



East -West Encounter: A Quest for Identity and Conflicts in the Pre and Post-Independence Narratives

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Abstract

The objective of this article to critically analyse the intercultural issue of East and West. Cultural conflicts or synthesis is displayed as a result of the intercultural issue by different Indian novelists (pre and post Indian writers). The attitudes of pre and post-independence have significantly changed, with the latter proposing or advocating individuals' search for India in a changing India. In contrast to pre-independence books, in post-independence novels, the confrontation between the two cultures is on a personal level rather than a social one. Because they worked for the imperial empire and had firsthand knowledge of South Asia. The Anglo-Indian writers are the primary focus of this research. These writings make evident the various facets of

imperialism, such as economic, political, and ethical considerations, as well as social transformation. To define what are definitely Eastern values and what are clearly Western values, the paper presents an analysis of important themes in the many tales and viewpoints of the East-West encounter.

Keywords: East-West encounter, cultural conflict, synthesis, Anglo-Indians and British writers, Altruism, Imperialist Ethos

“...the presence of two cultures in one’s mind forms a wider and therefore saner basis on which to originate the quest for identity, and.... The discordance between these two cultures can be creative as well as merely confusing. Perhaps one can go further and suggest that the man with mixed allegiances is contemporary Every man...”

— B. Rajan

East-West encounter is an inter-cultural theme. It manifests as cultural conflict or synthesis in many Indian novelists of pre-independence and post-independence era. It is a major theme in the fiction of such eminent British authors as Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Foster. It will be pertinent to find out why it is such an important theme in the novels of Anglo-Indian and British authors.

Meenakshi Mukherjee in her book *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*, is of the opinion that Indian novelist in English, “is more seriously and consistently involved with the East-West theme than his counterparts in the Indian languages, if only because his very choice of language indicates an awareness of and exposure to a culture other than the traditional Indian” (70). But it does not hold good for every Indian novelist in English. Take for instance, the case of R. K. Narayan. In the same essay, she states that for him, “the English Language is not in itself a subject, but only a neutral instrument which, while useful, leaves all the work still to be done by the user”(2). It is to be noted that Narayan “has written about a static traditional Indian life which the west touches at all points but without any real

penetration”(Mukherjee, 3), and that his Malgudi”stands at a nicely calculated or at least calculable comic distance between the East and the West”(Mukherjee, 4). Mukherjee uses A. N. Kaul’s observations to fortify her arguments.

We may concede the point that language is no issue in Narayan, and that in the bulk of his fiction there is only the East. But, then, Narayan is an exception; and the theme invariably appears in many Indian novelists in English, particularly of the 1950s and 1960s. It may be attributed to what Mukherjee calls, ”The complex fabric of contemporary Indian civilization” (5). She goes on to explain that, “...at the present point of Indian history, a writer’s analysis of his self necessarily involves the evaluation of his own attitude towards...two aspects of his being” – namely, ”the indigenous Indian traditions and the imported European conceptions”, and the ’tension resulting there from””(5). In other words, the East-West theme is both inevitable and significant. It is a different matter whether it is given a central or peripheral place and whether it appears overtly or just indirectly and implicitly in their work.

The East-West paradigm is a major theme in British fiction. But the basis of the development of this theme in these novels is altogether different. It emerges out of the colonial situation. Or, to put it differently, the milieu of these works is imperial. In the history of empires, as we know, it was the British that was the largest and most important, and it was the Indian that was considered very important. Burma was administered as a part of the Indian Empire for most of the period during. Their regime Ceylon, though less important, was governed separately by the British. But India, Burma and Ceylon cohere as one region – and this part of Asia, for all practical purposes, was considered the East, Britain, obviously, represented the West. D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke in his celebrated book, *Images Of The Raj*, has perceptively analyzed the interactions between the East and the West in the works of such eminent authors as Rudyard Kipling, E. M. Forster and George Orwell. Though empire is at the core of such fiction, the variations in the theme are clearly brought out. Thus, Rudyard Kipling emerges as the 'Myth-maker of Empire'. E. M. Forster is seen

in the light of 'difficulties of relationships' in India. It is difficult to make up one's mind about George Orwell. Goonetilleke thinks he may be a critic of the empire or conformist.

It is interesting to note that these writers had first-hand experience of South Asia, being in the service of the imperial system. In their works different aspects of imperialism, namely, economic and political consideration, altruism and social change - are brought out clearly. But it will be a mistake to think that writers such as Kipling and Forster are 'chroniclers of British expansion'. It is possible that the quality of life in colonies enabled the writers of the Empire to invest their works with remarkable multiple significance. It is also likely that the humanism of the Indian background sharpened their own humanistic attitude to the imperialist ethos. Objectively speaking, this literature throws light not only on Britain and the developing countries, but on life in general. Thus, though E.M. Forster's *A Passage To India* is about the difficulties of relationships in India, it is essentially, as Forster himself claims is, "about the search of the human race for a more lasting home, about the universe as embodied in the Indian earth and the Indian sky... it is or rather desires to be -philosophic and poetic"(Goonetilleke, 6).

In Post-Independence novels the conflict between the two cultures is not on the social but on the personal level. The theme of such novels may be called an individual's search for India in a changing India. Confrontation with the West for the discovery of one's own country, and of one's own self: this seems to be a common motif in Indian-Anglian novels of this period. The protagonists of the novels by writers such as B. Rajan, and Raja Rao, face their predicament after they return to India. In each case the protagonist's awareness of two civilizations intensifies his concern with his own identity. Whether it is Indian or British authors, the East-West theme, ultimately, involves clearly two value systems: Oriental and Occidental. What these values are we may try to find out in the context of some Indian writers in English. Mulk Raj Anand (1930s, 1940s), as we know, is a rational humanist, in the western tradition, believing in the power of science to improve material conditions, in progress and in the equality of men. His protagonists are

persecuted by society for their non-conformity, but they exercise their indomitable spirit against the existing conditions. If the majority of villagers in Anand's world share the traditional fatalism about nature's cruelty to man, his protagonists stand out as rebels who believe in the prospect of improvement. They suffer because they cannot accept and be resigned. Now, 'non-conformity' and not taking things as inevitable (fatalism) and striving for improvement - this is a significant aspect of European Hellenism. Anand believes in the intrinsic merit of each individual quite apart from his caste and profession, and he has never tired of propagating universal brotherhood through his novels - this is clearly a Western attitude, as against traditional Indian view based on caste with its faith in a hierarchical society. Goonetilleke quotes one of Anand's protagonists says, "our merchants are descended - let us be honest - from a caste ridden society with an utter contempt for the lower orders ingrained in them as part of their Dharma"(7). This shift of interest from the public to the private sphere may be regarded as characteristic of the fifties' and the sixties' novel. The private search often constitutes a quest for a satisfactory attitude towards the West, and for a realistic image of the East. It should be clear that Anand does not have, what a critic has called 'The East-Past Complex,' and that there is no nostalgia or sentimentality in his attitude towards Indian traditions.

In order to bring out Eastern and Western values further, we may dwell on a few more novels. In Santha Rama Rau's *Remember the House*, the narrator of the novel, Baba Goray, is briefly infatuated with the American way of life: 'enjoyment', 'success' and 'happiness'. This is what Goonetilleke quotes her saying, "we were given, and we accepted almost without thinking, certain precepts. The importance of family, the one we were born to and the one we are married into. Our place in a certain structure, a pattern of life, of birth, of marriage, children, peace and death... within our framework we would make our happiness... it was never suggested that we pursue happiness. We were never encouraged to waste our time"(8). Thus, it should be clear that happiness is not an Indian goal. This theme, namely, "personal fulfillment as opposed to loyalty to the family"(Goonetilleke, 9), is found in Atia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. "You have been defiant

and disobedient. You have put yourself above your duty to the family"(ibid), says the protagonist of the novel.

Another indigenous social structure, namely, 'the joint family', figures in some Indo - Anglian writers. The joint family represents the voice of authority and tradition and serves as a microcosm of the hierarchical society which the individual has to rebel against in order to attain his personal identity. The joint family may be a static force to rebel against, but at the same time the joint family also stands for security, relaxed comfort and a kind of sharing of joys and sorrows. The institution of the joint family is very conveniently used by the Indo - Anglian writer, in order to get a close view of the struggle between the self and society. "Alienation" and "rootlessness", arising out of the cultural conflict, is a very common theme in Indo - Anglian literature. In Nayan Tara Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy*, Sanad Shivpal is a product of a public school, an executive in a mercantile firm... His problem is that of regaining his roots, of belonging. This is what Goonetilleke quotes him saying, "I don't belong entirely to India. I can't. My education, my upbringing, and my sense of values have all combined to make me an Indian. What do I have in common with most of my countrymen? "(10). The same feeling of alienation and rootlessness is found in Atia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, "She (an ugly shape in burqa) is closer to the people than us, sitting, standing, eating, thinking and speaking like them, while we with our Bach and Beethoven, our Shakespeare and Eliot, put "people" into inverted commas" (Goonetilleke, 11). Krishnan in B. Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* is trying to unite himself to things, "that are real and rooted, that belong to India "(ibid), even if he does not.

It may be noted that Kusum in Nayan Tara Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy*, Premala in Kamla Markandey's *Some inner fury* and Kamla in B. Rajan's *The Dark Dancer*— all cherish a life of Indian values. They derive their strength from service and sacrifice and they believe in non-violence as a creed and in right action rather than happiness. Premala, to be sure, with her eastern calm and acceptance is representative of Indian culture.

In some novels, 'East' and 'West' are clearly spelled out. Take for instance, B. Rajan's *The Dark Dancer*. Goonetilleke quotes the protagonist of the novel categorically says, "She [Cynthia] comes from a tradition which included non- conformity and dissent among its attributes- His on the contrary was a background completely conformist, where the map of one's life was drawn even before one's first cry"(12).

In the novels of 50s and 60s mentioned above, the 'East' finally wins. Mukherjee rightly points out that in these novels the "triumph of the Indian values does not emerge naturally out of the situations depicted, but is often arbitrary"; and that "one strongly suspects that this is so because the novelists themselves, like their protagonists, feel alienated from these values and they therefore tend to sentimentalize and idealize them "(Goonetilleke, 13).As compared to these novels, Raja Rao's *The Serpent and The Rope* (1960) is a class by itself, as the East-West theme in his novels, "assumes a depth and validity not achieved before in Indo-Anglian fiction"(Goonetilleke,14).

Conclusion

The novel analysed in this article, whether Indian or Western, there is a segregation of sexes observed, which is unique to thier culture, "I could not understand the northerners going from purdah to this extreme modernism with unholy state. We in the south were more sober, and very distant, we lived by tradition"(Goonetilleke,15).However, the West is considered in more general terms. "The foreign characters partake of a signal value system', says Mukherji 'which may be regarded as 'western' in its insistence on the particular and the concrete, on the personal and the immediate — in other words, in its recognition of the objects as something outside himself"(Goonetilleke,16).This insistence on the particular and the concrete makes Madeline feel uncomfortable with Ramaswamy. His inability to deal with the practical life, say, his haphazardness, like the towels in the bathroom that lay everywhere, is attributed by Madeline to his Indianness.The same lack is attributed to their relationship. Madeline writes to him, "I wondered

whether I could really love you - whether anyone could love a thing so abstract as you... I wonder if Indians can love "(Goonetilleke,17).Madeline's insistence on the personal, or the individual should explain why she feels no warmth for Ramaswamy's family in Hyderabad, a group of people whom she has never met - she cannot conceive of a large and loose unit as a family. The 'East' emphasizes the 'Soul', whereas the 'West emphasizes the 'material' existence and that most of the values discussed above can be subsumed under one or the other category.

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