

The Colonial Enterprise in Contemporary British Short Sci-Fi

A Study of Peter F. Hamilton's Footvote and Manhattan in Reverse

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Abstract

Peter F. Hamilton writes about the world where the individual countries have disintegrated and the world is united. Humanity has attained progress and made distant planets inhabitable. Can the prosperity brought by “scientific industrialization” and the vanishing borders be the way to attain the grand ideal of equity or it is just the stage of full blown Capitalism where a few countries are controlling all others? This hyperglobal and hyperconnected world is actually the extension of Colonial Enterprise that has ended in real world long ago. Hamilton’s stories show direct Colonial control as well as Neocolonialism. This paper analyzes Hamilton’s two recent short stories “Manhattan in Reverse” (2011) and “Footvote” (2005) and the portrayal of the future Western world in them. As a popular British author, his vision of the future where Colonization and capitalism has engulfed the entire galaxy is an important commentary on the modern science fiction. Despite playing with the same old theme of colonialism, this science fiction is different in one aspect—it shows conscious realization that colonization is bad for the colonized.

Key Words: Peter F Hamilton, Manhattan in Reverse, Footvote, Civilization Project, Governmentality, Cultural Hegemony, White Man’s Burden, Conscientious Colonizer, Deterritorialization, Neocolonialism, Worlding, Homo Duplex

Peter F Hamilton is Britain’s one of the most popular science fiction authors with the sale of more than one million copies of his books. His *Void Trilogy* and *Commonwealth Saga* are perhaps the most famous series. Overtly a writer of space operas, which is a hard sci-fi genre, Hamilton actually writes soft science fiction—a subgenre of science fiction that deals with sociopolitical, economical and psychological issues bothering humanity in the contemporary world. It deals with soft sciences and social sciences like anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, and so on; as opposed to hard sciences like astronomy, physics, mathematics etc. Being science fiction, these issues are disguised as the problems of the future, although the problems of the

future cannot be imagined without having similar problems in the present. The issues in soft sci-fi are really the contemporary issues disguised in the speculative tales of the future. When it is too complicated to handle an issue in a realistic fiction, you do it in the science fiction.

Hamilton’s different series of novels are set in different speculative universes he created which may or may not have a link with each other. The characteristics of each of these universes and the issues traceable in them are different. Hamilton made his reputation as the writer of epic tomes of space operas. *Manhattan in Reverse* (2011), the book at the center of this research, is his second short story collection. The reason behind choosing *Manhattan in Reverse* is that the short

stories compiled in it were written by Hamilton intermittently in his career. Hamilton's career as a novelist spans two decades and being a novelist and not a short story writer, these short stories are more contemporary than his novels. As a result, this collection of short stories represents a more 'mature Hamilton'. Besides, some of these stories belong to Hamilton's universes he created for his more popular novels, giving a reader a sneak peek into the society and the politics in his future universes, which is the main motive of this research.

It can be argued that although science fiction was ever evolving due to the change in technological advancement and human aspiration, one element in sci-fi never changed and that was the predominance of the Caucasian race in the stories and the future world they dealt with. Not to mention, when the sci-fi paints grand future of the world united or the human civilization spanning galaxies, it is essentially recreating the same old trope of colonization which is problematic for a postcolonial reader. These things need to be called out and if possible, corrected. If the present progress of the world is lopsided, then the future condition shown in the science fiction is even more so. Whether created consciously or coming inadvertently from the author, it just shows the second-class status of the eastern and the African countries in the world. If corrected, sci-fi can be a beckon for inclusive growth and advancement of the world.

Manhattan in Reverse contains seven short stories: "Watching Trees Grow", "Footvote", "If at First...", "The forever Kitten", "Blessed by an Angel", "The Demon Trap", and "Manhattan in Reverse". The most common theme seen

in these stories is that of human expansion beyond earth. None of the stories, except "Watching Trees Grow" is set in a real traceable location and some of them are set on distant planet or intra-galactic societies, and yet, while writing the saga of advancement of human expansion and colonies on planets other than earth, the only ethnicity represented in the stories is a White Man. With this, Hamilton sounds like a co-conspirator in neocolonialism. The second story in the book, "Footvote" (originally written in 2005) is more on the lines of contemporary times. It shows the Dystopian conditions similar to the ones in present times. The story seems like a wish fulfillment fantasy of a western citizen because of the science fiction element added as a solution to the contemporary problem of collapsing economy and unchecked immigration. The story is set in the unspecified future England where the economy of the country is crumbling down and the politicians have failed the people again.

The overall condition in the story is reminiscent of the 2008 economic crisis of America and subsequently of the rest of the world when the people were losing jobs and the banks were going bankrupt with debt crisis. It was the first time American working class raised strong voice against Capitalism and the failed American Dream. It was around this time the protest against Wal-Mart started. People were disillusioned with Capitalism and the inept leadership. It was also the time when the voices against influx of migrants became stronger. As a result visa rules were made stricter and with Obama's change in policies, outsourcing to Indian IT companies came down. Similar to this, the inflation and unemployment in the story is so high that people have given up

hope. The government is asking citizens to be steadfast and make sacrifices. People are laughing it off because that's what they have been hearing from their leaders for a long time now. The cash-strapped country is in such miserable situation that "one tenth of the army had deserted" (Hamilton, 89), soldiers just stopped doing their job. Those who remained were forced to do civic duties as the civil employees were on strike.

"Why can't they take rubbish away like they used to?" Olivia asked.

"Not enough people to do that anymore, darling."

"There's hundreds of people standing around the streets all day", she pointed out. "It's scary. I don't like the park anymore."

She was right in a way. It wasn't the lack of people, of course, it was the money to pay them to work. (89)

The government has no money to pay people. There's unemployment. The story shows the Western juggernaut of Capitalism finally coming to halt. In such condition, citizens are offered an easy solution. One of the politicians called Murray opens a wormhole—an entrance to another inhabitable planet where the citizens can go and reside by leaving their country behind and start new lives. This is reminiscent to the people coming to America and establishing New England, a new world, free from the control of the fatherland. The colonization of this new land and subjugation of the native race, although nowhere mentioned in the text, is implicit. Although the world in the story is contemporary and the Colonialism has already ended, while talking about Britain, the story inadvertently reveals the

Neocolonial control that England still has over its previous colonies.

When the British economy is on the rocks and the citizens are leaving the country forever in favor of a New World, the people from the third world countries, especially from Belgium, India and North Africa started pouring into England. This shows biased attitude towards third world countries; that given a chance, they would come to the Western Countries no matter how poor the economy is. As soon as the wormhole is opened, the British people started selling their homes and every asset available for dirt cheap price to go to the other side. This is very akin to the way people in India and Pakistan sold their homes and assets overnight to cross the border during partition. Employment companies emerged overnight and started taking the applications of migrants for jobs. The houses of the British people were being sold to the migrants. Hamilton portrays this picture with melancholy as though the Britain is being cut into pieces and sold out to the migrants. It's the reversal of the trope of Colonialism. The people from colonies are buying the Britain now. Interestingly, it can be seen as the author's subconscious as a white British citizen; the guilt that what they had done could be done to them, that what they had earned would one day be taken away from them.

Although the story shows Hamilton's disdain for opportunistic Asians and Africans and pessimism about the Western economy; from the perspective of those from the erstwhile colonies, it appears like the victory of the colonies. There was the time when the Britain ruled over the colonies. Now is the time when the migrants are being sold "little bits of England" (93). Finally these are the people

who will acquire space at the Center of the world and set things right. From the Center, it looks like the story of failure of the world economy but from the subaltern point of view, it's the story of the subaltern victory.

England is divided between two groups—those who want to leave and those who want to stay. Murray, who has opened the wormhole has certain rules for who is allowed on the other side called New Suffolk where citizen won't be allowed to own weapons and where the culture would be compulsory "monoculture" (86). Going on new planet and residing is the way of Colonizing it. Murray is populating a strange land with people and he would be their ruler. This is the Imperialist method Spivak calls Worlding; when the world is brought into being, when the land is made into the New World. It's like starting a New Civilization on a New Land. This is similar to the way Robinson Crusoe populates his island. Murray allows only the people of Caucasian race and belonging to certain professions. On the other side, "no organized religion would be permitted" (97) and Labor Party, Conservative Party, Liberal, Communist, Nationalist Party members are not allowed. While giving them an opportunity for a new start, Murray is disallowing them any individuality and annihilating any reason for conflict. Not to mention, the people allowed through the wormhole are only those who made very successful careers for themselves in England. Murray is creating a new world, bringing it into being. He is deterritorializing England and reterritorializing New Suffolk. It is a carrot and stick approach. He's governing the bodies of the people by disallowing them common human rights. He is showing utopian dream to people that would soon

turn to dystopia. Here Murray comes as an ultimate Colonizer.

Everyone always talked of North-South divide, and the class war, and the distance between rich and poor. But it was just an ideology, politicians lobbying spinning sound bites at each other. Murray went and made it physical. (95)

"In the land of the new arrivals, the owner of the machine tool is the king" (104). So the people who are leaving are carrying all mechanical devices they can. This just hints at the way the new economic and political system that will develop in the new world. The person who has maximum useful tools would rent them to others to do the job and would capitalize on that.

England is divided basically between the people with leftist and rightist ideologies. Rightists are choosing to go and the leftists are not ready to abandon rest of the people who are not welcome through the wormhole. Not to mention the leftists aren't allowed the other side of the wormhole either.

Hamilton is derisive of the Communists (Commies) and it shows in a character called Zoe. She's a drinking, swearing woman who doesn't queue up to get into the public transport to New Suffolk as she thinks it is a bourgeois concept. She goes for rallies against the rightists and the government and gets into physical fight with the policemen. She is against rich people leaving because poor aren't allowed to leave. Zoe isn't portrayed in a very good light and through her, Hamilton criticizes the leftists or anyone who fights for the injustice and lack of equal opportunities for that matter, whether the white leftists or the third world postcolonialists. The story is a neat take on

failing Capitalist influence of the western countries and the colonial reversal.

Another interesting story, the last one in the collection, is “Manhattan in Reverse” (2011). The title itself is the indication that the story refers to the Manhattan Island in America. In 1626, Peter Minuit, the Director General of the New Netherlands province purchased some land from a Native American tribe of Wappinger Confederacy by giving them clothes and trinkets costing sixty guilders. That was proudly referred to in the American history as the best land deal man has ever known. That was the deal of the Manhattan Island, which measures approximately 87km². Although Americans are proud of this deal, it’s an epitome of example of the exploitation of natives.

If aliens visit us, the outcome would be much as when Columbus landed in America, which didn't turn out well for the Native Americans. (Hawking, 2010)

Here Hawking warns about dangers of space exploration. What is perturbing here is the tacit approval almost all the Western scientists have towards Colonialism. Hamilton’s eponymous story in the collection *Manhattan in Reverse* deals with this topic where human is an alien species for the population on another planet. It is written in the tone of an adventure story where detective Paula Mayo solves the law and order situation on the distant planet that man has Colonized and the natives are revolting violently, pelting stones at humans and their houses, trying to kill them. These natives are Onids—six legged kangaroo like creatures initially categorized as non-sentient by the xenobiologists, as if this justifies Colonizing them.

The story shows a group of smugglers who smuggle Onids, planning to sell them as living metal detectors due to their magnetic sense. They plan to sell them on earth with genetic modification in place of domestic dogs. A part of this planet is replete with raw gold hidden in unexplored hills that a species of Onids living in that region can easily access due to their metal detecting ability. This smuggling group is also stealing the gold nuggets that Onids use as totem in the grave of their deceased ones. The story shows Paula reaching to this smuggling group which is the cause of the native Onids’ revolt. She does this with the help of Dino—a xenobiologist who later emerges as the figure of a cunning Colonizer.

Interestingly, Dino is initially shown as a well-wisher of the natives, he is a good character pitted against the morally corrupt smugglers. He is a Conscientious Colonizer who genuinely wants to do good do the natives but only to alleviate his guilt of exploiting them without their knowledge. When the smugglers are arrested, Dino learns the secret of Onids, about their ability to find gold and decides to use it to his advantage. Dino realizes that Onids’ attraction is not to gold nuggets in particular but to any shiny object. He takes out flashgem, a shiny trinket from his pocket and gives it to an Onid. Seeing that it is shinier than a gold nugget, the Onid takes the flashgem and gives Dino a gold nugget in exchange. Dino however, coerces the Onid to find the biggest nugget before exchanging his flashgem. Realizing his trick is successful, he decides to exchange as many flashgems as he can with gold nuggets and become rich. This exploitation of the Onids is covered by Dino’s noble thought when he declares using the money to buy the island

and build a wildlife sanctuary for the Onids to protect them from smuggling and exploitation. The problem here is that Dino plans to buy an island when the natives cannot give consent to sell it, making it akin to capturing a territory. The island, it appears, is already claimed by the American government Dino plans to buy it from. Comparing this deal, where Dino is buying an island for the price of flashgems with the Manhattan deal might be an effort to praise the business sense of the colonizers, but it is colonization nevertheless.

It is important to note that Dino emerges as a Homo Duplex here. He is cunning and shrewd and wants to buy an island. But he also has a conscience where he wants to protect the Onids from the exploitation of others. But this doesn't necessarily make him a good person. The trope here is similar to Frank Herbert's *Dune* where one group of colonizers ultimately outsmarts the other group of colonizers. Who is good and who is evil hardly matters because the natives are colonized anyway. Dino's desire to help the Onids can be seen mimicking current efforts by America and other European countries to help Africa. If

they hadn't exploited them, the Africans wouldn't need the help anyway. This can be seen as an effort to alleviate the guilt. Dino in the story is deterritorializing the natives. Their displacement, just like that of the Native Americans, wouldn't be positive in any sense. It would be a state from which they will never be able to rise.

Both these stories deal with the future of colonization or neocolonization. The stories show that the western countries might never lose their grip over the world and their domination in one way or the other will continue. However, the anxiety of the texts is what they don't quite reveal—the influx of immigrants in “Footvote” towards the center of the world and the guilt in Dino's heart in “Manhattan in Reverse”. Although imperialism has continued in Hamilton's version of the future, what has inadvertently seeped into the stories is the conscientious realization that the British control over the rest of the world was bad and that what England has achieved by exploiting the colonies could one day be reclaimed by its rightful owners. This is, as they say, one small step for these stories, one giant leap for science fiction.

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