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The hapless royal India: A study of Gita Mehta's *Raj*

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Abstract
The demonstration of the material and moral disturbance of Royal Indian life precipitated by colonisation is the central mission of this research paper. The study shows that the impact of imperial and colonial ideology on the native rulers was essentially crippling. The fifty years – 1897 to 1947 – depicted in the novel was historically a period in which the country was fortified by an undeclared but obvious entanglement with imperialism and the native India that existed within the British India was as troubled and the rulers were as hapless and hopeless in the strangle-hold of the British power politics as the masses in the imperial British India. Fear continues to haunt the rulers till the end of the novel – first it was the fear of displeasing the British and thus of being black-listed or disinherited on smallest pretexts; then there was also the fear of the nationalists spreading their message of freedom among the people in the native states; then came the most important and sensitive issue of merger with the Indian Union.

Keywords: privy-purses, liquidation, fortified, catastrophic, confiscated, colonialism & post-colonialism, imperialism, perverted logic, ambivalence

Introduction

Raj, published in 1989, is Gita Mehta's first novel. It deals with the cultural and political history of India. Starting with 1897, the novel concludes with the end of an epoch when India attained freedom and the princely states were merged with the Indian Union – some willingly, others unwillingly. The novel maps and dramatizes within its narrative framework the important events with which the century set in – the famine of 1898, the ever-increasing British interference in the affairs of the native rulers, emergence of Gandhi ji and other national leaders, their clarion call to the nation, the two wars, awakening of the democratic spirit among the masses and finally Independence. But finally and significantly, the novel depicts the condition of/in the royal or native Indian states.

Structurally, the novel is divided into four books: 'Balmer', 'Sirpur', 'Maharani' and 'Regent'. It has a 'Prologue' and an 'Afterword' also. The 'Afterword' documents the abolition of the privy-purses, agreed upon at the time of merger. What the British could not or did not do, independence did to the rulers - liquidated their identity. For the rulers, accession to the Union meant not only complete liquidation of their kingdoms but also obliteration of identity, which they construed as personal defeat and humiliation. Mehta draws our attention to one of the most distressing experiences of cutural violence of colonialism. The fifty years that she depicts - 1897 to 1947 - was historically a period in which the country was fortified by an undeclared but obvious entanglement with imperialism and the native India that existed within the British India was as troubled and the rulers were as hapless and hopeless in the strangle-hold of the British power politics as the masses in the imperial British India. Fear psychosis had gripped the nation including the native kingdoms. The Rajas and the Maharajas were no better off. Fear continues to haunt them till the end of the novel – first it was the fear of displeasing the British and thus of being black-listed or disinherited on smallest pretexts; then there was also the fear of the nationalists spreading their message of freedom among the people in the native states; then came the most important and sensitive issue of merger with the Indian Union. The author quotes Sardar Patel's insightful words to form the epigraph to chapter-71, the last one of the novel, "The capacity for mischief and trouble on the part of the rulers... is far greater than could be imagined. Let us place ourselves in their position and then assess the value of their sacrifice." (456)

Mehta weaves a story within a story and sets *Raj* in a richly glorious and colourful royal India against the political background of National movement and creates a post- colonial text that is truly Indian both in its subject matter and in execution. Mehta achieves this artistic success through an adroit delineation of characters that incarnate the spirit of the age in which they live. The material and moral disturbance of Royal Indian life precipitated by colonisation becomes the central mission of this artistic endeavour. The author traces the decline and fall of the Royal India through the story of Jaya Singh, the intelligent, beautiful and compassionate princess of Balmer and Maharani of Sirpur.

The opening of the novel plunges the reader straightaway into the heart of Royal India, which is gradually nearing its catastrophic end and disjunction under barbaric mercantilism of Europe. Nobles from Balmer and other Kingdoms warn Maharajah Jai Singh against this greed of Britain, "Maharaj, be cautious. Britain cripples us with her greed. Half of India's money goes to fatten England. The other half is spent on an army in which no Indian can be an officer… The Angrez are weaving a spider's web of power from which we will never disentangle ourselves." (16) Aime Cesaire in his work *Doscourse on Colonialism* (1955) vindicates the immutable reality expressed in the above warning. He writes:

> I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out... I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair and behave like flunkeys…I am talking about natural *economies* that have been disrupted - harmonious and viable *economies* adapted to the indigenous population - about food crops destroyed, malnutrition permanently introduced, agricultural development oriented solely toward the benefit of the metropolitan countries about the looting of products, the looting of raw materials. (Cesaire 43)

Maharaja Jai Singh, in order to prevent his kingdom from becoming another patch in the carpet under the feet of Queen Victoria, decides to hire an English tutor for his son Tikka, to propitiate the suspicions of a skeptical empire, so that "...it might convince the British that I am training my son to be loyal to the ideals of the Empire." (55) This decision presents an opportunity where an Englishman with his culture, manners, education, and air of superiority comes in immediate contact with Royal India. Mehta, here, allegorises the encounter of two distinct cultures - the imperial power and the colonised, and shows how while countering the imposing culture, the weaker one redefines and reinterprets its tradition while seeking its identity. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin reiterate this idea in their book *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (1995) as, "Post-colonial as we define it does not mean post-independence, or 'after colonialism', for this would be to falsely ascribe an end to the colonial process. Post-colonialism, rather, begins from the very first moment of colonial contact. It is the discourse of oppositionality which colonialism brings into being. In this sense, post-colonial writing has a very long history." (Ashcroft *et al*. 117)

This encounter between the Osbornes and the Royal family of Balmer punctures the famed cultural superiority of Britishers symbolised by Osbornes, for whose accomodation magnificent traditional interiors of Chand Mahal were altered. Jaya, still a child, exclaims on seeing a bath tub for the first time. She questions, "Is that for washing clothes?' The Maharani laughed. 'No, for washing their bodies.' 'But how do they change the water?' Jaya persisted. The Maharani steered her out of the bathroom. 'The container is filled and then the Angrez wash themselves.' 'They can't wash their feet and their faces in the same water. Where do they wash their feet? " (56) But contrary to Jaya's and Maharaja Jai Singh's expectations, Tikka soon began to disintegrate under the polluting influence of the Angrez. Lured by his tales of European development, underground railways, aeroplanes, cars and adventurous expeditions, Tikka ceased to listen to the advice of his father. The child (Tikka) who revered his kingdom and its indigenous ideals, customs, culture and spirit of bravery now began to look down upon his own roots, "Tikka did not know how it happened, but the Captain's presence diminished Balmer. With a deepening sense of disloyalty, he regarded his father as a ruler blind to the advances of the real world outside the orders of his kingdom. He avoided his mother, embarrassed that he now saw her as a woman steeped in the superstitions of the harem. He despised himself for despising his parents and desperately wanted the Angrez tutor to acknowledge that he was not like them." (58)

Everything indigenous around him was gradually replaced by foreign stuff. He ordered goods from Army and Navy stores in London. His table was covered with British newspapers and magazines and the walls of his rooms which were earlier decorated with ivory paintings of gods were now covered with black and white photographs of English sportsmen. His interest in kite flying soon diverted into a passion for cricket. Partha Chatterjee writes in this connection, "The claims of Western civilization were the most powerful in the material sphere. Science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, and modern methods of statecraft - these had given the European countries the strength to subjugate the non-European people and to impose their dominance over the whole world." (Chatterjee 120) What Macaulay had foreseen was coming true. These were the 'mimic' men who talked in the 'master's' tongue but were not his equal; who could see the weakness of their own culture but had neither the will nor the means to rectify it. This is what Frantz Fanon calls the 'perverted logic' of colonialism.

But behind this entrenchment was camouflaged Tikka's wounded self-esteem and pride which demanded an answer and acknowledgement as to why despite being better than the English, Indians were denied equal status and equal opportunities only because of the colour of their skin. Mehta does not merely question the cultural imposition but also the political authority. So, if Tikka is granted a teacher like Osborne who is a mouthpiece of colonialism, expressing beliefs that legitimize colonization, then Jaya is blessed with a teacher like Mrs. Roy who stands for nationalists engrossed in the process of decolonisation. Tikka's exile both metaphorical and physical doesn't cease with the education imparted by the English tutor; it infact begins with it. Maharaja Jai Singh, succumbing to the nefarious blackmailing of British Empire which demanded Tikka as hostage if he was to remain heir to Balmer throne, sends him to a school in England. Unfourtunately, this deportation devours Tikka forever. Once he leaves for England there is no real homecoming for him. The circumstances compel him to lead Balmer Lancers in defence of the Suez canal during the Great War.

In this war, Tikka a representative of Royalty, emerges as a symbol of sovereignty martyred in the process of colonisation. On personal front, if Tikka's exile ends with his martyrdom, then Jaya's exile begins with the assassination of her father, catapulting her into a loveless marriage with Prince Pratap of Sirpur, an unsympathetic, half-christian anglophile. He draws our attention towards cultural imperialism of white man that questioned and disintegrated our all-time-reverred laws of right and wrong, and good and evil. It is the psychological influence of colonialism that prince Pratap suffers from selfish individualism, alienation and cynical indifference. Pratap and his elder brother Victor display fragmented, schizophrenic personalities which undoubtedly are the products of colonial education. The characters of Pratap and Victor exhibit how traditional Indian society with all its glory and strength was crumbling simultaneously under the formidable external force of imperialism and the self-destructive impulses of the individual from within. According to Lady Modi who is hired

by Pratap to westernize his wife, "The truth is, he thinks all Indian women are disgusting. Is it the colour of our skin? Our hair ? Are white women so much more beautiful than we are? Of course not, darling. It's just that you represent everything the British Empire has taught Pratap to despise. Become chic, of course, darling. If you want to attract your husband, Princess, you must make the British envy Pratap, not patronize him. You must make yourself into a woman who is desirable to white men. (197-98)

Raj handles the political situation in the country from the angle of the native rulers. It tells the history of two separate kingdoms - Balmer in Rajasthan and Sirpur in the north-east, joined by one protagonist - Jaya. She (Jaya) is both a mute observer and an active participant in the events that surround her – a mute observer of the happenings over which she has no control, be they political whereby the princes were stripped of their power, or human whereby her husband and the other princes invited their own downfall by their excesses and vagaries; She is an active participant in life-situations when she foresees the coming crisis and acts with dexterity to forestall the conflicts or troubles that were latent in the existing politico-cultural order of the times.

The rhetoric of the novel, however, suggests that the impact of imperial and colonial ideology on the native rulers was essentially crippling. The British political doctrine of difference and inequality, of cultural and economic exploitation and the deployment of diplomacy based on the principle of fidelity to the British produced complicity that confused the native rulers, created ambivalence and rendered them impotent, and inert toy rulers. The aim of the Imperial strategy was to transform the princes and their traditional culture in order to establish a new one based on the concept of superiority of the Western culture. That the princes fall a prey to the designs of the British is reiterated through the examples of Tikka, Prince Victor and Pratap. Those rulers who show unwillingness to send their sons to England for education, are threatened with dire consequences; those who like the Sirpur princes are given to sensuous life are admonished. Either way they are trapped by the dominant ideology of the imperial power.

The British government had contrived many ingenuous and subtle schemes to keep control over the ruling princes. Schemes like gun-salutes, decorations, and conferment of honour pleased the rulers but conversely these generated rivalries among them, each vying to have an upper hand over the other. This in turn gave rise to sycophancy, and cringing and fawning before the Englishmen. If somehow a ruler offended the British masters, he had to face the humiliation of being degraded by several seats in the Darbar. Consequently, the Rajas and Maharajas spent their energies and money in futile attempts to keep the English humoured and thus neglected their people. With nothing to do for/in their kingdoms most of them whiled away time and money in useless pursuits and landed in misery. The rulers made themselves ridiculous, "The rulers vied with each other in canvassing for honours and decorations from the King Emperor and used all means to secure them and thus the Political Department and the Viceroy of India played havoc with the whims and idiosyncrasies of the rulers." (Jarmani Dass 312)

All over India the rulers were in a state of fear as their ancient lines were replaced by lackeys. The rulers were no longer free to administer justice, nor were they potent enough to rule their people with 'dignity'. In fact, by the curious logic of the colonial psychology, they were frightened: as much of loosing their traditions, as of being victims of colonial violence. The native rulers were in a situation of double bind: on the one side was the imperial power (their rulers), on the other, the awakened segments of the public like the newspaper men, the reformists and the nationalists (the ruled). The British were following Machiavellian tactics in liquidating the rulers. They would advance them loans and encourage them to spend it as they wished but soon they would extract the price; it may be in any form – allegation of excesses, threat of disinheritance or submission. They would play court intrigues by backing up rival claimants to the throne or create belts of friendly powers to counter each other.

What distinguishes *Raj* from some other works dealing with the princes is exactly the woman's angle which gives it a new dimension. Admittedly, Gita Mehta is not a feminist writer, nor does she claim to portray women's problems. Despite this, it is a woman-centred narrative. Jaya has all the problems that a woman may have – a callous, uncaring husband, insecurity, loss of all male members of the family and a restrictive social order. The novel has three strands running more or less parallel: (i) the condition of/in the native states, (ii) the rise of nationalism, and (iii) the woman's question in culture and in nationalism. Finally, these three strands are joined to the imperial colonial politics with its colonized-colonizer binary. Scholars in the fields of colonialism and the history of women's movement in India have recognized that by introducing the cultural notion of female inferiority, the imperialist forces perpetuated the notion of inferiority of the culture. The colonizers essentially draw upon gender as a tool to further their civilizing mission in India and adopted the native female social reform project to advance their larger imperialist designs.

The novel ends on a happy and optimistic note, but the author does not seem quite sanguine about it. In the 'Afterword' she expresses her disappointment at the abolition of privy purses. She considers it a betrayal and a breach of faith. May be the rulers were not in favour of merger; but they did sacrifice their identity by agreeing to merger. Sardar Patel understood this and he assured them security. The author does draw our attention to these facts, "Disbanding their armed forces, the Indian rulers merged voluntarily with a nation that did not even have a constitution. In return, the Union of India agreed to pay the rulers privy purses to assist in the discharge of their financial obligations." (462) In recognition of their sacrifice, the government had reaffirmed the agreement between the Indian Union and the kingdoms. At that time, Deputy Prime Minister had said, "Our obligation is to ensure that the guarantees given by us are fully implemented. Our failure to do so would be a breach of faith." (462) Ironically, what began on a democratic note comes crashing down and by 1971 it is substituted with a re-enactment of the power politics of imperialism, "In 1970… introduced a bill in the Indian Parliament stating, 'The intention of Government is to discontinue the privy-purses and abolish the concept of rulership.' In 1971, the Constitution of India was amended to

ensure passing of this bill."

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