

Colonial Society and the Psychological Construction of Criminality In Bengal

Shilajit Biswas

PhD Research Scholar

English literature, Techno India University, Salt Lake, Kolkata

Abstract

This article explores the construction of criminality psychologically in colonial Bengal, where rights of law, administration and literature met to form the image of the criminal native. The paper relies on colonial legal documents, literary sources and cultural literature to state that crime was not seen as a reaction to social, economic or political circumstances, but rather an innate moral and psychological characteristic of the colonized peoples. These constructions were further reinforced by the colonial literature, fiction, travel literature, and crime fiction in which characters of native origin were described as morally ambiguous, emotionally unstable, and inclined towards deviance whereas European characters were seen as rational and authoritative. The paper also examines internalization processes in the colonized subjects and illustrates the way that exposure to criminalized representations was repeated and decided the self-perception of the subjects, social behaviours and cultural consciousness. At the same time, it also underscores some of the manifestations of opposition and the counter-discourse that native authors, reformers, and other nationalist intellectuals created and challenged colonial crime definitions and provided alternative ways of ethical and psychological selfhood. This research brings into light the legacy of colonial criminalization on identity, social hierarchy and cultural memory in Bengal through a literary, historical and cultural lens, which is critical in understanding how power, narrative and psychology interact in a colonial setting.

Keywords: Colonial Bengal, Criminality, Psychological construction, Literary Representation, Internalization, Resistance, Postcolonial identity, Cultural memory

1. INTRODUCTION

The colonial experience in Bengal did not just end up in the political subjugation or economical exploitation, but in the restructuring of the local society, both psychologically and culturally. The British colonial rule created systematically the types of identity that had been used to control the administration, one of the most significant being the type of the criminal native. Criminality during the colonial rule was not a legal identity, but a psychologically created identity that was created by discourse, surveillance and representation. This building was especially notable in Bengal because of the early experience of colonial rule in the region, the rich intellectual atmosphere and the role of the region as the center of bureaucratic fantasy of British India.

Colonial accounts such as literary works and travel reports as well as legal and ethnographic reports were instrumental in establishing crime as an inborn aspect of a particular group of people as opposed to a conditioned action. These portrayals defined Bengali object as morally

weak, untruthful or prone to deviation, hence authorizing an intrusive rule and controls. The English literature, fictional and non-fictional, was an influential channel with which such psychological assumptions were spread, institutionalized, and internalized. By looking at these literary constructions it is possible to gain a better perspective of how colonial power worked not only through power but also through creating perception, identity and selfhood.

This paper suggests that criminality as a psychological category was actively constructed by the colonial society in Bengal, through a combination of legal discourse and cultural representation, to create stereotypes of deviance that stick into the consciousness of the society. Through foregrounding literary analysis and colonial criminological paradigms, the work aims to reveal the nuances when it came to criminality being entrenched in the colonial imagination and forced into the subject of colonized people.

1.1. Colonial Bengal and the Ideology of Control

Bengal had a distinct place in the British colonial enterprise, where it both acted as an administrative center and a place of experimentation of colonialism. The initial formation of the British rule in the area meant that systems of categorization needed to make the native population visible and controllable. In this regard, crime served as a key prism in which the colonial administrators were able to explain the behaviour of their social setting. Resistance, movement or nonconformity was commonly reconstructed as criminal inclination, bringing home the notion that disorder was inherent to an indigenous society.

This dominion ideology was based on generalizations in psychology. The Bengali subjects are frequently shown as deficient in moral discipline or self-control, which colonial discourse explained as a reason to take the subjects under its care. The appearance of such characterizations was not accidental but was developed with the help of textual and institutional reinforcement. Literature thus served as a cultural continuation of the colonial power, reincorporating such presumptions into the literature that seemed to be impartial or objective but were in reality highly ideological.

1.2. Criminality as a Psychological and Discursive Construction

This study does not idealize criminality as a goal or a universal phenomenon like how it has been treated, but instead deals with it as a discursive and psychological construction that was influenced by colonial power relations. With postcolonial and Foucauldian insights, criminal identity is conceptualized as a result of surveillance and categorization as well as repetition of stories. Crime was often pathologized as part of colonial writings, but it was viewed as a symptom of inherent psychological insufficiency and not an outcome of the socio-economic circumstances enforced by the imperial regime.

This psychological framing in literature found its reflection in the character typologies that strengthened colonial structures of power, characters that are suspicious, morally ambiguous and deviant. These representations over time helped in internalizing the criminal stereotypes, influenced the subjects of colonization to view themselves and be viewed by others. This paper aims to problematize colonial assumptions by questioning such representations with the aim of showing the constructedness of criminality in the colonial imagination of Bengal.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Bag (2024) studied the colonial prison in Bengal 1860-1945 by placing carceral institutions in the context of larger social, cultural and literary structures. The research did not focus on prisons as mere administrative forms of punishment but on prisons as the arena where the colonial power was in the process of re-creating identities and experiences. Through reading literary texts and the official documents, Bag showed that imprisonment produced alternative colonial histories that brought out the realities of day-to-day experiences of discipline, coercion and surveillance. The discussion indicated that prisons were used as psychological spaces where the colonial power aimed to reform, normalize and control the native subjects. The work of Bag indicated the role of the narratives that were produced in the prisons to the building of the concept of criminality as continuity and defining characteristic, though the focus of the study was mainly on the experience in the institution and not the more psychological internalization of criminal identity.

Banerjee (2017) delved into the crime of colonial Calcutta through the connection of the urban life of childhood and adulthood in the fast-changing colonial metropolis. The paper explored the extent to which the colonial rule introduced new regimes of surveillance, policing and moral control that transformed the ordinary social behaviour. Banerjee believed that crime in the colonial city was not solely a legal issue but a social and cultural phenomenon and was determined by imperial concerns over order and authority. The work revealed how cities like the streets, schools, neighbourhoods were turned into areas of disciplinary surveillance whereby the colonial power actively monitored and classified the native people. Though the authors aimed at studying social dynamics and not literary works, the study however brought significant understanding of the ways how the colonial surroundings created psychological preconceptions of deviance, insecurity, and criminality to colonized subjects.

Ghosh (2023) studied the production of culture of crime, respectability, and surveillance in colonial metropolitan disciplines, using narratives that saw the development of the gentleman and the detective as symbolic. The paper has looked at how accounts of crime and other forms of literature supported the principles of moral discipline, rationality, and social order that came with colonial modernity. Ghosh proved that these kinds of narratives put native subjects into a suspicious position and placed colonial power on the level of the holder of justice and stability. It was noted in the work that literature was supposed to have a very vital role of conditioning the readers to believe that surveillance was natural and necessary. Connecting crime fiction to more general observations and practices of control, the analysis uncovered the role of the literary discourse in the psychological process of constructing criminality and respectability in the colonial society.

Waits (2018) explored Imperial ideologies in British prison architecture in Bengal between 1823 and 1873, and the role of space in perpetuating and reinforcing imperial ideologies. The paper has claimed that prison designs reflected the concepts of visibility, isolation, and discipline that formed the core of colonial rule. Waits showed how the forms of architecture were not neutral, but they actually influenced the behaviour and self-perception of imprisoned

subjects. The discussion revealed the impact of colonial expectations of native criminality on spatial organization, thus bringing about psychological beliefs in discipline and reform. Even though the research focused on architectural history, it provided valuable information on the role of physical space in internalizing the identity of crimes, which reinforces the interpretation of criminality as a category constructed in colonialism.

3. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

The ideology of producing knowledge needed its psychological implications to be included in the analysis of criminality in colonial Bengal. The colonialist mechanism existed in interconnection between law, literature, and institutional practice, which did not eliminate the need to discontinue single-theory perspectives. This paper hence embraced a composite approach that viewed criminality as a historically situated phenomenon that was influenced by discourse, representation and disciplinary processes. Through the combination of literary criticism with the postcolonial and psychological theories, the framework allowed a complex analysis of the way of how criminal identities were created, distributed, and internalized in the colonial society.

A theoretical framework of interdisciplinary approach based on the use of postcolonial theory, discourse analysis, and psychological interpretations of power underpinned this study. This was needed to research the way in which criminality in colonial Bengal was not simply governed by the law but was produced ideologically and psychologically by constructing the narrative, representation and institutional discourse. The study aimed at uncovering how criminal identities were created and reproduced by the colonial society by placing literary works and colonial administrative and cultural sources.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis of the proposed research was largely based on the postcolonial theory, which has taken a critical look at both cultural and ideological aspects of colonial domination. The idea of Orientalism of Edward Said was used to explain how the knowledge systems of the colonizers described colonized subjects as pre-equipped with irrationality, moral inferiority, and deviance. These representations played a vital role in justifying the colonial power and aiding to present the notion of criminality as the inherent feature of the indigenous people instead of the reaction to the historical and material circumstances.

The theories of power, surveillance and discipline proposed by Michel Foucault also formed a part of the analysis since they provided information about how institutions like prisons, policing system and legal systems were technologies of control. The concept of power/knowledge proposed by Foucault was especially helpful in exploring the ways in which the discourse of colonialism created the truths about crime and criminal behaviour. These realities spread in literary and administrative writings, defining the perception of colonialism and the self-image of the indigenous people.

Also, the work by Frantz Fanon on the topic of colonial psychology offered the critical angle of the issue under analysis in terms of the internalization of criminal stereotypes by the colonized persons. The study of psychological alienation by Fanon under the colonial rule aided in understanding how continuous labelling and portrayal might translate into

internalization of identities imposed. The combination of these theoretical viewpoints allowed the study to formulate criminality theoretically as a discursive and psychological construct as opposed to an objective or universal category.

3.2. Methodological Framework

The methodology of the study was the qualitative and interpretative one based on textual and discourse analysis. Colonial and crime fiction literary texts and other culturally relevant writings were critically read to determine the recurrent themes, metaphors, and representational tactics that pertained to criminality. These were not read as independent works of aestheticism but rather read as narratives within their respective cultures, which served to perpetuate and support colonialist ideologies.

Besides the literary critique, the work also consulted the records of the colonial administration, the prison stories, and the historical records to provide the literary representations into the greater frames of the governance and domination. The comparative reading also made it possible to analyze the similarity in discursive patterns reflected in literary and institutional texts. Some thoughtful consideration was given to language, characterization, narrative point of view and descriptive framing to reveal the psychological presumptions of colonial descriptions of crime.

The methodology allowed the study to identify the mechanisms by which criminality was created, normalized and internalized in a colonial society, therefore, because it was based on theoretical rigor and close textual analysis. This combined approach was what made the analysis to be based on the literary scholarship and to have a meaningful interaction with the historical and psychological aspects of the colonial power.

4. COLONIAL SOCIETY AND THE MAKING OF THE 'CRIMINAL NATIVE'

Colonial society within Bengal positively contributed towards the creation of the figure of the criminal native as a familiar, sustainable, and administratively useful category. The British colonial rule was based on extensive systems of classification which simplified and restricted the complex social realities into simplified and manageable identities. In this epistemology, criminality came out as one of the major indicators by which the colonial powers explained difference, disorder and resistance. Crime was not treated as a situational or socio-economic product but was more and more a given condition of some individuals and places. This essentialism of criminality allowed colonial rule to naturalize surveillance, punishment and coercive intervention as essential steps in government.

Construction of criminal native was very much interlocked with colonial fears of political stability, and social order. The result of its incorporation into the British Empire early together with its intellectual activity and frequent rebellions made Bengal a province of increased administrative anxiety. The vocabulary used by colonial authorities in describing the indigenous society was often of moral weakness, duplicity and irrationality. These descriptions were not objective observations but ideological claims which placed the colonial power in rational, civilizing, and corrective positions. Any actions that did not conform to the norms of colonialism, including migration, not obeying labor regimes, or engaging in a general

demonstration, were taken as an indicator of criminal inclinations and not the reaction to exploitation or political suppression.

Institutionalization of this construction of criminality was done by legal and administrative structures. Cultural stereotypes were transformed into legal structures and enforceable categories through colonial laws, policing and penal institutions. Medicalized or psychological terminology was regularly used in official documentation to explain criminal conduct in terms of it being habitual, hereditary or instinctive. Such framing alienates crime out of historical context and social causation and places its origins in the hypothetical psychological incompleteness of the colonized subject. It was therefore as a consequence of this that criminality served as an approving of sustained monitoring and disciplinary intervention.

On this level, the process of building the criminal native can be interpreted as working off of interconnected colonial spaces all strengthening the psychological validity of criminal labeling:

Table 1: Colonial Mechanisms in the Construction of the ‘Criminal Native’

Colonial Domain	Key Mechanisms	Psychological Implications
Legal Frameworks	Penal codes, policing laws, criminal classifications	Criminality framed as innate and habitual
Administrative Discourse	Reports, censuses, ethnographies	Pathologization of native behavior
Carceral Institutions	Prisons, surveillance, punishment regimes	Internalization of discipline and guilt
Literary Representations	Fiction, travel narratives, crime stories	Normalization of suspicion and deviance
Urban Governance	Regulation of space and mobility	Sense of permanent surveillance

The institutional amalgamation of criminality, which was enhanced by the cultural and literary discourses, resulted in the popularization and naturalization of the colonial assumptions in the domain of representation. Administrative logic found reflection in literary accounts as native characters were portrayed as being morally uncertain, enigmatic, or being inclined to evil. These depictions were not the passive sources of colonial thought, but were involved in the process of creating the consciousness of the people. The cross-genre repetition in fiction, travel writing, reportage, and ethnographic description of a dangerous native in the colonial imagination created a recognizable and stable picture of the native in the colonial imagination. The process of the construction of the criminal native worked, therefore, on a legal, cultural, and psychological level creating a complex of domination. Criminality was not merely foisted on by higher authorities but was rather internalized by being subjected to disciplinary regimes and representational practices over time. The process converted colonial subjects into beings who will be under multiple examinations and promoted the notion of criminal labeling as a social fact that has to be accepted. The production of the criminal native was thus the wholesome colonial policy that combined power, knowledge, and psychology to maintain the imperial power in Bengal.

5. LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONING

The colonial phase of literary production was closely tied to the ideological project of empire and it was a channel in which ideals of crime and morality were culturally institutionalized. Instead of being the mirror of social realities, colonial discourses actively shaped the systems of knowledge that presented the colonized as individuals, who are naturally inclined to deviance and moral instability. Instead of being an outcome of structural inequalities, economic disruption and the political domination of the imperial rule, crime was presented as a psychological attribute of the native population, who integrated it in their culture and personality. By being constantly exposed to these stories, the colonial society developed the collective view of criminality as a natural process, which condoned the administrative domination and the discrimination in the society.

These literary accounts served as effective psychological conditioning weapons as they kept the colonizers and the colonized. To the colonial audience, literature supported the idea of European moral and rational superiority, justifying surveillance and policing and disciplinary institutions as essential in order to keep order. In the case of the colonized, the reading of these texts usually led to internalization of the labels imposed on them, a feeling of moral inferiority and rejection of societal status. The frequent portrayal of the native as being suspicious, deceitful, or emotionally unstable helped to create a psychological climate where surveillance and self-discipline had been normalized and so influenced behaviour, perception and self-understanding in small but widespread ways.

Presenting crime and deviance as inherent traits, the colonial literature erased the boundary between the cultural stereotype and psychological reality. Fiction, travel, and crime fiction characters were not only denied narrative power but their interiority was viewed through the prism of colonial suspicion and judgment. These representations caused a hint of inevitability to the criminality and placed it as an unchanging part of native identity. A cumulative outcome of all these literary techniques was the creation of a psychologically disciplined society where surveillance acts and criminal labels internalized were used to strengthen the colonial structures of power. Literature was, therefore, not only a product of culture, but also a tool of social and psychological control, in construction of identity, perception and moral reasoning in the colonial Bengal.

5.1. Depicting the Criminal Native in Colonial Literature

Literary writings created in the colonial era were key determinants and perpetuators of the psychological criminalization in Bengal. Instead of being passive epiphany of the social reality, colonial accounts actively rendered legal, administrative and ethnographic presumptions into culturally resonant accounts. Literature used methods of characterization, chronological arrangement and moral framing to demonstrate colonial explanations of crime as something natural, inevitable, and cultural. Native figures were also constantly being depicted as morally unstable, emotionally excessive, and fond of deceit whereas Europeans were rational, disciplined, and morally authoritative. Such binary opposition increased the hierarchies of

colonialism by linking criminality to the psychology of colonized people instead of historical, social, or material circumstances. The selective focalization, moral commentary and loaded description as narrative techniques led the readers to the pre-conceived interpretation of the native behaviour whereas the most basic acts were made to look suspicious and this made the literary environment where criminality seemed to be everywhere and socially embedded. The portrayal of the crime as the psychological characteristic of the indigenous people made colonial literature a highly successful tool of ideological domination as it masked structural violence, economic deprivation and social upheavals at the onset of the imperial rule and thus literary representation became one of the most important means of ideological control.

5.2. Psychological Internalization and Colonial Consciousness

These literary representations influenced the psyche of the colonists many times beyond the limits of the text into greater colonial consciousness. The recurrent experience of criminalized native individuals contributed to the development of an emotional response fear, anxiety, suspicion, and moral distance, which were in full compliance with the colonial tactics of surveillance, discipline, and social control. Literature therefore supplemented institutional practices of policing by influencing the way the crime was imagined, anticipated and handled emotionally. By creating control and punitive behaviours as the necessary reactions to the natural deviance, literature allowed to rationalize colonial power and legalize the idea of the native as a morally and psychologically imperfect subject. These discourses were involved in internalization and psychological alienation at the level of colonized subjectivity. Native characters were seldom given a voice of narration authority and when they were the voices were mediated through colonial suspicion or judgment. Colonized readers were exposed to a skewed reflection of literature that resonated with the labeling in institutions strengthening social marginalization and moral inferiority. Though there were the occasional narrative ambiguities that pointed out inconsistencies in the colonial discourse, the prevailing literary tradition is what supported the psychological premises of the process of criminalization in Bengal and conditioned the perception and self-identity of generations.

6. INTERNALIZATION, RESISTANCE, AND COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Colonial criminalization in Bengal did not only take place within legal definitions and institutional processes, but was more of an ongoing process of psychological conditioning. It was not only through legislation, policing and administrative labeling that the figure of the criminal native was imposed but it also became internalized by the colonized subjects with time. The reinforcement of colonial accounts of deviance through literature, cultural discourse, and frequent exposure to authoritative accounts of deviance formed a social consciousness and self. Crime was always positioned as a moral and psychological weakness, and not as a reaction to structural imbalances or imperial oppression. This framing created a situation where any deviation of the colonial norms was seen as a moral deficiency that developed a long-lasting sense of guilt, shame, and social anxiety in colonized communities.

The internalization of the criminal labels had extensive effects in the self-regulation and social behaviour. Colonized people started to expect spying and evaluation, as well as adjust their behaviour to meet the imposing norms. Criminality, therefore, was not only a legal category

but a psychological load that was affecting the daily decision-making and interaction process. Such internalized representations overtime solidified hierarchical power relations, instilling in social consciousness concepts of inferiority and deviance of moral inferiority. Such cultural and literary narratives were repeated further reinforcing these effects which meant that colonial constructions of criminality remained institutionally and psychologically.

6.1. Acts of Resistance and Alternative Narratives

Meanwhile, colonial criminalization gave rise to resistance in retaliation to its ideological powers. Native authors, nationalists and reformers vigorously questioned colonial conceptions of crime, morality and deviance thus revealing the political incentive and cultural bias that perpetuated it. Other contexts repackaged criminalized behaviours as counteract to exploitation, dispossession and injustices of a system, thus disrupting the colonial depiction of the innate nature of crime. The texts of literature and culture created in the context of nationalists stressed on ethical, historical, and moral agency of colonized subjects, they provided images that contrasted with the deterministic images of the criminal native. These texts undermined the colonial ownership of meaning by reconstructing the former narrative power, and they did this by proving that criminality was a socio-constructed notion, not an objectively existing or axiomatic quality.

The resistance was also expressed through reconfiguration of identity in the literature representation. Indigenous literature tended to anticipate interiority and emotional complexity as well as ethical quandary and humanize characters which hitherto had been diminished to criminal cliches. In giving the disenfranchised actors a voice and character of equal importance, these texts challenged colonial cliches and expressed other ways of being. This kind of literary reclamation was a challenge to the imbalance of representation that prevailed in the discourse of colonialism, disrupting the psychological authority of stories that were based on silencing, simplification and essentialization. Thus, they provided colonized audiences with the channel of critically looking at the imposed identities and retaking the control over self-perception and social cognitions.

6.2. Enduring Legacies of Colonial Criminalization

In spite of such acts of defiance, the legacies of colonial criminalization were very entrenched. The long-term consequences of the labeling, surveillance and cultural conditioning still remained after the official presence of the British rule and carried on further into the social attitude, institutional practice and cultural narrative in the postcolonial Bengal. Internalized ideas of deviance, respectability, and moral stratification got etched in the collective consciousness, which informed ideas of behaviour and social mobility, as well as social justice. The presence of the internalization and resistance reveals the delicate nature of psychological domination in terms of colonization, since, although the colonial narratives were minimized, their effects still resonated in the cultural memory and modern social order. This duality is crucial in the way of understanding the lasting influence of the colonial discourse on the identity, morality and social expectations in Bengal.

7. CONCLUSION

Inhibiting a multidimensional process involving the convergence of law, administration and literature, the psychological construction of criminality in colonial Bengal developed into the creation, maintenance and naturalization of the image of the criminal native. Crime was not defined as a reaction to social, economic, or political circumstances, which were imposed by the colonial rule, but as a moral and psychological characteristic and justified surveillance, punishment, and social control. This construction was amplified by literary and cultural discourses which repeatedly constructed native characters as morally ambiguous, deceitful and prone to deviance, whereas European characters were rational and authoritative thereby perpetrating hierarchical and racialized views. At the same time, the fact that such representations were propagated by the colonized subjects themselves, as well as counter-narratives of indigenous writers and reformers, brought out the struggle and continuation of these representations, showing the interplay between domination, identity, and resistance. This paper highlights the functioning of colonial discourse in psychological, institutional, and literary processes that established knowledge, perception, and subjectivity that left lasting legacies in postcolonial social consciousness, cultural memory and literary representation and calls on additional research on the persistence of these constructions in the present day society.

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