

Colonial Consciousness In Gita Mehta's *Raj*

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Abstract: India has a colonial history of more than three hundred years. Since then, at every level of its journey, the country had to face trials resulting from the effects of imperialism levied upon it by the British. The worst affected was the psycho-cultural level as it directly influenced the common man. In quite a few cases it resulted into an identity crisis for the natives, which finally lead to an abject surrender to the so called Western superiority. Gita Mehta's fiction Raj (1993) is an account of such colonial impacts of the British rule on India. It is a tale of an intricate saga of impacts of imperialism on the psyche of the colonised society. However, although in a subtle manner, it also talks about some positive influences that came to India, by default, along with colonialism. The present paper aims to explore the above hypotheses from the narrative of the book.

Key words/phrases: colonial, imperialism, psycho-cultural, identity crisis and positive influences.

1. INTRODUCTION

A country in its journey, from past to present, has to endure with a multi-faceted consciousness which incorporates in its fold social, cultural, political, psychological and economic issues. However, this consciousness, in addition, becomes multi-layered when it comes to a country like India that has a colonial history of more than three hundred years. At every level of experience, India had to face challenges resulting from the effects of imperialism and forced dominion levied upon it by the colonisers. The worst affected was the psycho-cultural level as it infected the nation through the instrument of common individuals. Colonialism may result either in confrontation with the coloniser or in identity crisis for the natives, that may finally lead to an abject surrender to the so called Western superiority. Gita Mehta's fiction *Raj* (1993) is an account of such colonial impacts of the British rule on India.

In order to explore the colonial consciousness prevailing in the novel *Raj*, it will be prudent to take into consideration some theories of colonialism and imperialism. Edward Said, the inspiring patron of postcolonial discourse, in his well acclaimed book *Culture and Imperialism*, analyses that imperialism is "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes, of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism', which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on a distant territory and often involves untold miseries for others" (1993. p8). During the nineteenth century, Britain and France enjoyed exceptional power. Said adds, "This century climaxed 'the rise of the West', and the Western power allowed the imperial metropolitan centres to acquire and accumulate territory on a truly astonishing scale" (6). From the Indian point of view it is evident that colonization, on such a large scale, nurtured fear of annexation in the royalties of India. However, the transgression could not have been possible without creating a dividing

line between them and the natives, and convincing to the world about their superiority – economic, intellectual, ethnic and scientific. Edward Said talks about this dividing line in his colonial discourse *Orientalism*, where he argues on this as an act of dividing the world into “us” (Westerners) and “they” (Orientals)” (1978. p45). In this way the West shaped a cultural notion for the East that endorsed the Europeans to suppress the peoples mainly of Asia and Africa with a belief that “the sense of Western power over the Orient is taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth” (46). The Orientalist paradigm authorized the Western scholars to argue that the oriental world “require and beseech domination” (*Culture and Imperialism* 8), as it is inferior, backward, uncivil and illogical. In addition, Said also established that as power and knowledge are the two inseparable entities of the us-and-them affiliation, the Europeans were able to rename and redefine concepts; and justified their action of transgression.

Such kind of imperialistic control over nations has a far reaching impact on every quarter, be it political, economic, cultural, social or psychological. Although some critics may argue in favour of colonization, the impact on the colonized is usually damaging. The psychiatrist and philosopher, Frantz Fanon, a well known postcolonial critic, in his celebrated book *The Wretched of the Earth* gives a critique on the process of decolonization and has carried out a mental health analysis of colonialism. He describes colonialism as fundamentally disparaging and calls it an organized defiance of humanity (1961. p34). He asserts that colonizers imposed a colonial identity and a servile mindset which was injurious to the psychological wellbeing of the natives – “a mental pathology which is the direct product of oppression” (201). The irony is that these European transgressors did all the excesses in the guise of humanity. Jean Paul Sartre, the eminent French philosopher and critic, in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, has quite acrimoniously condemned this colonial approach by branding the whole show as “the strip-tease of our humanism ... nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage ...” (21) and goes on to say that European colonisers have “nothing more consistent than racist humanism” (22).

The three hundred years of India’s servitude not only exploited the mental wellbeing of people, but also forced the royalties to live under perpetual fear of annexation and coerced compromises. This resulted into psychological subjugation of people by showcasing the divide between the east and the west. With the above stated framework, this paper, through the medium of *Raj*, attempts to explore effects of colonialism.

The Novel, *Raj*

Raj, Gita Mehta’s second book, is a historical saga of a *Rajasthani* kingdom of Balmer and the North-Eastern Indian dominion of Sirpur, languishing under British rule. It is a third person narrative of the life the protagonist Jaya Singh, the princess of Balmer and later the queen of Sirpur. She finds herself torn between the warring factors of the most upsetting experiences of political as well as cultural imperialism. She witnesses the end of the British imperial rule in India and the initiation of the process of decolonization when she fills her nominations for elections in free India in 1950. The novel depicts the fifty three years (1897 to 1950) of the colonial India in which the country experienced high degree of British imperialism. The states, rulers and the masses all had become disheartened in the strong grip of the British control. The impact was varied. If on one side there was aggression against the British, then on the other, there was a loss of the Indian identity under the influence of the Western culture. Fear factor haunted the native kingdoms – the trepidation of the accession to the Indian union and the dread of displeasing the British. By narrating the vital events of

the Indian freedom movement, the novelist presents a deeper standpoint, on imperialism, colonialism and historicism. In this way, Gita Mehta “reconstructs the historical data and places it within the socio-cultural context” (Bande, 2008. p84).

Westernization: A negative impact of colonialism

There is a very strong under-current of a westernization or pseudo-modernization in the novel. The characters are seen getting shattered under this false sense of modernity. Here one may observe that modernization and westernization are not tantamount to each other. Problems arise when the latter uses repressive tendencies to influence a traditional culture, as happened in the expansionist eras. Westernization is a practice where the colonized group accepts the western principles not only in the areas of industry, technology and commerce, but also in the cultural beliefs related to life, food, attire, language, religion, philosophy and morals. The western advocators undermine “the fact that the models of culture that they have created are inappropriate for settings outside of Western civilization” (Kottak, 2015). Jain remarks, “but being modern is not the same thing as Westernized. Indeed the modern West need not be the model of social change” (1998. p10). Aliceve believes that in modernization “the society tries to innovate and utilize its present and old knowledge, patterns, ... and looks towards the present and existing treasures in one’s own culture” (2011. p2). The modernization is synonymous to progressiveness which can be achieved only after adopting the best out of the past. However, “it is really harmful when in the shade of adoption we start condemning our own great culture, patterns and resources”(Aliceve 2). Nevertheless, this may be perilous as it may lead to a cultural collapse, which in turn negates the very identity of a westernized individual. The colonization, as Fanon says, induced a servile mentality and a ruinous psychological health among the Orientals.

Colonizers used different tools to achieve their objectives. In the Indian context, one of them was to infuse English values into young princes by pressurizing kings to send their sons to England for Western education. The royalties were made the initial targets; probably, by virtue of their status, they were the people with whom the British used to have political interactions and, at the same time, were a good medium to influence the masses. “The colonialist bourgeoisie looks feverishly for contacts with the *elite*, and it is with these *elite* that the familiar dialogue concerning values is carried on ... a rear-guard action with regard to culture, values, techniques and so on” (Fanon, 2001. p34). In the guise of giving a modern education, their clandestine strategy was to transform the princes into westernized Indians. T.B. Macaulay carried out the key responsibility in the introduction of a Western model of education in India, and published his design on the subject in the "Macaulay's Minute" of 1835, through which he made the intentions of the British clear regarding forming “a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern ... , Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay, 1920).The fictional Balmer of Mehta’s novel is not an exception to this historical fact. Maharaja Jai Singh is forced to send Tikka, his son, to England for studies. Jaya was apprised of her father’s vulnerability in this regard: “Sometimes your father has no choice ... The new Viceroy says that if Tikka is to remain heir to the Balmer throne he must go to England” (71). However, by that time, Tikka had already started taking lessons from an *Angrez* tutor and the influence could be seen in his looking at the world through the English lense. The books of Kipling, Burke, Baden-Powell, Macaulay and British newspapers shaped his vision. Gita Mehta rightly gives reference to these writers in *Raj* as Rudyard Kipling’s literature very much exhibits pro-colonial sensibilities. Kipling’s “The Ballad of East and West” (Kipling,

1889), explicitly represents the colonial divide between the Orientals and the Occidentals. George Orwell, in one of his sharp criticism on Kipling, published in *Horizon*, labels him a “jingo imperialist ... a prophet of British Imperialism” (Orwell, 1941). Edward Said, while interpreting Kipling’s *Kim* from colonial angle commented, “The division between white and non-white, in India and elsewhere, was absolute, and is alluded to throughout *Kim* ... a Sahib is a Sahib ” (Culture and Imperialism, 1993. p162). Thus the influence of British pro-colonial writers was very much on Tikka. He would “regard his father as a ruler blind to the advances of the real world He avoided his mother ...desperately wanted the *Angrez* tutor to acknowledge that he was not like them ...” (58). Jaya was afraid “that her brother was becoming an *Angrez* himself” (58). Such was the British policy of Cultural Imperialism and its human byproducts were the ones as illustrated in the novel through characters like Tikka. Raj, in itself, is a good representation of Said’s concept of Orientalism. The divide between the Occidentals or the Pseudo-Occidentals of Indian origin and the Orientals can be noticed in *Raj*. The Westernized Indians can be witnessed debasing the tradition loving Indians by considering them inferior, uncivil and backward. Prince Pratap of Sirpur, who is an England return and has recently entered into matrimony with the princess Jaya of Balmer, likes French ladies and dislikes spending time with Indian women as “they are just a lot of overfed buffalos” (*Raj* 92). The newly-wed princess, although conventional in outlook, yet very well trained in sports (polo), hunting and *Rajniti* (politics); is invariably humiliated by her Westernized husband. When Jaya appears in her customary bridal attire, he out rightly rejects her saying, “I’am afraid you won’t do, Princess Wash all that nonsense off your hands and feet. And change out of these Christmas decorations”(189). Later he is blunter and attacks her self-esteem directly, “Ours is strictly a marriage of convenience, Jaya Devi. Should the necessity for children ever arise, I am sure we can both rise to our duty, but until then ...” (190). In fact he had agreed to get married because he is permitted to travel abroad only when he is accompanied by a wife.

Although, in the era of neo-colonialism the language of the British has gained global proportions, it still seems to be accepted as a symbol of social esteem in the same way as it was considered in the past. So for a person like Pratap, as a colonial hangover, the language of the British has always stood for everything that is Western and superior. He asks demandingly to his wife, “By the way, what languages do you speak” (*Raj*191)? Although Jaya speaks good English due to her prior training, without waiting for her answer he adds sarcastically, “French?...‘Italian? Spanish?” (191). Prarap calls Jaya a “rough diamond” (192) who needs to be groomed in “the intricacies of Western society” (192). Thus, one can observe that colonialism, through its so called envoys like Prince Pratap, “seeks to dehumanize them (inhabitants). Everything will be done to wipeout their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture” (Jean-Paul Sartre, 2001. p13). Tikka and Pratap are representations of the value shift and the resulting self-dehumanization, which are disastrous psychological impacts of colonialism. The shifting of the values, in case of these two individuals, occurs due to their beliefs in the colonizers’ superiority and their own inferiority. Such cultural swing is likely to end up in alienation from the real self. In this case, it is the transference of belonging from the indigenous culture to that of the west. In this regard Fanon comments, “colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’ ” (2001, p200). Consequently, this makes them victims of dehumanization of self - a psychological concept in which a person, as M. Kouchaki et al state, views himself/herself “as less human and spirals into unethical behavior” (quoted in “How Self-Dehumanization Spirals Into Unethical Behavior”). Self-

dehumanization results when “people’s fundamental motivation to belong is frustrated ... resulting in a reduced sense that a person has control over their lives, and it may also undermine ones self-esteem and sense of meaning in life” (Batian, 2014. p 242). The feeling, no doubt, is cultural and racial oriented, there is a sense of inherent inadequacy involved, which sometimes proves disastrous for inter-personal relationships. Gita Mehta, in an interview to *India Today*, commenting upon her reasons for portraying such characters, agrees to the presence of an undercurrent of inferiority prevailing in Indian kings and princes like Pratap and Tikka. She remarked, “I became fascinated with the idea of how even an anointed king could be made to collaborate in the idea of his own inferiority” (The Pleasure of Writing *Raj* 1989). The comment of Jaya’s English tutor, “The British have taught your husband to hate himself. Do not become like him or you will belong nowhere” (*Raj* 232), supports the presence of self-dehumanization in Pratap. As a result, he indulges in inhuman verbal abuse and leaves no pretext to humiliate his wife as coarse and uncultured.

Modernization: A positive impact of colonialism

Positive impacts of colonialism, the idea itself seems ironical. However, from the Indian point of view the argument does appear to hold water, and if it is true, then not depicting the positive side of colonialism would be tantamount to biasness. The Colonialism of India, with all its appalling norms, did have a positive side.

Westernization and modernization are the two flip wings of imperialism. If the blind westernization is damaging for the colonized nation; rational modernization is rewarding for it. Paolini has remarked that in imperialism and colonialism, new ideas which come from the side of the colonizers become localized and become a part of self-experience (1999, p.10). Aliceve believes that in modernization “the society tries to innovate and utilize its present and old knowledge, patterns” (2). The modernization in a colonial set up, is akin to progressiveness that is accomplished after embracing the premium ideas from an alien set up. It is just not taking a country on the path of economic and scientific advancement; it also includes the insertion of humanistic social innovative trends and removal of the damaging old traditions.

The paper approaches this idea taking into consideration the Indian social reform movements of the initial phase the 19th century. It is well known that some highly successful attempts were made in this direction by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore, Keshub Chandra Sen, Gopal Hari Deshmukh, Jotiba Gobind Phule, and more, who came forward with reformist zeal. This new social group was the English educated intelligentsia “closely associated with British administration or British trade” (Basham 2014, p. 237). The reformers drew inspiration from their working environment, as well as from the European literature that brought to India fresh challenging ideas related to education, technology, liberalism etc. In them they found an opportunity to do away with some sordid Indian practices like *Sati Pratha* (widow burning), widow ill-treatment, and child marriage. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, through his activism and mass movement, was successful in getting *Sati Pratha* declared punishable as culpable homicide through the government of India act of December 1829. The modern reformers were iconoclastic as they also rejected caste system, female seclusion and illiteracy (Basham 240). Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar ignited a pan India widow remarriage crusade and brought it to a logical conclusion when the British government passed the *Widow Remarriage Act of 1856* (Haldar, 1998, p.85). The European positive ideas that came to India, by default, along with colonialism, were used by the reform movements for the benefit of the Indian society.

Coming back from history to fiction, one finds that a similar kind of modernity of environment is depicted in *Raj*. It is not only a saga that represents the ill effects of colonialism, on a different but parallel scale, it also witnesses the acts of rejuvenation carried out by the states. Maharaja Jai Singh is progressive by nature. He understands very well the utility of the new advancements for his state. He is instrumental in bringing railway - “Balmer State Train” - and the first motorcars to Balmer (*Raj* 54). He employs engineers for new constructions and factories, gets irrigation system redesigned and works on increasing the electricity supply in Balmer with the help of technically trained British and Indian experts (64). Modernity was in the air and his daughter Jaya was the child of the new dawn. Unlike the Maharani, who insisted that Jaya should be groomed “in the traditional manner” (44), the Maharaja “had decreed that his daughter was not to be raised in purdah” (44). She is trained in riding, hunting, shooting, and playing polo (47). English Language lessons are also imparted to her (64), possibly to prepare her to grasp the new progressive knowledge coming from the Europe.

Modernization-globalization nexus

Globalization, along with a very strong communication-connectivity, is one of the blessings of the contemporary world. It has made nations flexible and approachable enough to accept one another’s favourable ideas – social, economic or scientific. Societal researches in this area have reported that globalization took its route through modernization and post-modernization, as there is a presence of a close connection between modernization and globalization (Chen & Y. Ren, 2015. Pp 12-13). Although this research was carried out with a special reference to Shanghai, the overall conclusions appear to be effective for other Asian countries like India as well. While it would be untimely to say that globalization is a product of the positive impacts of colonialism, this can be an area of further in-depth research.

2. CONCLUSION

History narrates facts; and a good historical fiction blends the two aspects of fact and imagination in a manner that both seem inseparable. The Indian history reveals that the British Colonialism became synonymous with exploitation, westernization and tyranny. However, it also discloses that the colonialism did have a positive impact. *Raj*, although a fiction, has successfully showcased the negative aspects, but subtly, it also divulges the positive facets of the same. The novel depicts, if westernization and dehumanization were the some of the adverse psychological effects of colonialism on India, then modernization, progressiveness and globalization are its favorable outcomes. Nevertheless, in the end it can be stated that in order to sustain the spirit of growth, societies must always welcome modernization.

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