The Aesthetic of Natives’ Dress and Undress: Colonial Stereotype and Mimicry in Paul Gauguin’s and William Somerset Maugham’s Cultural Forms

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Abstract: This paper shed light on the appropriation of the presence or absence of sartorial habits in colonised subjects in French and English cultural forms like those by Paul Gauguin and Somerset Maugham. It studied nakedness and half-nakedness as colonial stereotypes for the so-called primitivism and semi-primitivism of colonised people in the forms by Gauguin and Maugham. It also considered the presence of clothing in the colonial subject as a form of colonial mimicry. It showed that the ‘nakedness’ and ‘half-nakedness’ of a colonised people were metonymic tropes that referred to the reductive categories of ‘primitivism’ and ‘semi-primitivism’. As for the instances when the colonised subject was ‘dressed’, they were cases of colonial mimicry, i.e. the creation of the colonised people as the mimic persons of the colonisers; the native was created as the resemblance of the coloniser, but he was not completely the same. The anxious repetition of the expressions ‘naked’, ‘barefoot’ and other such expressions in the texts as well as paintings which transformed them into colonial stereotypes. With the colonial contact, the colonisers came to the encounter of people that were having their own ways, one of them being the fact of not covering themselves. Instead of trying to understand the reasons for this nakedness and its socio-cultural implications, the coloniser considered it as the very sign of their primitivism or semi-primitivism. Thus, by means of repeating this nakedness, its misunderstanding was expressed within colonial discourse and other Eurocentric cultural forms.
Introduction: Representation of colonised people in French and English cultural forms takes different shapes. Most of the time, they have been dealt with in terms of ideologies of difference that maintained them in fixed states of savagery and primitiveness. Such ideologies prevail, through painted images, in the European painting of the era of the imperial impulse between the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Be it in fiction, non-fiction or painting, the colonised subjects have been dealt with in terms of reductive categories by means of which the Europeans aspired to consolidate their domination of these people. Endemic to these categories are those metonymic or metaphorical traits that are used to construct the Other as the subject of the European Self. For instance, with the idea of the primitive is associated the category of ‘naked’ colonised subjects as opposed to clothed Europeans. However, when the colonised people are not represented as ‘naked’, their ‘barefoot’ and ‘half-nakedness’ are accentuated, and sometimes when they are dressed there is a kind of mocking contempt.

Such ideologies of difference related to the states of dress and undress of the natives are at the core of many cultural forms like the writings by Somerset Maugham, Edward Morgan Forster and the South Seas paintings and diaries of French impressionist Paul Gauguin. Before dealing with the ways these artistic figures conceive of the natives’ states of nakedness and half-nakedness, it is important to consider how this concept of nakedness is regarded in the specialised literature. David Spurr (1993: 81) considers it as a kind of personal and community attribute that marks the lack of virtue in ‘savage’ people. Spurr bases his conception of nakedness on Charles Darwin’s notion of the “low morality of savages” and their lack of “self-regarding virtues” (Quoted in Spurr, 1993: 81). Jean Marie Allman (2004: 146) observes that “throughout the colonial period the binary of ‘naked’ and the ‘clothed’ invigorated colonial discourse”. The presence or absence of clothe meant the success or failure of the English civilising mission in the colonies. It means that English colonial rule attempted to instil in their subject people the necessity of clothing themselves. It is clear that for both Spurr and Allman nakedness is important to the colonial system as well as the discourse that accompanies it. Yet the function of nakedness and its endemic attributes as ideologies of difference
within colonial discourse deserves more analytical attention, especially when they work out themselves in Eurocentric cultural forms.

**Issue and Working Hypothesis**

It is, therefore, the purpose of this paper to explore the categories of ‘naked’, ‘half-naked’ or ‘half-dressed’ and dressed natives as colonialist ideologies of difference appropriated in Maugham’s fictional works and Gauguin’s writings and paintings. More specifically, the categories of nakedness and half-nakedness will be considered as forms of colonial *stereotype*, whereas clothing will be considered as a form of colonial *mimicry*. Nakedness is taken to be a metonymy for the larger ideology of the primitivism and semi-primitivism of the colonised subjects. As for ‘clothing’, it is taken to be very synonymous to colonial mimicry, through which the colonised subject is created as a mimic individual for the European coloniser. One common aspect of the cultural forms by Gauguin and Maugham is the fascination with the so-called primitive life of the people of the South Seas and the Malay Archipelago. Also, a very recurrent trope in English writings about India is the extent to which the Indians are static and placid. Many Western writers maintain that the people of India have progressed to a certain state and remained stagnant in that state midway between civilisation and primitivism, what can be termed semi-primitivism.

Colonial discourse is generally modelled on ideologies of difference set out by the imperialists to maintain the subject people in states of primitiveness so as to justify conquest. Much of the discourse about India maintains them in a static position, whereas the people of the South Seas and the Far East are generally associated with primitiveness. The Indians are considered to have acquired some kind of civilisation, but their progress stopped at some moment and remained stagnant. When the first white explorers encountered the people of the Far East and the South Seas, the first impression was to describe them as savages.

This paper takes *nakedness* and *half-nakedness* as metonymies of the so-called barbarous or primitive and the semi-barbarous or semi-primitive attributes, which are supported by *clothing* as the very sign of mimicry as mockery. Nakedness is taken to signify the extent to which the exotic people are put at uncivilised states.
Clothing, however, either means the success of the so-called civilising mission to make the colonised subjects learn some civilised ways or used as a means of mocking at them, considering them as eternal primitives and that their efforts to resemble the coloniser could never be successful on the basis of their supposed fixity in time and even in space.

The study will be based on Maugham’s *The Moon and Sixpence* and his short stories “The Letter” and “The Outstation” and Paul Gauguin’s Tahitian exotic paintings and biographical note *Noa, Noa*. As for theory, it is appropriate to make reference to Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*. It will mainly be concerned with two concepts: *colonial stereotype* and *mimicry*, from which the paper borrows its title. Three short sections will be at the core of the discussion, one comparing stereotypical representations in Maugham and Gauguin, the second focusing on half-nakedness as colonial stereotype in Maugham, and the third will consider clothing as colonial mimicry in Maugham and even Gauguin.

**Discussion:** At the core of this paper is the idea that the ‘nakedness’ and ‘half-nakedness’ of a colonised people are metonymic tropes that stand for the reductive categories of ‘primitivism’ and ‘semi-primitivism’. As for the instances when the colonised subject is ‘clothed’, they are cases of colonial mimicry, i.e. the creation of the colonised people as the mimic persons of the coloniser. It is considered as mimicry, for the colonised in being clothed is “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha, 2004: 123). The native is created as the resemblance of the coloniser, but s/he is not completely the same. The anxious repetition of the expressions ‘naked’, ‘barefoot’ and other such words and images in the texts and paintings transforms them into colonial stereotypes. With the colonial contact, the colonisers came to the encounter of people that were having their own ways, one of them being the fact of not covering their bodies. Instead of trying to understand the reasons for this nakedness and its socio-cultural implications, the coloniser considered it as the very sign of their primitivism or semi-primitivism. Thus, by means of repeating this nakedness, its misunderstanding was expressed within colonial discourse and other Eurocentric cultural forms. According to Bhabha, the stereotype is “a form of
knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, ‘already known’ and something that must be anxiously repeated” (Ibid. 94). As for mimicry it is “the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (Ibid. 122). The coloniser accepts the native only as “almost the same but not quite” (Ibid). On the one hand, colonial discourse is engaged in a strategy of reform and regulation of the colonised people. On the other hand, the natives should not and cannot be completely equal to their reformers or the colonisers. For Bhabha, both stereotype and mimicry are two strategies of colonial authority.

‘Nakedness’ and ‘Half-Nakedness’ as Colonial Stereotypes

To start with nakedness as the very sign of primitivism, it should be said that ever since the beginning of the colonial encounter, it has always been considered as the encounter between an advanced people encountering a primitive one. The conquest of land for the sake of raw materials has always been the mark of power for Western societies. This impulse for more land led them to the farthest of lands where they encountered people of different skins and different customs. Due to the fact that the ways of these people were different from those of the Westerners, the latter took it as the very sign of their primitivism. For example, they came to the encounter of people who were not bothering about covering their bodies. They tended to be naked, and the Westerners considered this significant of the very beginning of human development when men and women busied themselves with survival to the expense of caring about their physical appearance. This same Western attitude towards the non-Western people has been intensified in the nineteenth century with the new imperial impulse. Regis Stella states that “nakedness [of non-Europeans] was the other major marker employed by Europeans to define indigenous people as savages [and it] signified the absence of civilization” (2007: 129). This absence of civilisation was considered as a pretext for colonial expansion, and it was emphasised in colonial discourse so as to justify this expansion.

This attitude is common to both Maugham and French painter Gauguin. It should be said that when Maugham was in Paris he had heard much about Paul Gauguin, and this made him decide
to write a novel based on his life. In the explanatory note of *The Moon and Sixpence*, Maugham writes,

I spent a year in Paris on Montparnasse when I was just thirty and lived with a number of painters who greatly admired Gauguin and one of whom, Roderick O’Connor, had painted with him in Pont Aven. I was told a great deal about Gauguin and it occurred to me that there was in his life and character the idea for a novel. I kept the idea in mind and when I had occasion to go to Tahiti heard a good deal more about him. This was in 1917. I wrote the book during the summer of 1919 [...].

(Maugham, 1941: 10)

Based on what he heard about Gauguin in Paris, Maugham modelled Mr Strickland in *The Moon and Sixpence* on his revered painter. This is why some part of the novel is set in Tahiti, Gauguin’s artistic birthplace. As at the core of Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings is the nakedness of the natives, in Maugham’s novel, too, there is a constant reference to the states of undress of the people of Tahiti.

Maugham focuses on the ‘nakedness’ of the people of the South Seas and the Malay Archipelago and relates this to their state of primitiveness. In terms of colonial discourse, this aspect provides a necessary pretext for European colonialism. With him, there is a mixture of fascination and awe with regards to this nakedness. If taken within the imperialist enterprise and the quest for ideological support to it, the fact that they can be ‘primitive’ as shown through ‘nakedness’ calls for the intervention of the West to reform them or inculcate in them some civilised values like the importance of covering their bodies. Even if their way of life needs to be respected, there is some insistence on the idea that these people need to be reformed so as to resemble the white people. In parallel to their ‘nakedness’, these people behaved strangely, which is to say that there was no comprehension between the Western subject and these people of ‘the forest’.

Dr. Coutras had a sense that the child was stealthily watching him from behind a tree. The door was wide open. He called out, but no one answered. He stepped in. He knocked at a door, but again there was no answer. He turned the handle and entered. The stench that assailed him turned him horribly sick. He put his handkerchief to his nose and forced himself to go in. The light
was dim, and after the brilliant sunshine for a while he could see nothing. Then he gave a start. He could not make out where he was. He seemed on a sudden to have entered a magic world. He had a vague impression of a great primeval forest and of naked people walking beneath the trees. Then he saw that there were paintings on the walls.

(1941: 269, emphasis mine)

It is clear from this that the people of Tahiti are considered as primitive; behind their nakedness one clearly understands that they are considered to be in the beginning of time living in huts in the bush.

Maugham’s fascination with their nakedness is comparable to some figures in Paul Gauguin’s paintings. For instance, in his *Mahana no atua* (Day of the Gods) and *Deux tahitiennes*, the painter pays due respect to the beauty of the nudity of the people of the ‘exotic’ isles. In *Et l’or de leur corp* (1901), Gauguin depicts two naked exotic women, the colour of their bodies shining like gold. If one substitutes the attractive naked bodies for the exotic background as a whole, one deduces that this attracts the Westerners. Nakedness being the physical aspect of the primitive, it is to say that the primitive people call for the imperial attention of the civilised people. The link between the artist’s fascination with the exotic and the idea of imperial domination can be deduced from his *Le cheval blanc* (1898), where Gauguin emphasises the ‘nakedness’ of the people of the Marquises Islands and draws a contrast between its native inhabitants with the white conquering race. Indeed, he depicts a naked man riding a black horse which is contrasted to a white horse. This white horse can as well stand for the white races. In fact, in this tableau, the white horse overshadows the black one on which the native stands; it is put in the foreground of the tableau whereas the black one is barely perceptible as it is set at the background of it. It is a way of saying that the white races have always precedence over the ‘black’, ‘brown’ and ‘yellow’ ones. In addition to Gauguin’s paintings, at the core of some of his sculptures like that of the entrance to the *Maison du Jour*, the name of his dwelling in the Marquises Islands, are sculptured images of naked native women, coloured exclusively in brown to emphasise the difference of colour as a marker of difference. Though critiques would argue that Gauguin’s fascination with
the primitive has no imperialist intent, the fact that the
“government had entrusted [upon him] a mission (apparently
artistic) but principally political espionage” (Gauguin, 2001) in
Tahiti. Indeed, as an artist he expressed a desire to paint their
bodies, but this just a lure upon the political mission. About one
of his native ‘friends’, he says, “he would ask me questions
typical of a young savage” (Ibid). It means that there is a tacit
belief in the savagery of the natives. This state of being
primitive, in the words of Philipa Levine, “was to be in a state of
nature, unschooled, unselﬂless, lacking in shame and
propriety—and nothing better signiﬁed the primitive than
nakedness. […] Nakedness deﬁned the Western encounter with
colonial—and potentially colonial—spaces” (Levine, 2008:
192).

Like Gauguin, in Maugham’s The Moon and Sixpence, one
clearly understands the fascination with the primitive scene,
I scarcely know. It was strange and fantastic. It was a vision of
the beginnings of the world, the Garden of Eden, with Adam and
Eve—que sais-je?—it was a hymn to the beauty of the human
form, male and female, and the praise of Nature, sublime,
indifferent, lovely, and cruel. It gave you an awful sense of the
inﬁnity of space and of the endlessness of time. Because he
painted the trees I see about me every day, the cocoa-nuts, the
banyans, the ﬂamboyants, the alligatorpears, I have seen them
ever since differently, as though there were in them a spirit and a
mystery which I am ever on the point of seizing and which for
ever escapes me. The colours were familiar to me, and yet they
were different. They had a signiﬁcance which was all their own.
(Maugham, 1941: 272-273)

The writer in this quotation clearly contrasts the white race with
the exotic people, whom he considers as diﬀerent. He associates
them with the beginning of the humanity to emphasise the idea
of primitiveness. With such emphasis, one clearly can draw the
connection between the fascination with the nakedness and this
idea of primitivism, for which it stands. It follows that exotic
writers like Maugham and painters like Gauguin were fascinated
with nakedness so that they represented it in their works. The
mixture of awe and fascination about the ‘nakedness’ of the
people of the South Seas is expressed in what follows,
And those nude men and women. They were of the earth, and yet apart from it. They seemed to possess something of the clay of which they were created, and at the same time something divine. You saw man in the nakedness of his primeval instincts, and you were afraid, for you saw yourself.

(Maugham, 1941: 273)

Despite the fascination of the artists with the nakedness of the exotic people, they perceive in it a pertinent case of their primitivism. This can be explained by the fact that this nakedness is a colonial stereotype that stands metonymically for primitivism. Metonymy being the use of the name of an attribute of a thing for the thing itself, ‘nakedness’ can be considered as the physical attribute for primitivism, for it is generally associated with the primitive people, who do not bother about covering their bodies. It is stereotype, for both Gauguin and Maugham depict them repeatedly in their works: at the core of many of Gauguin’s paintings are naked exotic people; throughout Maugham’s texts, there is a constant reference to the fact of being naked. In fact, the writer’s as well as the artist’s naked people refer to the man and woman of prehistory who were not preoccupied with covering their bodies. When it is not nakedness, it is the fact of walking barefoot that is substituted. These two attributes are colonial stereotypes, for they are constantly repeated to denote the idea of white intervention and control. It follows that in Maugham as well as in Gauguin, this idea of the naked native is much emphasised, and it serves the imperial project in showing the most evident external aspects of the primitivism of the exotic people, which is in itself an appeal to Western intervention. If one is to theorize upon this interest in the states of undress of the natives, it is important to say that they perceive in it an opportunity to instil colonial rule. In fact, Cohn argues that cloth, which is absent or scarce in them, meant for the colonial administrators “the substantial nature of authority [which is] literally part of the body of those who possess it. It can be transferred from person to person through acts of incorporation, which not only create followers or subordinates, but a body of companions of the ruler who have shared some of his substance” (1996: 114). The nakedness of the natives gives the colonial an opportunity to incorporate in them cloth that
would bind them forever as ruler and ruled.

To explain this idea further, it is important to refer to the opposite use of dress to show the superiority of the white race. In “The Outstation”, Maugham contrasts the natives’ states of undress to the refinement of the imperial agents in terms of clothing. In this story, Mr Warburton always endeavours to instil in his novice assistant, Cooper, the necessity of dressing in a refined manner in order to “maintain the proper pride” of the white people and keep himself respected by the natives (CT: 107). Putting on refined clothes gives the white imperial agent a sense of superiority, which is his own pride in the colonial world. If one is to theorize upon this interest in the states of undress of the natives, I would argue that the European text and textile go together to support imperial rule. In fact, Cohn claims that for the European writers, artists and administrators clothing signifies “the substantial nature of authority [which is] literally part of the body of those who possess it. It can be transferred from person to person through acts of incorporation, which not only create followers or subordinates, but a body of companions of the ruler who have shared some of his substance” (1996: 114). The nakedness of the natives gives the colonial administrator an opportunity to incorporate in them through their textiles/ text, binding them forever as ruler and ruled.

Another idea which looms so large in colonialist literature is that of half-nakedness and the fact of walking barefoot, which are taken to stand for the idea of semi-primitivism. If some colonial societies had been considered as purely primitive by the European colonising powers, others had been dealt with in terms of semi-primitivism. This can be attributed to two main factors. To begin with, colonial societies like India had been considered as static ones; they had taken some strides towards civilisation, but they remained stagnant at a certain moment in this move. Second, other colonial societies, in view of the upbringings of the colonising societies, had learnt somewhat from the teachings of the colonising powers so that they adopted some of their ways of living.

In The Razor’s Edge, Maugham speaks about his Indians friend Mahendra in the following terms: “kindly, intelligent” university teacher (Maugham, 1992: 263). He covers his nakedness with “jock-strap” (Ibid). He is half-naked as he is not completely
covered. Maugham like Kipling and Forster consider the Indians as semi-primitive in their attitude towards clothing, covering themselves only partly. They either walk barefoot as with Forster and Kipling or just wear something to cover the least parts of their bodies. In Maugham’s Malay tales, the dictates of the imperial rule force the Malays to adjust their behaviour to the standards of the colonising society through at least half-covering their bodies. The nakedness of most of the Indians was one of “the first impressions formed by British travellers to India in the nineteenth century” (Cohn, 1996: 129).

‘Covering Natives’ as Colonial Mimicry

If one follows in the footsteps of Edward Said and his concept of narration (1978: 240), certainly there is something of narration in Somerset Maugham’s depiction of the disposition of the Chinese people to adopt the culture and behaviour of the white race. However, it is important to say that this narration falls within Bhabha’s category of colonial mimicry. In “The Letter” (1941), Maugham focuses on the disposition of the Chinese to change and adopt the ways of the white race. Ong Chi Seng is the Chinese assistant of Mr Joyce, Mrs Crosbie’s legal representative in the trial. There is also a Chinese woman who is Hammond’s mistress. Maugham through these two individuals shows the extent to which the natives can espouse the cultural behaviour of the ruling race. Far from the colonial stereotype of the ‘dirty’ and ‘bubbling’ Chinese, Ong Chi Seng is presented as a gentleman in the sense that he takes care of his image as a man. He wears the appropriate clothes for the appropriate occasion, and he is especially endowed with the civility that is generally not attributed to the Orientals. Following “the height of the local fashion [he] wore very shore patent leather shoes and gay silk socks. In his black tie was a pearl and ruby pin, and on the fourth finger of his left hand a diamond ring” (Maugham, 1941: 198). The expression local fashion goes against the prevalent clichés about the ‘nakedness’ of the Chinese common both in Maugham’s texts and other colonial texts. Nevertheless, there is sarcasm as to Ong Chi Seng’s efforts to resemble his masters, for he is doomed to be his subordinate eternally. Ong Chi Seng’s endeavours to speak accurately and behave appropriately “always faintly amused Mr Joyce and now he smiled” (CT: 198). Also, the narrator keeps up repeating Ong Chi Seng’s efforts as
if they are needless in view of their fate of being inferior to the white race.

Maugham does not stop at creating Ong Chi Seng as a mimic man; he also depicts a Chinese woman’s change of behaviour in the direction of civilisation and refinement. Though this woman is depicted as a “very ignorant woman” (Ibid. 214), she gives “the impression of a woman of character. She wore a pale blue jacket and a white skirt, her costume was not quite European nor quite Chinese, but on her feet were little Chinese silk slippers. She wore heavy gold chains round her neck, gold bangles on her wrists, gold ear-rings and elaborate gold pins in her black hair” (Ibid. 219-220). Not only does she take care of covering her body but she does it with the fashion-like way of the European aristocracy as well. Besides, she is not barefoot, as it is customary with the Chinese people. Before dealing with this woman in these positive terms, reference to her so-called ignorance is there to show that whatever steps the native takes, he can never reach the status of his European masters. This idea of mimicry can also be deduced from Paul Gauguin’s *Le repas, ou les bananes* (1891). Despite Gauguin’s persistent focus on naked natives in other paintings, at the core of this tableau are three native children covered almost in the manner of the Europeans. The gaze of the three children, however, is that of worry or dissatisfaction as if they are by no means happy of their being covered Western-like. Jean Marie Allman (2004: 146) observes that “throughout the colonial period the binary of ‘naked’ and the ‘clothed’ invigorated colonial discourse”, and “cloth was powerfully and symbolically implicated” (Ibid. 147). The presence or absence of clothe meant the success or failure of the English civilising mission in the colonies. It also meant in the words of Bernard S. Cohn, an act of incorporation wherewith the native becomes part of the imperial body (Cohn, 1996: 114).

**Conclusion**

As a conclusion, it is clear that whether represented as naked, half-naked or dressed, the colonised subject is always reduced to a status of inferiority as to the European subjects. Maugham, Gauguin and other colonialist artists represent them as such to stress their difference from the Europeans, who are considered as superior to them. This attitude of distinguishing the colonised societies from the colonising ones in terms of their physical
appearance is very common in colonialist cultural forms. If the colour of the skin is the immediate mark of difference, the very modest sartorial habits or the absence of such habits also took a startling prominence in colonialist cultural forms. It goes without saying that it is only one marker among many which colonialist artists adopt to provide ideological support to the imperial enterprise.

It should be said that these artists contributed in the consolidation of the Western imperial vision of the non-Western people in depicting the most obvious external markers of the primitivism and semi-primitivism of the people they conquered. However, this consolidation derives its meaning only at the expense of cultural understanding of the people they colonised, for their cultural forms fall within what can be called the disdain towards the imperial subjects. Since there is no effort as to the understanding of people of the colonial world and their cultural and social behaviour, barriers are implemented between the coloniser and the colonised.
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Paintings


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