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Missionary Ethics and Colonial Power: A Bakhtinian Reading of Father Krick in *The Black Hill*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ethical positioning of the figure of Father Krick in Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*, a novel situated in what is now known as Arunachal Pradesh in India by bringing Postcolonial theory into conversation with Bakhtin's idea of moral accountability. Through close textual analysis, it argues that Krick's encounters with Indigenous communities are shaped by an orientalist framework that embeds his missionary efforts within wider imperial agendas, ultimately contributing to epistemic and physical violence. Employing Bakhtin's critique of "theoretism," the study shows how Krick depends on rigid, repeatable images of the "Orient," that have historically facilitated both colonial and evangelical authority. A Bakhtinian reading of ethical responsibility further demonstrates Krick's displacement of culpability onto colonial institutions, exposing the instrumental and ethically compromised nature of his professed "love" for the natives. By highlighting Krick's orientalist worldview and his refusal to recognise the interdependence of religious and political domains, the paper challenges assumptions about the autonomy of **the religious sphere**. It also situates the novel's critique within current debates in Arunachal Pradesh, where renewed attention to the Freedom of Religion Act reveals how contemporary legal ambiguities around conversion threaten to perpetuate epistemic violence.

KEYWORDS

Father Krick, Postcolonial theory, theoretism, moral accountability, love, Orientalism

Introduction

The figure of Father Nicholas Krick, the non-native French Jesuit priest in Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill* (2018) offers a particularly complex entry point into the intersection of postcolonial studies and Bakhtinian thought. Mikhail Bakhtin's early philosophical writings, especially his essay, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, move beyond his more familiar theories of language to propose a profoundly ethical vision of being. For Bakhtin, the "self" is neither abstract nor autonomous. It is always located in a particular, unrepeatable context and it must exist in participation with this specific world to which it is answerable for its "presence." In other words, the self cannot claim any "alibi in being." A human subject, by virtue of presence and participation in life, cannot claim detachment or innocence from the world in which they act. This Bakhtinian ethical stance resonates powerfully within a postcolonial framework, where the question of "presence", i.e. who is permitted to be where, under what structures of power, and **with what justification and effect, becomes central to how imperial authority is produced, sustained, and legitimised.**

The Black Hill, set in the mid-nineteenth century in the region now known as Arunachal Pradesh, narrates the encounter between Father Krick, a French Jesuit missionary en route to Tibet, and the Indigenous Abor and Mishmi peoples inhabiting the region, tracing the chain of events that culminates in the death of the Mishmi chief Kajinsha. Situated in the early phase of colonial contact, the narrative reveals the ways an ostensibly benign missionary journey becomes entangled in the violence attending imperial expansion. While Father Krick appears to conceive of his mission as distinct from the apparatus of colonial power, his presence is nonetheless implicated in forms of cultural, epistemological, and ultimately physical violence enabled by imperial structures. Bringing postcolonial theory into dialogue with Bakhtin's ethics of answerability, this paper examines the ethical and political implications of Krick's moral self-positioning, arguing that his insistence on separating his missionary endeavour from the broader imperial operations facilitates a troubling evasion of responsibility for the cultural and epistemic violence resulting from his presence and actions.

The ethical tensions identified in Father Krick's self-positioning, while rooted in the historical setting of the narrative in Arunachal Pradesh, continue to resonate in the post-colonial political climate of the region, where entanglement of state power and religion continues to shape debates around religious freedom, conversion, and state authority. The recent revival of the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act (APFRA) and the anxieties surrounding the erosion of Indigenous faiths and cultures

underscore the persistence of questions about cultural autonomy, political control, and the ethical claims of the nation-state, questions that echo, in altered form, the very dynamics dramatized in the novel. By situating *The Black Hill* within these intertwined historical and contemporary contexts, this paper investigates how Dai's novel interrogates the ethical claims embedded in missionary and state ideologies alike, challenging the presumed separation of the religious and the political, and revealing their deep and enduring entanglement.

Father Krick's denial of colonial association

Nicolas Krick's story begins with him embarkation on a missionary journey to Tibet, a decision initially presented as being motivated by his desire to **rediscover meaning** in his ecclesiastical vocation rather than to spread the word of the Gospel: "More than the challenge of carrying the Gospel to unknown parts of the world," Krick "was seeking an experience of the passionate union with the divine" **(Dai 15).** Serving in the protected parish of France where preaching and everyday rituals had turned mundane and lost meaning and spiritual depth, he was looking for a renewed connection with God as he set out on his journey to Tibet through India. This union with the divine, he believed, "would come only through the path of love and service" (Dai 15).

Furthermore, following his arrival in India, Krick disavows his association with the British colonial authority on multiple occasions. Upon being invited by the British political agent, Captain Vetch, on an expedition to meet the Abor people, he initially rejects his offer, not wanting "to be part of what he thought was a military mission" (Dai 87). When Krick finally joins Vetch after being reassured that the meeting with the Abor was intended to "make peace with them," on sensing tension in the meeting, he is seen regretfully reflecting that "if he were killed now he would be dying with the English, for the English, when he would have preferred to die for his own cause" (Dai 89). Likewise, later in the narrative, on being interrogated by a Tibetan official following his arrival in the Tibetan village of Sommeou, Krick makes sure to dissociate himself from the **British colonisers,** asserting, "I am a man of religion. I am not British. I am French" (Dai 117). Krick's insistence on **his identity as a French missionary,** and his reluctance to die for an English cause underscore his desire to be seen as an autonomous missionary, operating independently of the British colonial project. **In claiming that his missionary journey is primarily driven by personal, spiritual longing, and his belief that authentic union with God can only be attained through the path of "love,"** Krick emerges, at the onset of the narrative, as someone seeking personal salvation through sincerity, struggling to remain spiritually sincere in a world saturated with violent hierarchical structures.

Orientalism: The Pernicious Legacy of "Theoretism" Shared by Mission and Empire

Contrary to Father Krick's benevolent assertions that his missionary journey operates independently of the colonial project, a close reading of the text reveals latent orientalist assumptions that underpin the cultural and discursive foundations of both missionary activity and the imperial project. Orientalism, the Eurocentric, stereotypical depiction of the Orient by the West, can be understood as a form of what Bakhtin refers to as "theoretism," the tendency to explain and categorise events, actions, utterances, and human beings through a specific theory or theoretical logic. The theoretical cast of mind sees individuals and separate moments in time through the lens of repetition. Thus, distinct moments or events come to be perceived as instances of repetitions of a particular theory or set of rules. Vehemently opposing such systems of deterministic generalisations based on repeatability, Bakhtin asserts, "it is a sad misunderstanding…that truth can only be the sort of truth that is put together out of general moments, that the truth of a proposition is precisely what is repeatable in it" (Morson 96).

If, as Bakhtin suggests, "theoretism" rests on the assumption that "truth" is reducible to what can be abstracted into generalised, repeatable propositions, then orientalism, the centuries-old unified body of knowledge, produced by Western writers (scholars, missionaries, travellers, novelists, and diplomats), and characterised by a dualistic logic that draws rigid distinctions between the "civilised West" and the "uncivilised East," represents a particularly pernicious historical manifestation of this logic.

Orientalist discourse enacts a Eurocentric, racialised theoretism in which the "truth" of the Orient is produced not through dialogic engagement with its irreducible, lived particularities but through the abstraction of those realities into essentialised types and frozen images. These abstractions, circulated as stable, recognisable "knowledge" in the form of stereotypes, function as a repeatable currency of representation, easily deployable across time and space in the service of both imperial control and missionary expansion. In other words, orientalist stereotyping entails the removal of lived specificities from their spatio-temporal context, reducing complex dynamic lives into fixed categories. The abstraction of lived experience enacts a dynamic central to Bakhtin's critique of representation, a phenomenon that Bakhtin scholar, Caryl Emerson, refers to as the "corruption peculiar to images" (410). While Bakhtin acknowledges the human need to construct, to quote Emerson, "circumscribed image(s) essential for our practical functioning in the world" as we "continually do others the favour of

(provisionally) fixing their identity," "by bestowing an image" on them, he cautions against any "form-shaping" activity that seeks to fix identities "once and for all time." As Emerson notes, such operations remove objects "from space and time, into some autonomous, unanswerable Utopian sphere where they were so uninterruptable that there was nothing an ordinary outside consciousness could add to them, no potential dialogue for good or ill, no medium of exchange, no way one could leave one's mark" (Emerson 410).

The theoretism of orientalism, thus, lies in its practice of removing "objects," from their specific spatio-temporal contexts, i.e. their lived historical context, repackaging stereotype as "truth." In doing so, orientalism produces an easily recognisable and repeatable "knowledge" of "the Orient" that serves imperial interests, erases lived difference, and forecloses ethical engagement with the Oriental Other as a unique and unfinalisable human subject.

The erasure of the spatio-temporal context within orientalist discourse becomes immediately apparent at the onset of the novel, particularly reflected in the narrative commentary on the European Church leaders' "gaze" toward Tibet. When the narrative notes, "what drew their (the Church leader's) gaze most were the unexplored mountains of the high Himalaya and the mysterious kingdom of Tibet…remote (and) mystical," (Dai 14) it reproduces familiar orientalist tropes that construct Tibet as an essentialised, mystical space in which time and history appear suspended. The characterisations of both India and Tibet as spaces "deeply mystical" or "shrouded in mystery" **functioned** to define the essential modernity and rationality of Western culture by projecting contrary qualities onto the Oriental Other (King 147). Peter Bishop, underscoring how Western constructions of Tibet **relied o**n suspending spatio-temporal context to serve imperial interests, notes, "Tibet's frontiers were equivalent to the boundary of a temenos, a sacred place" within which "time and history are suspended," prompting Western commentators to depict Tibet as a space "in deep freeze," "left on the shelf," "a museum," defined by "its mythology, its reincarnations, its supposedly unchanging tradition." With little to no interest being shown in its dynamic, "colourful history," and evolving institutions, Bishop emphasises the West's fabrication of the static, timeless Tibet in service of imperial interest: "It was the Western imagination which needed an unchanging Tibet outside time and history. How nicely this mystical fantasy dovetailed with imperial demands. …The mystic East remains a timeless memorial to a bygone age – the time of the ancients" (Bishop 34).

A similar orientalist attitude likewise informs Father Krick's first encounter with

the hills that lay beyond British administrative control in the 1850s when the events of the narrative unfold. His impression of the landscape is infused with a language that recalls the Edenic representation of the Orient found in some of the "imaginative geographies," the self-serving mental mappings of the Orient projected onto its space by Orientalist narratives.

On his way to the Mishmi Hills, enraptured by "the beauty of creation unfolding before him" Krick reflects: "Here, there is nothing to awaken passion, pride and jealousy…Everything around was peaceful, as it must have been in the first days of creation" (Dai 93). His description of the hills as "green, pristine, and silent" **(Dai 93)** reduces the hills to a homogenised landscape, implicitly extending its essential purity to its inhabitants by stripping them off the most ordinary of human emotions of vanity, envy or passion. The evocation of the "first days of creation" carries a distinctly romantic orientalist undertone informed by a "nostalgia for lost origins," "an important strand in the Western representation of the 'mystic East'" (King 147).

Associating a sense of purity with the hills endows them with a Biblical timelessness, figuring them as morally uplifting and positioning them as a spiritual counterpoint to the industrial, modern West. Often prevalent in nineteenth century Romantic and Orientalist representations of India -one of the most popular of these narratives being the projection of India as the primordial "cradle of civilisation," promoted by scholars such as the German philosopher, Friedrich Schlegel in his book, *On the Language and Wisdom of India* (1808)- these tendencies were born out of the post-Enlightenment spiritual crisis of the West dominated by rationalistic thoughts and secular values and consequently, marked by a yearning for spiritual anchoring. The constructions of a primeval, timeless, essentialised, mystical Orient served the Occidental Self's need for a sense of continuity with the pristine, innocent past lost with the modernisation and rationalisation of the post-Enlightenment West. So, when Krick contemplates at the foothill, "If Voltaire had spent time here, he would have become a servant of God, …for in these wild hills, the work of an all-powerful God was truly manifest under the transparent veil of nature," (Dai 93) his reflection exemplifies the Orientalist tendency to deploy the Orient as a site through which the West's spiritual longings are articulated and fulfilled. The assumption that the perceived purity of the landscape in its supposedly "natural state" could transform even a sceptic like Voltaire into a believer underscores the romantic-spiritual idealisation of the East as a redemptive and morally restorative space for the Western imagination. **As a result, the hills are not engaged as lived, historically situated spaces but are instead transformed "once and for all," into symbolic**

surfaces upon which Western desires are projected.

Krick's Edenic vision is therefore rooted in a totalising representational gesture of fixing the identity of the Indigenous space conclusively, exemplifying the "corruption peculiar to images" that Emerson refers to. By bestowing an image of primordial purity upon the hills and their inhabitants, the narrative forecloses their historical agency and lived complexity, transforming them into static figures within an Orientalist imaginary rather than participants in a shared, unfolding human reality.

Such projections, Edward Said suggests in his seminal book *Orientalism*, took a specifically fictional turn in the writings of French scholarly "pilgrims" to the Orient. Said distinguishes these writings from the narratives of British colonisers, who, possessing direct control over parts of the Orient, employed a "material imagination" "limited by the realities of administration, territorial legality, and executive power," leaving little "room for imaginative play" (Said 169). In contrast, French "pilgrims," lacking sovereign control and guided by the French "mission civilisatrice" as a "second-best political" substitute, wrote from a sense of "acute loss," longing, and imaginative projection. They "planned and projected for, imagined, ruminated about places that were principally in their minds; Theirs was the Orient of memories, suggestive ruins, forgotten secrets, hidden correspondences" (Said 169), often drawing on memories of ancient civilizations, the Crusades, or the Biblical past.

Against this backdrop of orientalist imagination, the French Jesuit priest, Father Krick's description of the hills as "peaceful as it must have been in the first days of creation" can plausibly be read as informed by the French "interest in the Biblical past," that French pilgrims often projected onto Oriental landscape. Moreover, Krick's perception of the hills as a space that, by dint of its "innocent" or "pure" character, could transform even a sceptic like Voltaire into a believer, also recalls to mind the narratives of writers who "found in the Orient a locale sympathetic to their private myths, obsessions, and requirements" and consequently exploited "the Orient in their work so as in some urgent way to justify their existential vocation" (Said 170). In this light, Krick's decision to undertake a missionary journey to Tibet in search of a renewed spiritual connection with God, one that had been lost in the mundane ritualistic nature of his duties in his French parish, may initially appear to stem from a purely personal, apolitical motivation. Yet, when read within the framework of "seeing" articulated by Said, it becomes evident that his seemingly private and non-political quest

remains inevitably enmeshed in, and dialogically shaped by the Orientalist discourse through which he perceives and inhabits the world.

While the Orient, imagined as a counterpoint to the post-Enlightenment Occidental world, and as a site for contemplating Western anxieties functioned in Romantic orientalist representations as a screen for the West's projection of its own spiritual crisis, the essentialist characterisation of the East as "mystical", "innocent", unchanging, and hence, "non-rational" simultaneously helped solidify notions of Western modernity and rationality in ways that legitimised imperial interests and the colonial "civilising mission." Commenting on the West's convenient essentialist projection of the East as both, a site of nostalgia for a spiritual past, and as a backward, primitive space, Richard King in his book, *Orientalism and Religion* (2001), notes:

This nostalgia for origins provided, on the one hand, a much needed sense of continuity with archaic traditions and the natural world and, on the other, a way of defining the West as quintessentially 'modern' in contrast to the 'primitive' or 'traditional' cultures of the East. Asia in general and India in particular came to be seen as the West's gateway to its own past – to the lost innocence and childhood of humanity (147).

Pivoted on the assumption of linear temporality, wherein history was imagined unfolding along a single progressive continuum, in this mode of thought, the Western civilisation represented the pinnacle of social and cultural evolution, while the non-Western societies were cast as "primitive" or "backward," capable of progress only through the adoption of Western norms and values. This logic carried over to the Christian theological discourse, which arranged religions along an evolutionary ladder, placing non-Christian faiths on the lower rungs or depicting them as deviations of Christianity. Such violent characterisations of non-Christian religions, marked by a supposed "lack" within Western Christian scholasticism, in turn, fed into and legitimised the dominant Euro-centric narratives of the so-called "civilising mission."

Such orientalist assumptions also shaped Christian theological and scholastic traditions that drew comparisons between Christian and Non-Christian religions to gauge their convertibility, treating the latter as preliminary stages in a teleological history culminating in Christianity. The impulse to compare and hierarchise religions can be observed in earlier scholarships of religiously inclined Sanskritists such as Monier-Williams, whose comparative studies promoted a "quasi-Darwinian" hierarchy of religions in the Indian context. Framing "Vaishnavism as a lower evolutionary stage of Christianity," these works **suggest** that Indian and Chinese "heathens" possessed a *lumen*

natural, a capacity to understand morality and metaphysics through reason, if not through divine revelation, thereby making them suitable candidates for Christian conversion (Tiné 4). Later in the 20th century, building on earlier scholarships, Fulfilment theology, most notably articulated by J. N. Farquhar, "the codifier of fulfilment," in his book, *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913), drew on ritualistic affinities between non-Christian religions and Christianity, to claim that non-Christian religions are not false but incomplete anticipations of Christianity, awaiting fulfilment in Christ. As noted by Harald Fischer-Tiné in his article, "Third-Stream Orientalism: J. N. Farquhar, the Indian YMCA's Literature Department, and the Representation of South Asian Cultures and Religions (ca. 1910–1940)," Fulfilment Theology cast Christianity as the telos of religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, "discovering" Christian elements in these religions, portraying their adherents as already moving towards Christian "truth" and thus ready for conversion: "Its discursive strategy was fairly straightforward: Christian elements were "discovered" in South Asian religious traditions, which were then read as evidence for the fact that Hindus and Buddhists were on the path to Christianity and hence prepared for conversion" (Tiné 4).

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A comparable dynamic can be traced in Father Krick's response to his first encounter with a Tibetan ritual, in the village of Sommeou. His initial approach to the ritual reflects a similar tendency to identify ritualistic similarities between the Tibetan religion and the Catholic religion. Initially, Krick sees the rite performed by the lama as an "opportunity to actually witness something that he had only read about in accounts that drew ritualistic affinities between the Catholic religion and the religion of Tibet" (Dai 125). Seen within the broader historical context in which such comparative strategies have been used to infantilise non-Christian religions and subsume them within the fold of Christianity, Krick's attitude reads as politically charged and violent.

Furthermore, although Krick approaches the Tibetan ritual hoping to discover "ritualistic affinities" with Catholicism, his expectation is quickly thwarted. He does not find much commonality between the Tibetan ritual he sees and his Catholic rituals except for the fact that the "lama's prayer beads resembled the Catholic rosary and the "chanting construed as the equivalent of ten Hail Marys" **(Dai 125).** However, his inability to "believe" the Tibetan ritual stems from the fact that it "seemed more like exorcism spells to cast out unseen sorcerers and house demons," **(Dai 125)** unlike the devotional purposes the rosary and the chanting of Hail Marys are employed for in Catholicism. Father Krick cannot "believe" in the ritual because it does not map onto Catholic

categories of meaning or practice, his response thus reflecting an orientalist tendency to evaluate a non-Christian religion solely through the interpretive frameworks of his own Catholic faith.

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What further consolidates Krick's orientalist posture is the manner in which he interprets the audience's response to the religious ceremony. Unable to invest in the ritual himself, he positions himself as a detached observer, explaining the "animated" audience's emotional reaction -"a bright light was burning in the eyes of all the onlookers"- in terms of the universal need to believe. His claim that it was the "incurable longing for the mystical passion to unite with the divine" that constituted the "impact of the lama and the magical properties of his cure that consoled the poor and the desolate," (Dai 125) implicitly diminishes the inherent spiritual efficacy of Tibetan religion. By locating the power of the ritual not in its own religious authority but in the psychology of its practitioners, and by attributing the ritual's impact to a generalized human longing rather than to its intrinsic spiritual truth, Krick's account reinforces a hierarchical opposition between Christianity and Tibetan religion, thereby sustaining an orientalist framework rather than fostering genuine cross-cultural dialogue.

The structural imbrication of Father Krick's missionary enterprise within imperial networks

. **Father Krick's attempts to distance himself from colonial authorities despite exhibiting an orientalist attitude that informed both missionary and colonial projects exemplify a broader historical pattern in which moral or spiritual enterprises operating under colonialism often professed autonomy from imperial agendas while remaining deeply entangled in the structures of power they purported to transcend.** Although revisionist historians like Andrew Porter insist on only a tenuous compatibility between missions and empire, arguing that "By and large most missionaries did not want to be imperial propagandists and colonial rulers, any more than they intended to be consistent or uncritical supporters of capitalist enterprise," (Porter 323) critically potent accounts such as Andrea Paras', while taking into account, Porter's arguments, asserts the impossibility of avoiding "the fact that, at the very least, the missionary societies benefited indirectly from Britain's interest in promoting civilization" (Paras 36). Paras goes on to assert, "…even though many missionary organizations later attempted to retreat from their imperial affiliations, "colonial ambitions…acquired momentum and moral legitimacy through their associations with the missionary enterprise" (Paras 38).

Even as certain missionaries attempted to dissociate their work from the colonial project and its civilising mission, their missionary zeal to convert non-Christians inevitably reproduced the violent orientalist logic of Christianity's presumed superiority as a Western religion. Noting the symbiotic relationship between the missionary enterprise and the project of empire, Andrea Paras argues, "Missionaries' belief in the importance of conversion provided impetus to British imperialism" even when some "missionary agencies were often wary of their connections to the colonial cause" (Paras 39) and missionaries came to be accepted "as legitimate agents of empire" (Paras 37).

The historical complicity between the colonial and missionary enterprises problematises Krick's attempt to assert spiritual autonomy from colonial structures as he frames his journey through the colonial landscape as a quest for personal or transcendent purpose rather than one serving imperial interest. In fact, Krick's claim to autonomy from colonial structures is complicated by the structural imbrication of his missionary enterprise within imperial networks, made evident from the very conception of his journey in France, when the Missions Étrangères de Paris strategically determined his route to Tibet through British-governed India rather than through China. Unlike the path through China, that involved the risk of antagonising the hostile Peking government, the route through India was considered the "only alternative," "the only accessible route," because India "was an area equally distant and untried but … was ruled by the British" (Dai 38).

Just as the Missions Étrangères de Paris had predicted, the British colonial presence in India proves to be a blessing for Krick's mission throughout his journey. His endeavour is facilitated by the British colonial government in India, the colonial officers serving as the "providential nutcrackers" for the preaching of the Gospel, with Krick receiving "the kindest attention and help from the British authorities in the person of Captain Reid, Captain Smith and the political agent Hamilton Vetch who was camped in Saikwa at the time" (Dai 87).

The support from the British colonial authorities ranged from a letter of recommendation issued by Captain Dalton, the magistrate of Guwahati, authorising his "exploratory journey" into the Mishmee and Abor territories, to privileged access to the private library of a friend who commanded the garrison at Nowgong where he came across accounts of British travellers who had attempted to cross into Tibet from the eastern frontier (Dai 58). The ethnographic objective of this "exploratory" journey to the Abor hills which involved making "a personal assessment" of their culture and habits otherwise deemed inaccesible (Dai 88),

alongside his privileged access to knowledge produced by British travellers, echoes epistemic strategies characteristic of colonial modernity, wherein knowledge of the Other was produced by the coloniser as a means of cultural domination and imperial consolidation.

When Krick later expresses his intention to render himself "useful to science, geography, and history" aided by the "good sextant" gifted by Vetch as he embarks on his journey to the Mishmee hills, his presence becomes further embedded within the colonial apparatus of cartographic knowledge-production that underpinned imperial expansion. (Dai 91). This ostensibly neutral pursuit of science, geography, and history by the missionary, aided by the sextant gifted by a British political agent, once again, foregrounds the entanglement between strategies of colonial knowledge production and the missionary enterprise. This alignment between colonial epistemic practices and the missionary project becomes more explicit as the narrative shifts from epistemic forms of domination to overt coercion. After the Abor people refuse to assist Krick in his journey to Tibet, the British political agent Vetch secures Krick's passage through Mishmee territory by compelling the Khampti chief, Chowsa, to act as his guide. This coercion takes the form of a veiled threat involving the chief's son. When Vetch tells Chowsa, "We will look after your son while you travel with the priest," Chowsa realises that "they were using his little boy…to force him to take the stupid priest into the Mishmee hills" (Dai 90). The epistemic violence implicit in Krick's association with colonial authority ultimately escalates into material violence later in the narrative when following Krick's death at the hands of a Mishmi chief, British forces respond by killing Kajinsha, mistakenly identifying him as responsible for the priest's death.

The merging of Krick's missionary enterprise and the wider colonial project becomes legible even in the semiotics of his attire and his overall bearing as he embarks on his journey to the Mishmee territory. As he traverses further into the Indigenous space, his "cassock," emblematic garment of clerical authority, is replaced by "a cotton blouse with black trimming and pants of the same woven fabric tucked into big boots." This sartorial change, coupled with the rifle he carries, produces an "overall unlikely appearance" that stands "in odd contrast" to "his missionary cross," "the only indication of the religious nature of the mission" (Dai 92).

His satchel, filled with objects such as the Bible, the breviary, a medicine box, the sextant, and "a supply of ink and paper," embodies the instruments of colonial religious authority, knowledge production, mapping and the colonial appropriation of scientific and

medical authority. Each of these items, representing a different dimension of colonial knowledge production and control, gestures towards the covert mechanisms of imperial power that underpinned missionary enterprise transforming the satchel into a condensed symbol, a metonym, for the cultural hegemony and exploitative dimensions of the broader colonial project. While the Bible and the breviary represent colonial religious authority, the medicine box symbolises the scientific and humanitarian discourse used to legitimise empire. Likewise, while the sextant signifies navigational mastery that enabled the colonial exploration leading to the control over the colonised space, the writing materials evoke the power of colonial documentation, record-keeping, and the production of colonial knowledge.

Together, these accoutrements form a portable ensemble of epistemic power through which the colonizer perceives, interprets, and orders the world. The satchel, therefore, does not remain merely a personal possession of Krick's but rather transforms into a metonymic representation of colonial epistemology, implicating him in the colonial enterprise, for these very items constitute the mechanisms through which cultural colonization operates, enacting the subtle yet pervasive forms of epistemic and ideological domination that sustained imperial hegemony and facilitated the subjugation of the colonized "other."

The institutional patronage accorded by the colonial administration to Krick's missionary endeavours, the convergence of his epistemic practices with the knowledge-producing mechanisms of by the colonial state, coupled with Vetch's coercive intervention to secure the cooperation of the Khampti chief, Chowsa, collectively illuminate the structural entanglement and mutual imbrication of missionary and colonial projects.

This nexus between evangelical and imperial enterprises becomes particularly conspicuous when Krick, identifies himself as a *sahib*, the nomenclature reserved by the natives for British colonial functionaries, and insists upon the deferential treatment customarily extended to such figures by reminding the natives of the sahib's "generosity" who "receive you well and give you presents." In appropriating the title *sahib*, Krick inadvertently discloses the internalisation of colonial hierarchies and an orientalist sense of entitlement, revealing how missionary subjectivity was inflected by the symbolic and discursive authority of empire.

Father Krick's Evasion of Moral Accountability: Colonial authority as an alibi

Navigating this specific colonial spatio-temporal context structured by the complicity between colonial enterprise and missionary project, and sustained by a

hierarchy that positions him as the dominant "Self," Father Krick's attempt to distance himself from the colonisers while simultaneously demonstrating orientalist attitudes, reveals the contradictions inherent in his theoretical disposition. Krick's persistent effort to distinguish his mission from imperial activity produces an artificial bifurcation between evangelism and empire, both culturally rooted in orientalist thought. This rhetorical separation obscures the shared orientalist assumptions underpinning both undertakings and allows him to shift responsibility away from his missionary enterprise, equally laden with orientalist underpinnings, onto the colonisers. In doing this, Krick commits the moral error of resorting to an "alibi" for ethical responsibility. Invoking an "alibi for being" exposes his unwillingness to confront his own complicity within the colonial framework, and foregrounds his evasion of accountability. As Bakhtin scholar, Gary Saul Morson notes, "For Bakhtin, the theoretical cast of mind not only oversimplifies the world… but also entails yet another moral error…people try to create what Bakhtin called an "alibi" for ethical responsibility. We shift responsibility to someone or something else and behave as if we were not there – as if we had an alibi and so could not be responsible" (Morson 99). In the context of Krick, by shifting blame onto the colonisers, he situates moral accountability outside himself, thereby creating an alibi for the violent consequences of his own missionary endeavour and his "presence" in that specific spatio-temporal context. But, in reality, his work remains embedded within the same orientalist framework and dependent upon the infrastructure of British colonial power that he tries to distance himself from. In invoking this separation, Krick, thus, transforms the colonial authority into a positive alibi that legitimates his own actions, even as he benefits from and reproduces the very system he ostensibly disavows.

Krick's evasion of moral accountability becomes particularly evident when he is confronted by Kajinsha, the Mishmee chief, about his assumption of the superiority **of his** Christian "God." In response to Kajinsha's inquiry, "…why have you come here to tell us of a God you say is more powerful than any other god?" Krick argues, "I did not say that. I am only telling you about my God. It is my duty" (Dai 139). In this exchange, by refusing to acknowledge the implications of his missionary presence, **and consequently, refusing his agency**, in terms of the cultural violence being inflicted on the colonised land, Krick invokes what may be understood as a "negative alibi." Kajinsha's challenge exposes the inherent violence in the act of proselytization: to preach the superiority of one's own God, especially one associated with the powerful colonisers, necessarily implies the inferiority or insufficiency of another's. Krick's insistence that he is merely "doing his duty" signals his refusal to recognise this violence or to accept the hegemonic

implications of his mission. **As Bakhtin observes, "Since our crime is negative, we can readily tell ourselves we have done nothing wrong because we have done nothing. The moral error lies in denying presentness" (Morson 100).** Krick's denial of his active participation in the dynamics of religious domination thus exemplifies this moral error, i.e. the attempt to construct an alibi through negation, and thereby to withdraw from the ethical dimension of his own actions.

The Problems with Krick's "Love"

Krick's orientalist assumptions and evasion of moral accountability also call into question the nature of the love and service he claims to practice to attain the spiritual reconnection with his faith he was determined to attain at the very outset of his missionary journey. In the very beginning of his journey, Krick is convinced that his "passionate union with the divine" can be achieved only through the path of love and service, and thus professes to serve with "love." However, the love Krick claims to practice stands in sharp contrast to Bakhtin's understanding of "love" as an ethical relation the subject engages in, and which emerges through what he calls "participative thinking" (uchastnoe myshlenie). Participative thinking is the humbling act of entering another person's consciousness or position, not to fuse or absolutely identify with it, but to return to one's own position with a renewed sense of responsibility. This dialogic relation, grounded in "participatory outsidedness," assumes that one cannot truly analyse another's consciousness but only address it, converse with it, and be changed through that exchange precisely because one can interact with another consciousness only from the outside. As Emerson states:

An outside position vis-á-vis another consciousness… provides neither party with a ledge to sit and watch, unchanged by the view… To know a given content, therefore, I must, from an outside position, participate in it, converse with it, and assume that in turn… will be altered by my interaction with it… To every definition offered to another consciousness, one must sense the other talk back: "not bad, perhaps even partly true-but not wholly me (Emerson 407).

In **Bkahtinian** view, therefore, the ethical self emerges through the recognition and preservation of boundaries between distinct consciousnesses. This acknowledgement of limits, i.e. the self's necessary separation from the other, also shapes his understanding of "love." As Emerson observes, love begins with the confirmation and respect of boundaries: "before anything can be loved, boundaries must be confirmed and respected—for I can only 'answer' to someone else across a boundary" (Emerson 408). While Bakhtin is of the view that human beings must, to some extent, define and project

images onto the surrounding world in order to make sense of its "multitude of fluid events, people, and impressions," he insists that such representations remain provisional (Emerson 407). *Participative thinking*, guided by the principle of *participatory* outsidedness, and grounded in respect for boundaries, prevents the finalization of another consciousness into a fixed or closed image. In fact, for Bakhtin, love constitutes one of the only two modes of engagement (the other being art) in which participative thinking flourishes and the subject maintains openness toward the other. Unlike the instrumental impulse to extract "a useful image or two from another person and then move on," "love," for Bakhtin, entails a sustained attention, care, and effort, enabling a genuine subject-to-subject encounter (Emerson 407). A true experience of love, then, is marked by what he refers to as an "urgent curiosity," a focused, cognitive attention that deepens one's understanding of the "beloved" through continually renewed and individuated responses. In contrast **to the condition of** "love," Bakhtin notes in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, "Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate sufficient power to slow down and linger intently over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it" (Emerson 408). Only love, he concludes, possesses the perceptive and imaginative subtlety required to engage the world in an ethically and aesthetically productive way.

In contrast to Bakhtin's understanding of "love" as a participatory mode of being that demands the acknowledgement of the other's autonomy and interiority, Krick's missionary impulse, observed in the discussed instances, forecloses the kind of mutual recognition Bakhtin associates with genuine, ethical encounter. When Krick identifies himself as a *sahib*, the colonisers, he **reflects** the orientalist and hierarchical assumptions underpinning his "love" (Dai 99). Similarly, his cultural misreading of Abor tattoos as "quite clearly the Maltese and Lorraine cross" is rooted in domination rather than dialogical reciprocity. His assumption about the superiority of his God and his failure to perceive the **Indigenous** people as independent consciousnesses with equally valid worldviews exposes his monologic consciousness. Krick speaks *about* the other rather than *to* or *with* them, an attitude that stems from his conclusive finalisation of the other through the act of fixing the other within his own ideological or theological framework. Because his love does not depend on maintaining boundaries that allow for genuine responsiveness, it takes the form of entitlement, projection and assimilation. As he never acknowledges the other as a subject capable of responding to him on equal ethical grounds, it eliminates the very possibility of "participatory outsidedness." That is, his "love" does not involve the "urgent curiosity" and sustained attentiveness to the other's irreducible particularity that the Bkahtinian understanding of "love" demands. In other

words, while Bakhtin's notion of love is grounded in the idea of co-experiencing the world with the other while preserving difference, Krick's is a "theoretical" love, one that is not only unidirectional but also instrumental, whereby he treats the other as an object of conversion, a medium through which his religious truth must be realised. What is problematic about Krick's love is not only its cultural arrogance but the structural impossibility of dialogue within the theoretical framework it is lodged in. Consequently, while Krick's "love" may be sincere within his own belief system, but in Bakhtin's terms, this sincerity does not equate to dialogical openness. From a postcolonial perspective, his love remains ethically limited because it erases *alterity.*

Conclusion

Employing the dual lens of Postcolonial theory and the Bakhtinian notion of ethical accountability, this paper has attempted to analyse the ethical positioning of Father Krick, the French Jesuit priest, on his missionary journey to Tibet, within a space marked by colonial presence in *The Black Hill*. Through a close reading of the novel, the paper identifies an orientalist mode of seeing that shapes Father Krick's encounter with the natives..

Given that orientalism constitutes the cultural and theoretical assumptions underpinning both evangelical and colonial undertakings, this paper reveals how the novel exposes the complicity between Krick's missionary endeavour and colonial authority. It does so by foregrounding the violent ways Father Krick's missionary enterprise is imbricated within imperial networks, a process that ultimately culminates in physical violence and the death of the Mishmee chief, Kajinsha. Drawing on Bakhtin's critique of "theoretism"—the tendency of deterministic models or universal rules to subsume events, actions, and utterances under a single theoretical logic, this paper identifies Father Krick's orientalist thinking as a particularly pernicious manifestation of such theoretism. His reduction of the "Orient" into essentialised types and static images operates as a portable, repeatable representational currency that can be deployed across contexts to further both colonial authority and missionary evangelisation.

Moreover, approaching the text through a Bakhtinian conception of moral accountability reveals how Father Krick deflects responsibility by invoking colonialism as an alibi, effectively shifting blame onto the broader imperial project. This manoeuvre further complicates the form of "love" he claims to offer the natives by spreading the word of the Gospel. Unlike Bakhtin's vision of love as a deeply participatory mode of being, one that requires recognizing the other's autonomy and interiority, Krick's

missionary impulse shuts down the possibility of the mutual recognition that, for Bakhtin, grounds any genuine, ethical encounter. Krick's love is "theoretical," unidirectional and instrumental as he treats the other consciousness as an object of conversion, a vehicle for realising his own religious truth. The problem with Krick's love is not only cultural arrogance but the structural impossibility of dialogue within his framework. While sincere on his own terms, Krick's "love" is not dialogically open in Bakhtin's sense and, in postcolonial terms, remains ethically limited because it erases alterity.

By foregrounding Krick's orientalist disposition rooted in his theoretical cast of mind, demonstrating how his missionary endeavour is imbricated in imperial structures of power, and underlining his failure to take moral responsibility for the violent consequences of his presence, this analysis unsettles his claim that the domain of religion can be rigidly separated from the political motivations and the power structures in which it is embedded. This entanglement between the two spheres acquires particular urgency in the contemporary politics of Arunachal Pradesh, where the recent revival of the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act (APFRA) has reignited debates surrounding faith, conversion, and state control. The Act's vague formulations of "force," "fraud," and "inducement," despite existing provisions in the Indian Penal Code addressing coercion and deception, render it redundant and position it as less a protective legal measure than a mechanism of surveillance. In practice, such ambiguity enables the criminalisation of voluntary conversions and exposes individuals to bureaucratic scrutiny and harassment. Read alongside similar anti-conversion laws in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh- widely criticised for violating Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees the freedom to profess, practice, and propagate religion- the revival of APFRA, in the absence of demonstrable evidence of widespread forced conversions, raises pressing questions about its political motivations, particularly its possible role within broader efforts to promote Hinduisation among Indigenous communities.

Although the Act is presented as a measure to safeguard Indigenous cultures and religious traditions, it is perceived as discriminatory, particularly against Christians, who have historically faced violence, church demolitions, and harassment under the pretext of such laws. At the same time, Indigenous voices have voiced growing anxiety about the erosion of Indigenous faiths through the Act, which they see as facilitating the acceleration of Hinduisation that threatens to absorb tribal identities into the cultural mainstream of the nation-state.

The critique in the novel therefore reverberates within the post-colonial context the novel is situated in, wherein the state apparatuses, under the pretext of moral

authority, replicating the ideological and political imperatives characteristic of colonial governance, enact laws that infringe upon one's freedom of religious choice and practice. Such a reading of the novel gestures towards how postcolonial governance, much like colonial authority, continues to conflate the religious with the political. In this light, the novel's exposure of Father Krick's unethical mode of being, his claim that faith can be separated from politics, gains renewed relevance. It reveals how religion, personal belief, and political authority remain inseparably bound in the socio-political landscape of Arunachal Pradesh. By juxtaposing colonial missionary logic with contemporary state practices, this study illuminates the persistent entanglement of moral rhetoric and political control in both past and present.

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