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Phantom's Burden: Reading the Politics of Colonial Discourse in *Phantom* Comics

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Abstract

Comics, the word usually brings to mind something entertaining but ephemeral, something not worthy of much critical deliberation. But such an approach to comics is not just faulty but grossly erroneous because comics as a medium has never been entertainment shorn off politics. The mass reach and consumption it has always had as a medium make comics important cultural texts which in significant ways both reflect and affect the social, political and theoretical tenets of a time. As a popular medium far from being detached it is enmeshed in ideologies and discourses either by functioning as a viable apparatus for disseminating dominant ideas/ideologies or by becoming a platform of challenge and critique of grand narratives. This paper seeks to study the politics of the *Phantom* comics as one that tries to peddle the grand narrative of reason that has been the primary thrust of the colonial discourse. The avowed duty of all the Phantoms through four centuries to ensure law and order in an otherwise savage land is in fact an embodiment and championing of the white man's burden that tries to justify the conquest of a land in the name of progress and civilisation. Also for a comic series that is propelled by this politics of justifying the control of a land, its resources and native people by the white settler by disguising it as an enterprise to bring the modern, rational, civilised to the superstitious, irrational, savage colonies, it becomes interesting to interrogate the popularity it enjoyed among its India readers. The paper seeks to also understand and theorise about the possible reasons for the same by seeing it through the larger discourse of colonisation at work.

Keywords

Phantom, comics, politics, colonial discourse, white man's burden

> "Because of the Phantom Law, most of the jungle is safe and happy. It took Phantom four centuries to do that"
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> – *The Challenge of the Cannibals*, Falk and Moore

The Rope People in some remote land of dense jungle and swamp land, that has more than just hints to make it seem like a place in Africa or at times even some place in the coast of the Java Sea probably in or around India, are cannibals. They are the Rope People because they live on a platform high above the ground made with ropes tied to trees in the jungle. They are a savage tribe who practice cannibalism on people who seem to be even harmless explorers (though we do not see them eating people, it seems more like a mythical perception regarding these tribesmen). June and her father Dr Archer on their trip inside the jungle in what seems to be a harmless expedition are made captive by the Rope People, when Phantom comes to rescue and restore law and order. The jungle as this episode is made to reaffirm would have become a savage place but for his intervention. Successfully through the use of his brawn and brain with this tribe Phantom is able to yet again prove the long held reputation of being a superior invincible being, the 'ghost who walks' the jungle to keep it a peaceful place. The Rope People who, as it is made to seem, would have otherwise not minded to make a meal of the two explorers end up obeying Phantom when he successfully proves that in fact he is *the* man whose legend is upheld and quite revered across all the tribes of this mysterious jungle land.

This is one lore of Phantom among many which as it relates all the super stunts of entertainment for its readers (overpowering a wild elephant, fighting a what seems to a massive Bengal tiger being some) more importantly weaves a complex discourse of the West vis-ὰ-vis the East and sets up binaries of reason versus irrationality, civilised versus savage, modern versus superstitious in its narrative. This series of comics that was created by American artist and creator Lee Falk with Ray Moore and later with Wilson McCoy to become quite popular in many countries worldwide builds and peddles a white western ideology, a colonial discourse. It is based on an ideology which Ashis Nandy calls a world view which believes in the absolute superiority of the human over the nonhuman and the subhuman, the masculine over the feminine, the adult over the child, the historical over the ahistorical, and the modern or progressive over the traditional or the savage (Preface x).

This association puts me at the risk of inviting raised and knitted eyebrows for placing a complex and serious discourse on something as 'ephemeral' as comics. Comics are after all just cheap entertainment for kids! Not to be taken seriously enough for a discursive study. That is a very limited and myopic understanding of a form that can reflect and affect the popular cultural preference of a time through its wide reach and mass consumption. And when I refer to comics it is not just Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus* of recent years which is alternatively called a graphic novel, but the very medium of comics in use since long back. Comics has always had the potential of bringing together humour with critique which it has explored in its many possibilities. Comics have never been apolitical, in fact for a medium of this reach and quite a license to pass on as 'simple' entertainment, it cannot be. Sometimes the politics of its narrative tunes itself with the dominant current/ideology at times even acting as a propaganda tool, and in many cases it functions to make a critique of or even attempting to dismantle a much endorsed grand narrative- in either cases its representation does have a politics involved in representing things, issues, ideas in the ways it does.

Let me pause for a moment and take a look at the comics culture in twentieth century America to further elucidate what I mean. Comics in the early decades of American popular culture came out in the form of comic strips or what were known as funnies in mass-circulation newspapers. Soon because of the content they had and also because of their easy and uncensored access to many homes across social classes comics became an object of concern and objection. The primary charge levied against them by those who considered themselves concerned citizens was the use of excessive, unbridled sensationalism in the majority of comics. It was felt that something that enjoyed such a wide circulation needed more screening, restrictions or responsibility before reaching its readers on whom it could have an undesirable but lasting impact. These detractors of comics therefore did not see it just as innocent entertainment but as potentially harmful and damaging. It was with this that America, trying to build up its status as an emerging civilised world power, felt threatened by a devaluation of its sense of culture and esteem in the Sunday comic strips/funnies[1]. The argument that funnies are not meant to be judged by critical categories was not quite taken into consideration when growing number of anti-comic campaigns disparaged it on grounds of immorality and profanity.

At this stage Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*[2] published the outcome of a survey which considered reading comic books as one of the primary factors contributing to child delinquency:

> Slowly, and at first reluctantly, I have come to the conclusion that this chronic stimulation, temptation and seduction by comic books, both their content and their alluring advertisements of knives and guns, are contributing factors to many children's maladjustment. (10)

Wertham saw the threat of comic books in its easy reach to children who are exposed to its content, displayed with lesser and lesser restriction and savouring more and more in its explicitness. As a doctor of mental health in his dealing with many juvenile patients drawing a causal relation between reading comics and juvenile delinquency[3] he noted:

> Here is the repetition of violence and sexiness which no Freud, Krafft Ebing or Havelock Eills[4] ever dreamed would be offered to children, and

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[1] For further reference, see Hadju, David.

[2] Originally from Munich, Germany, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham worked at New York City's Bellevue Mental Hygiene Clinic and worked closely with state courts, testifying in a few high-profile cases as well on the mental health of defendants. In 1946 while working with teenagers in Lafargue Clinic, Harlem, he began speaking widely about the dangers he perceived in the content of most comic books of the time.

[3] He gives the instance of a boy who had threatened a teacher with a switchblade knife. The reason he believes not to be an instinctive aggressive urge but his being long having voraciously read comic books filled with alluring tales of shooting, knifing, hitting and strangling. Although when the case was taken to court and the Children's Court decided otherwise Wertham continued to firmly hold his opinion that the child was 'seduced,' seduced by comic books.

[4] Richard Freiherr von Kraft-Ebing (1840-1902) was an Austro-German psychiatrist and the author of the foundational work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). Havelock Ellis (1859- 1939) was a British physician and psychologist. Ellis was a supporter of sexual liberation and his first major work *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* explores sexual relations from multiple perspectives

> in such profusion. Here is one man mugging another, and graphic pictures of the white man shooting colored natives as though they were animals. (9)

For comics with no censorship by an outside agency, Wertham saw it as reason for its unrestricted showcasing of content to draw its teen readers, alluring them to its provocative appeal. Thus, comic books in their inexpensive, seemingly harmless thin booklet form are not just casual entertainment for children or even adults. They have had the ability to influence psychologies by having the added advantage of laying out their content in the graphic/image form. What can be noted from Wertham's study is that comics never were as inconsequential as they quite often have been dismissed as. Comics can have a major impact in forming/influencing psychologies, endorsing/challenging opinions. It, in fact, never has been just a strip or a thirty-forty or so page thin booklet which when quite easily bought at a low price can be read and casually discarded. Even when comics might not have been so dearly preserved (although they were) because of their cheap paper quality and/or print, the effect that they created in the mind remained. Although Wertham's intention was to bring in strong impositions by way of laws and codes[5] to curb and contain the content that was being administered through comics what his research does is also show the immense potential that comics have always had. The attention Wertham gave to comics was singular because he saw them as important cultural texts that are capable of doing complex cultural work (York).

The *Phantom* series that I seek to bring into focus in my study does this very complex cultural work. The series initially began as comic strips in newspapers in 1936 was later published in issue wise arranged books by the King Features Syndicate, much later, three decades later in fact, began to be published in India. The first Phantom comic in India 'The Phantom's Belt' that came out in March 1964 had already been brought out by the King Features Syndicate, Great Britain in 1957. In this issue as in some others certain changes were made, in names of place and people[6], before it was reprinted and circulated in India. The issues that thus came out in India did not follow the sequence of publication of the original *Phantom* series. *Phantom* therefore although it was bought, reworked and distributed by an Indian publication house was not an 'Indian' comic in the way that *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Bahadur the Great* would later be. In India re-produced by the *Indrajal Comics* it was neither Indian in its origin nor in its content. What it propagated/peddled was, as I would discuss, a clearly colonial discourse. Nonetheless, *Phantom* found a huge readership in India.

> The enduring popularity of "The Ghost Who Walks" [Phantom] in newspaper strips eventually led to its appearance in comic books and other media, home and abroad. In fact while *Phantom* comic books have been published off and on in America over the years, the *Phantom* has achieved

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[5] Wertham's lash on comics helped spark a U.S. Congressional inquiry into the comic book industry and the creation of the Comics Code.

[6] The place of the pigmy people, the Bandars, where the twenty-one generations of Phantoms set up their skull-throne is called Denkali in the Indian version instead of Bengali or Bangala that was there in the original, and the Singh pirates becomes the Singa pirates to avoid any direct negative associations with the land and its people. However, when one reads deeper into the politics of it to note the racist references and the colonial discourse of the comics one sees the representation far more than just simply negative.

> his greatest popularity abroad. The *Phantom* is something of a phenomenon in the countries of Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden, Finland), in Australia, and *curiously* enough in India. (Duncan 312; emphasis mine)

It is curious indeed for a series that portrays in the way it does the native vis-ὰ-vis the white Phantom to have gained not only acceptance but popularity and high sales among people who had enough reason to feel uncomfortable if not offended. This is how the colonial discourse of reason works, where the native is made so conscious of his inferiority that he increasingly desires to be like the superior self of the white settler/colonizer. Such are the trappings of this discourse that as convinced is the white coloniser of being born to take the burden of civilizing the savages so is the colonised deluded of being lifted from darkness to enlightenment by the rationality of the white man. In his famous *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon also examines the deep and disturbing psychological effects of colonialism where the white subject sees the black other as everything that lies outside the self but for the black subject the white other serves to define everything that the self desires. Ania Loomba describes this situation as one where blackness confirms the white self but whiteness empties the black subject (144). The various ideological apparatuses of the state come to the service of the settler to ingrain this position of inferiority within the natives. The colonial world is a Manichean world says Fanon, the natives are derogated to the levels of animals, their customs and traditions are shown as a body of useless waste.

Here in the *Phantom* series the Phantom is not just the saviour but also the settler. His settling in a position of authority and reverence is essential for his continued stay in the land of the natives and for the 'rightful' use of its resources. This all the twenty-one Phantoms obtain by claiming to consecrate their lives for the cause of civilisation by bringing peace and normalcy in a land of otherwise barbaric and warring tribes. The Phantom's claims that he deludes himself into believing in the process of making the natives believe of their inferiority and pre-historic subhuman status is the discourse of the white man.

The first Phantom as we come to know was an Englishman, a Londoner to be precise, named Christopher Standish whose father in 1525 taking him along set out to explore the unknown lands of the East in what is shown to be as the championing of the Renaissance spirit of exploration. Phantom tells Diana, as 'Vasco Da Gama had discovered the water route to the Indies only 27 years before! All England was stirred with tales of the riches of the fabulous East!'(Falk and Moore 112). Here riches are clearly in the literal and not metaphoric sense. Standish's ship is the first English ship to set sail around the Cape of Good Hope to make the trip towards the East. Of course, more than the mercantile interest what is highlighted of this expedition is its being motivated by the heroic thirst for exploration. Although it is the fabulous riches of the East which attracts these people from the West such expeditions are not considered by them as mercenary; and as Phantom's quite proud retelling of his Western ancestors shows, it is seen as quite noble. The process of justifying these enterprises as noble is woven in the very narrative, in both covert and overt ways. This is quite a reflection of what the Renaissance spirit of Humanism and later on Enlightenment and its championing of Reason claimed to do, all the while quite artfully camouflaging its imperialist and capitalist intent. Whereas for those from the West it becomes quite justified to claim their right to the wealth of the East, when the same is done other way round it is shown as loot, plunder and piracy. There is shown a clear divide between these two pliers of the sea- whereas the Western are seafarers and explorers the only instances of those from the East are a pack of thieves or pirates. Here is a clear construction of binaries of course, in which the latter is savage and threatening other and the former a civilised self, propelled by a 'genuine' thirst of knowledge. Such distinction is held in place by reiterating in multiple ways the 'philanthropy' of the white man and the burden of his duty to aid the race that he not just imagines but gradually quite believes to be inferior.

When Standish's ship is attacked it is done so by 'oriental pirates' somewhere in the Bay of Bengal. It becomes difficult for a reader to understand the ethnic identity of these pirates because on one hand whereas they are described as 'Chinese' they are as we come to know the 'Singh Brotherhood' (or Singa in the Indian version of the series). Exactly who these group of pirates or evil-doers constitute becomes quite confusing, as through the series they seem to constitute people of quite diverse ethnic background, they have Chinese, Indians, people from different African tribes. But all of them are in one sweeping stoke clubbed together by the Phantom as the 'Orientals.' Their individual identities and differences are not significant here as they are to be just seen as the unruly Orientals to be properly schooled in the Western idea of good and bad. So for Phantom the differences between them do not matter, they are just a group of people who are not 'White' and to the white European they are as good as 'men from another planet' (Falk and Moore 113). From these oriental marauders of Standish's ship no crew member survives except Standish, who is washed on the shore of an island in the seas of Java. Here he is aided and most importantly reverentially accepted by natives of the island, the Bandar people or the 'pigmies who had never seen a white man before' (Falk and Moore 114). In spite of the fact that have not encountered a white man before they do not or rather are not made to consider him as a threat, rather even before Standish vows to become a Phantom, much before any of his 'philanthropic' stints at saving the natives, 'they care for him, treating him almost like a God' (Falk and Moore 114). Why? Is it because the way he looks, the colour of his skin? Here white is then 'reasonably' associated with the fair and trustworthy. There is clearly nothing innocent or incidental or accidental in this association that is made. It is a part of the politics of the comics. What we find here is the dissemination of an ideology very much a part of the colonial enterprise.

> On the British side, the entire grand business of colonization is affiliated to the grand structure of rationalist discourse. Groups of early colonizers, small enclaves within vast Indian society, claimed invincibility in the name of the rationalist programme- a view of the world that is clear, precise, instrumentalist, technical, scientific, effective, true, and above all beneficial to all who come in contact with it, both rulers and subjects. This is central to the self-image of the early colonizers, the white man with the burden, a gun in his hand and God on his side. (Kaviraj 54-5)

'If I fail law ends. The jungle will return to savagery,' says the twenty-first Phantom (*The Challenge of the Cannibals*). This is the very law and order that he would like to believe and make us believe that his ancestors have secured and ensured in the past four centuries. Standish, the first Phantom apart from vowing to avenge the death of his father by undoing the Singh pirates had more importantly consecrated his life and that of all the first born men of the family to fight crime in general and make the jungle a better place. And for these Phantoms, the white men who have forsaken their own land to bring ‘reason’ and ‘justice’ to the ‘savage’ lands, it then seems quite right to lay claim to the foreign land with its resources and people. The *Phantom* series is a clear instance of how racial identity can be made to decide and define justice. Here is a world were who deserves what, who gets to be the rightful claimant, depends on racial identity and the white man’s claim is almost an unquestionable given. Take all the fuss and fight for the ambergris found in the deep waters near Java for instance. This very ambergris worth million, Diana tells Jimmy, is discovered by her as she was on a research trip in the South Seas and quite accidently fell upon the graveyard of the whales (ambergris is primarily the grease of whales). Her intention as she repeatedly tries to set clear is not to become rich herself rather she wants to give the money from the ambergris to a charitable foundation for crippled children. But apart from being told that she has ‘discovered’ the ambergris we have no clue as to what gives her the sole right to decide the use of the huge sum of money from the ambergris. What gives Diana the claim over all the ambergris in the first place? And to what extent is her act at all a charitable one? This charitable institution as we cannot help noticing has been founded by none other than Diana’s father and after his death it is Diana who supervises its functions. Second, this ambergris was found in the coast of Java from where all of it is ‘charitably’ and hence ‘rightfully’ lifted and taken to New York. The money from the ambergris, no part of it goes for the development, aid, charity, or any such thing, of the natives of Java, whose good interest is claimed to be at the heart of Phantom who helps Diana and protects this ambergris from being ‘looted’ by Achmed Singh the pirate and his men. The act of Phantom on contrary to Achmed Singh’s looting becomes an instance of Phantom’s bravado and benevolence.

What comes out here is the notion of a world ‘defined by polarities[7]’ where the coloniser is not the conqueror but the modern, liberated, developed, man of reason and saviour of a race of underdeveloped, savage, unscientific people. The Phantom therefore is a meant to be the well-meaning colonizer who in order to fulfil his mission can never allow himself to be anything like the race of people he stays with. In spite of generations of his ancestors, all the previous Phantoms having stayed in the foreign lands among its natives and their customs, the distance and the difference are kept. The Phantom continues to keep himself in, what he considers to be, the ‘superior’ and ‘sanitized’ state of the West, and seating himself on a raised skull throne above the native tribesmen he refuses to let the polarities be broken. The twenty-first Phantom himself, with whom the series begins, in spite of having grown up in the island with its natives, like the witch-doctor Guran, continues to consider and maintain his difference. He is *the* white man for whom it is wise and healthy to keep away from the ‘mumbo-jumbo’ of the tribal people of the land. Even when it comes to choosing a partner for himself, the one woman who qualifies can be no one else but the American Diana Palmer, who also seems to be superior by the virtue of the very race she belongs to. The twenty-first Phantom before he was entrusted to carry on the oath of his forefathers has to be educated not in the land where he would spend most of his life but in a Western institution, the Oxford, and in the land (England) which will further solidify his identity as a white man and therefore a superior man who will then be eligible to venture to distant savage lands for the welfare of the natives who are too crude to know their own good.

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[7] For further reference, see Nandy.

Achmed Singh, one of the Singh Pirates, himself draws the difference between 'we' the orientals and 'they' the Western[8]. This difference is made all the more distinct throughout the comic series. This demarcation is clearly not per chance, or a reflection of the real. It is what colonizer would want to himself believe and make the native consider it as nothing but truth as well. The Phantom clearly does not admit himself to be the colonizer, and his avowed purpose is not to colonise the Bandars or the 'pigmy people' for his own profit, it is as if he is doing them a favour even at his own peril. This gives him a right to taking the decisions of the land more than the very people of it. The natives are also shown to be all too keen to see and accept the Phantom as their leader. This warped reasoning is embedded in the whole colonial enterprise of knowledge formation to serve its imperialistic end. Theoreticians like Althusser, Edward Said have shown how literature becomes a tool for describing, distributing and hammering this forged knowledge into place. Comics here also can be clearly seen to become a part of the politics of interpellating its readers.

The comics never have been an innocent piece of entertainment and so was not *Phantom*. Phantom and his heroic feats might have been quite entertaining for the Indian reader but he cannot identify himself as the Phantom. Ironically though, when *The Times of India* decided to publish a comics series Anant Pai interviewed potential readers and recommended Lee Falk's *Phantom* comics as a series to be published because he felt that 'the *Phantom* series set in a steamy, tribal Africa would probably be a good bet, as the milieu might seem familiar to Indians' (Rao 38). However, here the 'familiar' quotient for a native Indian is not comforting but unsettling as it will be with those who are represented as the inferior, superstitious, savage natives in need of a white saviour. The cultural lineage of the Phantom is not similar to that of the Indian reader. He is shown as not only different but superior. There is no point of possible identification with this 'hero', instead it makes the native reader conscious of his own inferior status and he desires to be like the white man, a desire that will be fanned but will remain unattainable. The people of the land Bengali/Denkali will be ever lacking in but at the same time also desirous of having what the Phantom has; the politics of representation of Phantom vis-ὰ-vis the natives of the land is such that the Indian reader would want to be like the Phantom even if he finds himself being represented closer in resemblance to the natives.

The *Phantom* and its world therefore becomes a reflection of the larger colonial discourse of the Orient and Occident at work, a discourse that with its pseudo knowledge cripples the confidence and self-esteem of a race of people, who are made to be seen as ones in need of saving from themselves, their savagery and superstition, their immaturity and ignorance, to justify their being subjugated, to justify imperialism. The narrative of *Phantom* is a clear instance of forging a continuous discourse through a seemingly innocent piece of entertainment to maintain the East/West binary at all costs and establish the West as the flag bearers of reason and rationality even at the cost of dehumanising the identity of a whole race of people.

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[8] ' "You American badmen------bah! I thought you had courage. We of the orient have our own way of getting what we want!" says Prince Achmed Singh to Fats Horgan' (Falk and Moore 24).

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