

Gulf of Economic Disparity in, *the Romantics* a Novel and *Making the Minister Smile*

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Abstract – Most of the Indian English novels are centred around the cultural divide between the Orient and the Occident. However many of the novels invariably project the economic disparity between the two worlds. The novels under study, *The Romantics: A Novel* and *Making the Minister Smile* repeatedly project the penury of India as if to satiate the palate the west. But such descriptions make compulsory probe into the nature of modernity and development.

Key-words: Cultural Exchange, Economic Disparity, Modernity, Development

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INTRODUCTION

Essentially Indian English Literature remains, as “the literary and cultural exchange between India and England [West]” (15), as Harish Trivedi observes in his *Colonial Transactions*. The thematic core in most of the Indian English novels is also a cultural encounter between the East and the West, although, in a less offensive and humorous way. When the Indian English Novels posit a cultural exchange between the East and the West, a homogenized and solid Indianness is being constructed in them. Meenakshi Mukherjee says; “Any project of constructing a national identity is predicated upon two simultaneous imperatives; an erasure of differences within the border and accentuating the difference with what lies outside” (84). But apart from this cultural difference, what comes foremost in the Indian English Novels is the apparent descriptions of economic backwardness in India. Many of the writers emphatically repeat the descriptions of poverty and filth in India as if the same a palatable subject for the western reader.

REFLECTIONS IN *THE ROMANTICS: A NOVEL*

In *The Romantics: A Novel*, Catherine’s exclamation, “Didn’t they know the difference in scale between the two economies?” itself shows the pictures given about the East and the West. The gulf between the Orient and the Occident is shown as widely accepted in India and the Panditji in whose rented room Samar is staying, has got a “foreign” rent and an “Indian” rent for the same type of rooms. The condition of the toilet in the building where Samar and Miss West are staying is described by Samar:

Early next morning I was awakened by the now familiar sounds of someone using the roofless toilet at the top of the stairs. There was no flush system in the toilet; we had to splash water from a large rusty Nestle powdered-milk tin after filling it up from a tap that seldom worked. I heard the creak of the tin door, the hollow gurgle of water rolling down into the hole in the ground, and then the futile repeated tweakings of the dry tap. (33)

Most of the European friends of Catherine think that India is “an exotic hotbed of illiteracy, poverty and religion.” (91). Catherine’s mother when she comes to India complains about the poor public transport system, cheap and unheated hotels, and the dirty clothes with which the plates are wiped and Catherine replies that this was the way people lived in India (47). Anand’s village is described:

...the overall picture they added up to was clear: the jumble of low mud huts and naked brick houses with cowsheds in the front yard on narrow lanes rutted by bullock-cart wheels, beyond which lay the whitewashed shrines, the buffaloes floating on algae-covered ponds, the sea of yellow mustard fields and the emptiness of dusty country roads. (53)

When Catherine’s parents insist that Anand should make enough money in India to get his air ticket to France, Catherine once again stresses the disparity between the two countries. (54). Mark says “You know one of the great things for me about coming to India has been knowing about poverty and pain and suffering, and realizing that there is a whole world outside America where people don’t even have the basic thing in life” (15). He also adds that seeing poverty on television doesn’t register much and when one gets the direct

experience that would benefit a lot. Catherine's friends also have similar notions. "Most of them couldn't think of India as anything other than an exotic hotbed of illiteracy, poverty and religion..." (91). They would speak excitedly of sadhus, beggars and huge rats scurrying about in the alleys.

Many of the western characters in the novel think that Indians exploit the westerners for making material benefits and often they mouth their opinion without any hesitation. A good example of this in the novel is when the director of the French Information Centre at the French embassy in New Delhi talks to Catherine's mother in Anand's presence. Curiously the French director speaks to the French lady in English and tells that Catherine should steer clear of "devious Indian men". "The director knew of many instances where French women had fallen for them, only to find themselves used as passports to Europe..." (47). In India poverty is so prevalent and in Anand's case he definitely is badly in need of money. Anand's parents have two daughters to give in marriage, but they are helpless because of the dearth of money to give as dowry.

Another Indian boy from an Indian village, Rajesh also has a background of abject poverty. Rajesh's childhood was spent in maze fields and carpet factories where unscrupulous child labour prevailed. In fact almost all the people in the remote village share this fate. Their homes are identical buildings in a row, "one room, the walls showing through" (168). The description about Rajesh's village goes on: "...box-shaped houses of naked brick and mud huts with large courtyards where men slumbered on string cots; cold-storage warehouses; tiny shuttered shops. Swarthy blouseless women squatted on the ground before thatched huts, slapping together cakes of cow dung, little igloos of which lined the road" (167).

They are Brahmins and his mother complains that they have reached a dead end because of the reservation policy in India (170). "All the government jobs these days were going to low-caste people, and not only did Rajesh have the wrong kind of caste, he had no connection anywhere" (170). The novel evidently projects a deplorable condition of the present day India in the background of corruption and caste politics. Rajesh, the high caste Brahmin youth, tells Samar about his toils and troubles in his childhood, in the maize fields and carpet factories to eke out a living for himself and his mother.

In fact most of the sights in India described in the novel are of poverty and peril:

... broken roads and slime-covered drains and defecating men passed our weary eyes. At the railway station truculent coolies bargained with passengers driven to near-hysteria by the simple act of offloading family and luggage. Ragged urchins screeched 'Chai, chai' while cracked loudspeakers

above droned out details of delayed arrivals and departures. Outside, rickshaw drivers with thin, unshaven, mustachioed faces and blood-red eyes jostled, harangued and taunted arriving visitors. (144)

Another excerpt: "The streets were littered with tiny soaked slips of paper and rotting vegetables and cow dung, the profound silence cleft only by the slow grind of rickshaw wheels. The houses on both sides looked wretched and dark. Here and there on rickshaw seats lay slumbering bodies in cramped postures" (145). The sights are not different in the villages and small towns anywhere in India. Near Pondicherry, Samar finds "the overpopulated slums with their tottering houses, fetid alleys and exposed gutters, their cooped-up frustrations and festering violence, there hardened ugliness" (215-216). "Rubbish lay in uneven mounds, or was strewn across the cobblestone floor, firmly sticking to the place where it had been deposited by an overflowing open drain. After every twenty metres or so, a fresh stench hung in the air" (20-21). There is also a reference in the novel about the perils and pains of exile which the Tibetan people at Dharmasala experience: "They looked remote and abstracted even while talking to you, and you wondered what memories of lost homelands were decaying behind the piercing sadness of their stoic faces" (219).

There are also dismal pictures of the universities in India which are supposed to be the centers of learning which guide the young generations in India. A seven page description of the student politics, agitation and riots in Banares Hindu University is given in the novel (78-84). The students in a fury throw hand grenades at the police and one is fatally wounded. Similarly the situation of the reputed Allahabad University is also given in the novel:

Set up in 1887, the university was once known as the Oxford of the East. To seekers of jobs and careers in the colonial dispensation it offered an attractive pedigree. But unbeknown to those of us who still set store by its old reputation, the university had suffered a steep decline in the years since independence. Anarchy reigned behind the still impressive façade of its domes and towers. Academic sessions were in total disarray: examinations due in April were more likely to be held in December, if at all. Everyone was locked in conflict: students against students, teachers against teachers, teachers against students, students against the management, teachers against the management, students against the police. Often these conflicts turned violent. Students shot at each other on the streets with country-made revolvers. Late at night, you were hurtled out of your sleep by the sound of a crude bomb going off somewhere in the vicinity. In the morning, you read the details in the crime pages of

the local Hindi papers: political rivalry, ambush, instant death, investigation ordered, no arrests so far. (8-9)

Some of the university students are shown as elderly men who promote politics and hooliganism in the campus. Vijay a secretary of the student union leaves the university almost middle aged after getting six degrees in Literature, Commerce, Journalism and Law (21-22). Rajesh who becomes Samar's friend and patron at the university also is a politician turned criminal. Vijay later becomes a " 'contractor' – the much used multipurpose word that could denote anything from a supplier of building materials to an organizer of arson and even murder. Almost all of the student politicians and troublemakers called themselves 'contractors'; the word was considered more weighty than 'businessman' " (22).

When job opportunities were few, the only enticing factor for the students as well as parents was the civil service examination:

Almost every student took the year-long three-tier exams at some stage; it was the thing to do whether or not anything in your academic record justified your ambitions. Though very exacting, they still offered the quickest route to affluence and power in North India. More important, they offered a way out of the hopelessness and desperation many of the students from nearby villages and towns knew awaited them at home. These students spent the best part of their twenties in their badly lit rooms, grappling with various exam 'guides,' memorizing whole essays on Gandhi and Nehru, cramming their heads with arcane statistics about the Indian economy. But only a handful of them ever qualified. To the rest, the results came every year as a fresh blow. They were the ones you saw age fast, with grey hair, crow's feet and faltering eyesight; and every year there were at least four or five suicides. (29)

YARDSTICKS OF MODERNITY IN INDIA

Further the novel also refers to new yardsticks of modernity appearing in India. "Those ghastly fast-food places and beauty parlours and so-called Italian restaurants and the hotels with discotheques – the money for all this comes from the mafia" (267). The novel also shows the tendency of succumbing to luxurious ways, especially when one comes from a financially poor background and then picks up modern education. In his trip from Dharamasala to Pondicherry, Samar takes a taxi to Pathankot. "The taxi was a luxury, and it was with the same light-headed extravagance that I cancelled my earlier reservations and upgraded my ticket to second-class air-conditioned" (253). It is out of the same sense of "modernity" that Samar's father reprimanded Samar for his decision to work as a lower primary school teacher (227).

There are also references in the novel about politics and books which mainly deal with economical aspects in society. Samar is fascinated by the writer, Edmund Wilson and both Samar and Rajesh read Gustav Flaubert's novel *Sentimental Education* and Wilson's critique of the novel. Samar is also shown as reading the books like Wilson's *To the Finland Station*, a book on the pre-Marxist and post-Marxist tradition of historical analysis, Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* (95) and Turgenev's *Torrents of Spring* (7). In his conversation with Catherine he uses the names of Nietzsche, Mann, Proust, James Kierkegaard and Pascal (91). Samar tells that Rajesh soon understood that "the society Flaubert and Wilson wrote about wasn't very different from the one he inhabited in Benares" (250).

Catherine blames Mitterrand and socialism for the failing economy (111) and unemployment in France. It can be seen that Catherine's French friends who visit her in India are fascinated by socialistic ideals. But after their university life the fascination remained a mere fascination which never called for any action or social activities. Even the romantic affliction between Anand and Catherine (49) is in a way an interaction and encounter between the present day India and France. Both of them reflect the difference of the countries from which they come: "Anand, fidgety and intense, who, with his thin face and tormented looks, would always be associated with the warren of dark slumbering alleys around us; and Catherine, looking in her calm self-possession, as she would always do, from another world, richer and more fulfilled than the one she lived in now" (18). In fact, Catherine's love for Anand, partly is due to her patronizing tendency and even her friends look at it that way: "With Anand, her [Catherine] friend's attitude could only be that of an interested and kindly patron" (89). When Anand says that one could not live without an air-conditioner in India, Catherine humours him: "Do you really want an air-conditioner? I can buy you one any time" (46). The relationship between Catherine and Anand metaphorically stands for the relationship between developed countries and developing countries. What is important for the west is to assume a fake patronizing attitude rather than really taking care of the weaklings.

The parties which Miss West occasionally throws is generally symbolic of the West's way of life. For Indians like Samar, parties associate with "half naked revellers" (9). Rajesh used to recite lines from a poem of Faiz which means "This is not that long-looked-for break of day" which reflect the frustrations and uncertainties of the youth in the background of penury (27). Shyam the family retainer of Mrs Pandey who "rarely spoke a word apart from a clichéd proverb in Hindi he would repeat, without regard to context, as he fanned the chulha fire: 'Greed,' he would mumble, 'is the biggest evil. It eats away man, destroys families, sunders son from parents, husband from wife...'"

(11) and this is very much symptomatic of modernity in the novel.

DELINEATIONS IN *MAKING THE MINISTER SMILE*

In *Making the Minister Smile*, the American youth's visit to India chances to bring out the nuanced differences in the field of economy. The omniscient narrator speaks mainly from the point of view of Chris, the American youth and this provides ample scope for a comparison of the orient and the occident in terms of economic disparity. Chris frankly tells Kalpana what an outsider thinks of India:

It's a nation of disembodied hands tugging at your sleeve insistently. I get exhausted shaking them off. I mean the national anthem should be the muttered urgings of hustlers. Jeez, I don't think any other country has such a large and diverse variety. But don't you think it's what India does globally, isn't it like one of its own beggars, plucking timidly but persistently at the world's sleeve, wanting, demanding, badgering?" (39)

When Chris looks around at the New Delhi Railway Station at 5.30 in the morning, he "marvelled at the Indian ability to create a home with invisible walls of privacy in the most public environment conceivable. . . . A certain spot was the toilet judging from the smells emanating and this was tacitly agreed to by everyone, though why they chose one spot and not another was unclear" (30). When Chris and Ajai Vir walk along the banks of Yamuna River, Chris wonders at the huge pipes inside which people live: "On the right was a clutter of huge pipes and black tarpaulins shaped into tents. Stones anchored the tents to the ground. Smoke rose from a dozen little fires and mingled with the smell of excreta" (167).

Chris is shocked to see a colony of the labourers where "The stench of urine, excreta and decaying junk made it impossible for him to breathe" (50). India is shown as an open place toilet where people excrete all over:

'Jeez,' gasped Chris in bafflement, stepping hugely over an artistically composed pile of shit. 'Nothing in this country is what it seems.' He looked back at the squiggles of excreta. They looked too contrived, as though there had been a pre-determined pattern to their excretion. 'Maybe it's a form of art among India's poor,' began to suspect Chris. 'Maybe they can make landscapes and portraits out of it. (51)

The official at the airport spitting blood into a bin (4), the poor condition of roads such as the one leading to The Taj Mahal (33), "a cow contentedly chewing the cud in the middle of an intensely crowded street" (7) and similar sights add to Chris' bafflement. An amused Chris thinks: "It was as though the entire city

was a vast replica of what America must have been like in the days of the Gold Rush" (7-8).

The novel gives a gruesome and murky picture of how, Indian political leaders, wealthy people like industrialists, union leaders, servile people at the families of political power-centres and spy agents of different countries and multinational companies work in an amalgam to influence and shape the destiny of the nation. The formula for success in India, especially in Indian business field is explicitly shown in the novel. Ram Avtar started his business life from humble beginnings and it is easily understood that he established his empire not entirely by straight means. On a big black board in the room of Ajai Vir, the son of Ram Avtar the business man, three capital letter "B"s are written which shows Ram Avtar's theory of the three secrets of doing business. Every morning Ajai Vir erases it and writes it again so that he remembers it for the rest of the day. The three capital 'B's stand for "Butter them. Bribe them. Or Bash them" (11) and that shows the general nature of general trade and business in the Indian context.

Besides describing the typical Indian features like poor infrastructure, unhygienic habits and ill-health of the public in general, greedy taxi-drivers, cows in the crowded streets and corruption in public offices, the novel successfully foregrounds the ways of running a company in the Indian context. Though the company is an average factory rather than a multi-national company, it shows how the labour class is exploited ruthlessly by the profit mongering management and how the politicians callously exploit the labour class to satisfy their vested interest rather than the interest of the labourers or the nation.

CONCLUSION

The Romantics gives lengthy descriptions of poverty in India with special emphasis on the poor condition of the roads, menacing auto rickshaw drivers, unhygienic and dirty streets with exposed gutters and stench, slums without proper drainage facilities, beggars and rats. Child labour, problems of the Tibetan refugees, Student politics, conflicts and anarchy in the Indian Universities and threat of the mafia in different centres are special problems prominently raised in the novel. Mushrooming fast food centres, beauty parlours and restaurants with discotheques are shown as the ill-disposed effects of modernity. The West is not shown as an ideal place devoid of economic problems. There is reference in the novel to the failing economy and unemployment in France and Catherine accuses Mitterrand and socialism as the root cause of the problems. However most of the youngsters including the protagonist have association with books and ideas of Marxism and socialism,

although few work seriously for the materialization of the ideals.

In *Making the Minister Smile*, the Western mind generally seems to think of India as a handicapped nation which goes all over the globe as a badgering beggar. Lack of infrastructure, slums and stench in India very much form part of the theme in the novel. Liberalization without effective state control, sentiments against the exploitation of multinationals like Coca-Cola and Pepsico, strikes which hamper development, double deals of politicians and union leaders and work of secret agencies to thwart the economic stability and integrity of the nation are reflected as special problems which destabilize the nation's economy in the novel.

Mike Davis in his remarkable book, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, which won World History Association Book Prize in 2002, says about the western type of modernization and prosperity during the period of colonization in India:

Yet, as macroeconomic statistics demonstrate, such prosperity was usually ephemeral and quickly reabsorbed in to the huge inertia of rural poverty. Peasant agriculture, even in the most dynamic cash crop sectors, remained radically undercapitalized. Only money lenders, absentee landlords, urban merchants and a handful of indigenous industrialists seemed to have benefited consistently from India's renewed importance in world trade. "Modernization" and commercialization were accompanied by "pauperization". (312)

Exactly the same kind of descriptions of rural poverty, lack of scientific and technological knowhows, poor infrastructure, crude universities and educational institutions, corruption and unethical politics are repeatedly delineated in the novels. The novels also have too many minute but interesting details of strikes, the crooked ways of political leaders, business and industrial personalities, spy agents, and minions to political bigwigs. However such descriptions tempt one to think of real sort of development. Tucker in his article. "The Myth of Development: A Critique of a Eurocentric Discourse." says: "Development is the process whereby other people are dominated and their destinies are shaped accordingly to an essentially Western way of conceiving and perceiving the world. The development discourse is part of the imperial process whereby other people are appropriated and turned into objects" (1).

But the most disturbing factor in the novels is the wiles of the pretensions of the development of the nation which does virtually nothing for the needy masses, although all these aspects are portrayed in a mildly satirical vein. It reminds one the words of Robert Young in *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction*: "Political liberation did not bring

economic liberation – and without economic liberation, there can be no political liberation" (5). Thus an in-depth study of the novels regarding the portrayal of economic aspects and concepts of modernity proves that the present day India depicted in the novels, epitomizes all the unscrupulous political gimmicks and the related corruption which impoverishes India as it apes the Western education and concepts of development.

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