like Palwankar Baloo, an Untouchable who broke caste barriers to play for the Hindu Gymkhana. Baloo's story represented Frantz Fanon's idea of 'decolonizing the mind' to the fullest extent. Fanon writes that colonialism "turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it," (Fanon, 17) creating a psyche that views itself through the colonizer's eyes.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he describes how the colonized are conditioned to equate whiteness (or upper-caste status) with virtue and capability while internalizing their own supposed "backwardness." True decolonization, for Fanon, occurs when the oppressed reject internalized inferiority and assert their humanity. This involves "stretching the Marxist dialectic" to center the colonized subject's lived experience, transforming tools of oppression into liberation. It stresses that decolonization begins with the mind: "The Black man is not. No more than the White man." Because of his cricketing prowess, Baloo challenged the British and upper-caste Hindu hierarchy and made them recognize his talent.

Baloo was a Chamaar, a member of the leather-working caste which ranks close to the bottom of the Hindu social hierarchy. The Brahmins of the Deccan Gymkhana wanted to defeat the British-only Poona Gymkhana and recruited Baloo into their fold. The Brahmins played with Baloo on the cricket field but would not dine with him off it. In fact, during the game's ritual 'tea interval,' he was made to stand outside the pavilion, at a distance from his teammates, and served tea in a disposable cup. What the high castes did respect was his bowling prowess. (Guha, 170).

The episode exemplifies Cricket's position as an equalizer and an exclusionary force. While Baloo, by his abilities, must have been able to confront caste hierarchies, he was never allowed to belong, revealing that social stratifications maintain themselves in hegemonized realms. In his theory of hegemony, Antonio Gramsci argues that ruling classes maintain power through force (e.g., legal exclusion) and by shaping societal norms to gain the consent of subordinate groups. In Cricket, Upper-caste elites allowed lower-caste players, like Baloo, to play only under conditions they set. They recognized his talent but denied him any leadership roles in the game. Such selective inclusion thus enabled caste supremacy to operate under the guise of meritocracy. The Quadrangular Tournament's religious-communal division (Hindu, Muslim, Parsi, European) are typical instances of Gramsci's notion that hegemony sustains itself by fragmenting subordinate groups. By capitalizing on the conflicts among communities, colonial and caste elites had subverted the possibility of a united resistance.

While caste defines Cricket's social hierarchy in India, race and class function similarly in the Caribbean. C. L. R. James *Beyond a Boundary* offers a case study of race-class segmentation within the colonial cricket clubs of the West Indies, with white elites controlling the sport while



relegating blacks to a subordinate role. James reflects on his youth in Trinidad, where Cricket was a space of both racial exclusion and resistance:

I have not the slightest doubt that the clash of race, caste, and class did not retard but stimulated West Indian Cricket...The class and racial rivalries were too intense. They could be fought without violence or much loss except pride and honor. Thus, the cricket field was a stage on which selected individuals played representative roles charged with social significance (James 99).

James' perspective aligns with Frantz Fanon's discussion of colonial mimicry, wherein the colonized are permitted limited participation in colonial institutions, but only under the conditions set by the ruling elite. Black cricketers such as Learie Constantine and Frank Worrell had to earn their place in a game dominated by white colonial norms. Worrell's promotion as the first black captain of the West Indies was celebrated, "The exclusion of black men from the captaincy becomes all the more pointed when the prime minister of the West Indies and chief ministers all over the islands are black men." Still, as some scholars argue, this was also a concession the white cricketing elite threw to squelch the mounting demands of nationalism.

James acknowledges that, despite its colonial baggage, Cricket became a space of resistance. The aggressive, fast-bowling style of West Indian teams in the 1970s and 80s, often seen as a direct challenge to the refined, "gentlemanly" English approach to the game, manifested postcolonial defiance. Douglas C. Steeples in "Cricket in the West Indies: A Postcolonial Assessment of Structure, Identity, and the Oriental" observes, "English notions of propriety and batting with 'beauty' and 'grace' were downplayed in the local cricket culture of the West Indies, which focused on aggression, and can be seen as an expressive West Indian response to the British colonial leadership within the structure of that leadership itself... The unorthodox styles were used by West Indians not only to express anger at English domination but also to differentiate themselves from the imperialists" (Steeple, 12).

In celebrating the West Indian cricketers who turned the sport into an emblem of black empowerment, James states that the West Indies have ruled international Cricket during this period, symbolically reversing old hierarchies by former subjects and showing their superiority over former rulers. He suggested that the game's true meaning cannot be separated from the social and political struggles it embodies. He writes: "West Indians crowding to Tests bring with them the whole history and future hopes of the islands. English people, for example, have a conception of themselves breathed from birth. Drake and mighty Nelson, Shakespeare, Waterloo, the Charge of the Light Brigade, the few who did so much for so many, the success of parliamentary democracy, those and such constitute a national tradition. Underdeveloped countries have to go back centuries to rebuild one. We of the West Indies have none at all, none that we know of. To such people, the three W's, Ram and Val wrecking English batting, help to fill a huge gap in their consciousness and their needs" (James, 233). In this way, Cricket offers both empowerment and exclusion.

Conclusion:

C.L.R. James' *Beyond a Boundary* forever changes the image of Cricket as a colonial pastime. The study maps how Cricket was first weaponized as a tool of imperial indoctrination but gradually became a contested space where those colonized challenged the imposition of hierarchies through mimicry and aesthetic innovation. Through its examination of individuals such as Palwankar Baloo in India, who confronted caste oppression and West Indian cricketers such as Learie Constantine and Frank Worrell, who redefined Cricket as a means of Black empowerment, the paper



establishes Cricket's contradictory existence as a mechanism of control and a theatre of liberation. Mimicry, a concept by Homi Bhabha, sheds light on this duality: the colonized players learned most of the game's technicalities but infused it with elements of the local style to alter it, thereby shaking the colonial myths of racial and intellectual inferiority. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony tells how the elites allowed selective inclusion to sustain their power.

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