

Colonizing the World in 80 Days: A Postcolonial View

by Marissa Bournias

Jules Verne's novel, *Around the World in 80 Days*, was written in 1872, but is still read throughout the world today. It catalogs the trip between an English gentleman, Phileas Fogg, and his French valet, Jean Passepartout, attempting to circumnavigate the globe within 80 days to win a wager. Throughout the novel, Fogg remains a subject of interest, being considered the main character, since he is the reason for their voyage. Although true, in Verne's novel, Fogg can also be described as "being the most uncommunicative of men", and quite dull (Grossman 250). In a modern steam-punk twist, Meg Jayanth takes Verne's novel and turns it into a much more interactive, choice-based experience. As for Jayanth, she decided to focus not on Fogg, but the player's experience through Passepartout. Jayanth's recreation of Fogg as a character totally flips Verne's notion, making him more of a background piece that rarely shares detail, dialogue, or anything of interest, and certainly not making him a main character. With this portrayal, Jayanth lessens Fogg as a person and revamps him as something other: a human representative of the British Empire.

The British Empire was "a worldwide system of dependencies—colonies, protectorates, and other territories—that over a span of some three centuries was brought under the sovereignty of the crown of Great Britain and the administration of the British government" (britannica.com). An impending question hanging overhead seems to be why Meg Jayanth chose to portray Fogg the way she did. In "rewriting" Verne's novel, she had the chance to reinvent him and make Fogg more than just a vapid, self-centered wealthy white man whose only concern was proving himself to his comrades. Being British herself, this would have been a chance to retract the overwhelming opinion of British imperialist men during that era. But aside from her English

culture, Jayanth is also of Indian descent. Historically, Britain has held an extremely tight reign over India. This began with the seemingly safe East India Company, whose only interest was to hold stake in India for trading purposes (britannica.com). But their tight hold on the country only grew, and beginning in the 1700's, the British forced millions of Indian people to perform slave labor on plantations (history.libraries.wsu.edu). Even though there were millions of farm workers, the people of India were experiencing an extreme famine due to Britain's exportation of nearly all the crops to maximize profits (history.libraries.wsu.edu). Eventually, the treatment of the Indian people boiled over to the extent that it spurred a revolt against the Brits during 1857 (britannica.com). Aside from physical mistreatment, this revolt spurred from heavy taxations, worries about religion, and forced cultural change (Cohn 9). It is possible that, feeling a close connection with her heritage, Jayanth saw that she had the opportunity to make other oppressed lands, during that era, become relevant beyond a colonialist opportunist view through her game.

British imperialism shows up many times throughout Verne's novel. In Japan, India, and Hong Kong, specifically, there are extremely Eurocentric areas. This shows that even in an exotic area, British imperial holds showed through strongly, and England had an expansive hold on the world during this time period. Jayanth did the opposite with her game. On many occasions while I played the game, Fogg would try to adjust the departure time of transportation by flaunting his English Gentleman's Outfit. The farther from England that we traveled, the less likely his wardrobe was to affect anything. Additionally, there were plenty of destinations that spoke English (Japan, France), but that appears to only have been to lessen inter-dialectal confusion. Jayanth states in an interview that it was her plan to lessen British authority in her game, in contrast with history, and create "a world on the brink of great technological and political changes; where the historical Scramble for Africa is averted by a Zulu Empire with

powerful automatons, where Haitian innovation and wealth are dominating the Americas and the British Empire's power is on the wane.” (theliteraryplatform.com) This being said, not every destination was welcoming of Fogg, taking into consideration the way Britain marched in and took the natives' lands and made them their colonies. Luckily, though, most characters in the game only interact with Passepartout, since Fogg is nearly mute and obviously disinterested, thus again greatly diminishing Fogg's role.

The few times he did have some kind of dialogue, Fogg himself portrayed colonial attitudes throughout the game *80 Days*. On various occasions during the expedition as I played, Fogg retired to the hotel and left Passepartout to explore on his own. Fogg could not be bothered to waste time with meeting people and experiencing other cultures. His main hobby was reading the newspaper and keeping to himself. I personally discovered this several times during any of my playthroughs of the game. Specifically, when in Calcutta, Fogg chose to retire to the hotel room in the early afternoon; Passepartout adventured for many hours, excited to relay his expeditions back to his master. But Fogg, being the one-dimensional figure that he is, merely brushed off Passepartout's excitement as if it were nothing. Grossman also brings up the point that in the original novel, when Aouda professes her gratitude for Fogg saving her life, he merely replies that it was in his schedule, unable to consider thinking about anything but his wager (Grossman 252).

Parallel with the novel, Fogg's truest concern in the game is for one thing only - to achieve his goal of circumnavigation within the allotted time. To lose would be the ultimate shame for Fogg, an Englishman, who believes himself to be the superior race. Though it can be said that Fogg “may seem only a French caricature of a stolid English gentleman, a convenient automaton, intentionally forgettable so the thrilling journey itself can occupy the novel's starring role”

(Grossman 249). For Fogg, passing through each destination means it is another place “conquered” in his empirical mind; he is closer to his final destination. Being a white, educated Englishman makes him superior to everyone else in his eyes.

Something quite evident in Fogg’s demeanor is how often he commits the act of othering. On several occasions, Fogg often turns up his nose at Passepartout’s actions (if one chooses to make Passepartout anything but loyal to Fogg during their playthrough) if he chooses to get involved with characters at any one of their stops. Fogg finds the locals to be subalterns, because they are not like him, whether it be different race, sex, ethnicity, or a number of other factors. I witnessed this during a boat passage in which a Haitian woman was captaining. She was eager to speak with Fogg, finding his accent and demeanor quite interesting. But being the stoic man he is, Fogg deliberately tried to dodge her and get Passepartout’s help distracting her. Fogg felt that he was above any communication with someone in such a lower class than he, even though she was doing them an extreme service by captaining their ship. An overall theme of Passepartout’s mingling with new and intriguing characters they meet is unsettling to Fogg, causing him to have a condescending outlook towards the French valet.

Another inclination of othering is seen in Passepartout’s employment. In both the game and the novel, Fogg hires a Frenchman as his gentleman's valet. Although subliminal, the fact that he hires Passepartout as opposed to another Englishman as his valet speaks volumes. He would not openly hire someone of his culture, because that would mean he would have to look down upon a fellow English person. Subsequently, British and French colonies often fought with each other during the 18th century, which may have been a nod towards this (britannica.com) Fogg certainly others Passepartout as a Frenchman, believing him to be inferior to his higher status as English. Throughout the game, Fogg also makes these feelings known by making snide

comments towards Passepartout when he does something considered uncouth or unconventional for a gentleman. This happens quite often if one takes the more adventurous route to have more interesting experiences while playing the game, which inevitably widens the relational gap between the two men.

With the social differences between Passepartout and Fogg being considered, it highlights the key differences between Jayanth and Verne's interpretations of Fogg. Jayanth entices the players to veer away from servitude and step out of their comfort zone in giving the choice to meet new people and experience other cultures. The more that Passepartout wanders, explores, and meets new people, the more their relationship again falters since Passepartout's attentions are not focused on the higher-status Fogg, who believes he should be attended to constantly as his societal right. In the novel, Verne paints Passepartout as a faithful and valiant servant, nearly always ready at the drop of a hat to prepare whatever his master needs (Grossman 251). Jayanth's option of diverting Passepartout's attentions from Fogg to encounter different cultural experiences breaks away from the colonial norm of master and servant.

It is quite evident that Fogg often looks down upon many of the characters and destinations met along the journey; he ostensibly others them. Even so, there are chances where Fogg himself is the other that he so often belittles. In the game, there are times I experienced when Passepartout and Fogg become desolate and cannot afford to stay in a hotel. They must beg on the streets for pity, a low blow for the haughty Englishman. Regardless of the fact that this experience occurs, after they gain funds again, Fogg acts like it never happened. He never speaks of it again, even to Passepartout. He continues to treat the whole expedition as if it were nothing of interest, just trying to reach his destination.

The overall theme I come away with is that Jayanth creates a piece of literature unlike anything seen before. She makes us, the players of her game, *Passepartout*. We have something that no other literature can offer - choice. We can choose to go along with Fogg's ultimate goal, ignoring the exotic and focusing on the task at hand, or we can make our own adventure through the eyes of a gentleman's valet. Another thing Jayanth accomplishes in her rewrite is take away the white male heroism aspect of Verne's original novel, making way for other minorities to have a chance in the spotlight. An example of this is when *Passepartout* awakes in a woman's harem, and must switch clothing with a woman wishing to escape so he will not be killed. On the outside, it seems, *Passepartout* has "saved" this lady from her unhappy life. But it is quite the opposite. Jayanth is providing an opportunity for an oppressed woman to take charge of her own life and make a decision for herself. One will rarely be able to play the game adventurously or interestingly, and still be able to return to London within 80 days. But that was never Jayanth's intention. She makes it difficult to "win", but also does not make that the point of the game. Her objective is to give the player agency, the chance to rewrite history or destroy it with the simple click of a button or tap of a screen. She aimed merely to bring to light the oppression of British colonialism and its effects on not only her people's history, but many others who suffered at the hands of colonization as well.

Historically, for the indigenous people, colonialism was not something they found to be a good thing. But connecting it to something relatable, without Britain's colonization of America, it would not be the country we know today, regardless of how well that turned out for Britain. No one can say what would become of our country, but it certainly would not be the cultural melting pot that it is today. Though it does not completely make up for the wrongdoings against the

colonized and understated countries, Jayanth empathizes with them and tried her best to give them a more important and original role in history.

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