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COLONIZING THE MIND: PROCESS AND PRACTICE OF COLONIALISM IN GURCHARAN DAS'S LARINS SAHIB

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to reveal the process and practice of colonialism as reflected in Larins Sahib, Sultan Padmasee Prize winning play by Gurcharan Das. The action of the play is based on the real events in Punjab in 1846-47. The play is recreated from the documents and letters exchanged by the principal characters. Prima-facie it is a love story of an Indian queen Rani Jindan Kaur and Henry Lawrence, an Agent of the East India Company to the Government of Dalip Singh, the son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Authors believe that imperialism operates in the play on psychological, political, economic, social, cultural and individual level. The play also throws light on the changing cultural priorities in the process of colonialism. Colonial power initially defeats natives to show them that they are inferior and thereby incapable to rule. Secondly it lays down strict political, economic, geographical and military conditions to sustain control over them. On the cultural level, under the pretext of development and social reform, colonizers change cultural priorities. Once the colonizers have gained full power and altered the social and cultural priorities, they start to harass the colonized on individual level. And when the colonized understand that they have been trapped in the net, they start rebellion to overthrow the colonial rule. Thus the colonizer and the colonized get locked in an unending struggle. However, the norms of the struggle are always set by the colonizer. The play under assessment is a good example of the process and practice of imperialism.

KEYWORDS:

Colonizing of Mind, Process of Colonialism, Practice of Colonialism,

INTRODUCTION:

The aim of this paper is to reveal the process and practice of colonialism as reflected in Larins Sahib, Sultan Padmasee Prize winning play by Gurcharan Das. It was first produced in July 1969 by Deryck Jeffereis at Bhulabhai Thearre; Bombay. As Das says, the action of the play is "based on the real events in Punjab in 1846-47". The play is recreated "from the documents and letters exchanged by the principal characters" (Das 97). Prima-facie it is a love story of an Indian queen Rani Jindan Kaur and Henry Lawrence, an Agent of the East India Company to the Government of Dalip Singh, the son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. But latent meanings in the play reveal the process and practice of colonialism. An attempt is made in this paper to analyze this process and practice on political, psychological economic, social, cultural and individual level in the play.

Process and Practice of Colonialism in Larins Sahib- Political, Psychological and Economic Level

Action of the play takes place a month after Punjabis lost the battle of Sobraon, better known as the First Sikh War. Sikh Kingdom is surrendered to East India Company by the Treaty of Lahore. Heavy and unbearable economical, military and territorial conditions are laid on the Punjabis. The sense of defeated outlook is there in the minds of Punjabis. Hardinge, the Governor-General, do not intend Punjab to be an independent state. Instead he plans that the twelve-year-old Prince, Dalip, must be under Company's protection and bidding. Hardinge appoints Henry Lawrence as the Agent of the East India Company for Punjab. Lawrence befriends Sher Singh, the son of Chattar Singh Attari, the governor of the North-West Frontier districts under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Lawrence's concealed motive is to succeed as a second "Lion of Punjab", the "Angrez Badshah". He pulls Rani in his net of love. As per the Hardinge's policy Lawrence makes Tej Singh the "Raja" and banishes Rani Jindan Kaur to Sheikhpura. He separates son from mother and keeps Dalip as the King. Sher Singh knows that Larins has betrayed Punjab by banishing "the Mother of the Punjab", Rani Jindan Kaur. Sher Singh takes vow to come to avenge his Queen and to throw Angrez out of the Punjab. At the end of the play, Lawrence, the "new Lion" of the Punjab, gets a message from the Company that his services are not needed in Punjab and he is asked to proceed to Calcutta. As Ashish Nandy argues "... a colonial system perpetuates itself by inducing the colonized, through socio-economic and psychological rewards and punishments, to accept new social norms and cognitive categories" (03). In colonial culture political and socio-economic dominance of the colonizer helps the colonizer to gain and maintain power over the colonized. As said above, colonial power initially defeats natives to show them that they are inferior and thereby incapable to rule and lays down strict political, economic, geographical and military conditions to sustain control over them. In Larins Sahib Punjabis have lost the battle of Sobraon, better known as the First Sikh War, against the British and have surrendered their Kingdom in full "sovereignty of the territory, hill and plain, lying between the Sutlej and Beas rivers" (Das 30). Also they have agreed to pay one and half crores of rupees security as expenses of the war. Moreover their army is reduced: infantry by 20,000 and cavalry by 12,000. They have surrendered 36 guns apart from those captured in the campaign. They have also given the control of the rivers Beas and Sutlej for convergence of the Indus at Mithankot. In a sense they are totally defeated and that's why they are inferior and "effeminate". Colonizers always look contemptuously at the colonized and regard everything amongst them as second rate. This is another policy to inculcate the sense of inferiority in the minds of the Colonized. The Governor-General Henry Hardinge says "Everything in India is second-rate" (28). The Foreign Secretary Currie says "Even the men become second-class in India" (Das 28). This was not only limited to individual level it was applied to religion too. When Hardinge asks Currie reason of the end of the Punjabi kingdom Currie answers: "It's clearly a matter of racial superiority. Every pagan power, no matter how formidable in appearance, must succumb to the civilizing mission of the white races" (Das 32). Britishers regarded Indian religion as inferior to Christianity. Capt. Abbot says to Lawrence: "The natives aren't Christians, sir. Their odious religion has thousands of ugly Gods and rituals (Das 48). The sense of inferiority is always inculcated in the minds of the natives through abusive language and insult. When Sher Singh participates in a discussion with Lumsden and Abbot and makes a joke, Lumsden reminds him: "You can't afford to offend us. Don't forget that you are a native, funny man...Natives should speak only when spoken to" (Das 47).

The relationship between the colonized and the colonizer is often visualized in household and patriarchal terms, which positions the colonized people as children who are to be grateful for the guidance and mastery of the colonizers as fathers. After the death of Ranjit Singh, 'one eyed Lion' of the Punjab, his son Dalip Singh, a child prince succeeds him. The Governor-General Hardinge does not want Punjab to be an independent state and intends that "[t]he young Prince must be under our protection, and do our bidding" (Das 33). Colonizers considered themselves as the agents of progress and true agents of salvation for the 'primitive', barbaric' uncivilized "niggers" (Punjabis). Surprisingly enough, this inferiority, subordinate position was accepted by Indians too. Colonial power creates respect for themselves in the minds of the natives. There are two ways they can maintain this power. First, they attract natives by showing that they are their saviors. And second they use power and violence. Lawrence uses first and other British characters in the play use the second method. Lawrence is one of those witty colonizers who instead of using violence attracted natives through various reforms and tried to keep colonial rule intact in India. As Das says in the afterword of the play that even today people in Punjab talk of his rule of justice and generosity. However their motive is same that is to keep control over the natives. Sher Singh happily says when Larins become Resident of Punjab that Larins is "merely reaping the fruit" of his past lives. He becomes victim of colonial policy. He prefers some English wine because he thinks that "Angrez know how to live". The British used divide and rule policy to maintain this power. Hardinge takes help of Tej Singh from the beginning and at the end makes him Raja. Larins takes Sher Singh in confidence. He makes a show of his love for the Queen. Henry Lawrence has meticulously observed the psychology of Indians. He says, "You Indians are the most

touchy people in the world” (Das 50). On the contrary as Lawrence says “An Englishman learns to master his feelings” (Das 87). Lawrence has rightly observed Indian men's nature. He continues “Sometimes it's so difficult to talk to you. One's always afraid of hurting you. You know Sher Singh, there's a hunting bird who is so sensitive ... even if you are standing a hundred feet behind it and you move an inch, its neck will cringe. An Indian is like that. One has to be so careful with you” (Das 50). Lawrence sums up the difference best and takes benefit of Indian mentality. He arranges the Darbar wherein he arranges tempting interior. Because he says:

That's the way to rule India... with dignity. ... Yes, Indians like colour, pageant style. They respect it. That's authority for them. ... They like to be ruled through the heart; we rule through the head. They like to be dealt with at the personal level; our basis of administration is impersonal law. They respect tact; our laws and settlements are crudely blunt. You can't change a people's view of the world just like that: Particularly if they've just lost a war ... You've got to make them forget they've lost a war. ... (Das 68)

The hidden ambition of Lawrence is the ambition of the colonizer to preside over the colonized. His deliberate act of arranging Darbar which is only the privilege of a King is an outcome of his hidden wish to become King and a way to transmit a message of power of the colonizer over the colonized. He deliberately arranges a place for the Sardars to seat on the floor despite Sher Singh's advice against it. He likes to be referred to as the “Angrez Badshah”. In the fifth scene of the second act of the play, all the natives have accepted Larins as their ruler as they shout loudly ‘Larins Sahib Zindabad, ‘Angrez Badshah Zindabad’ (72). Without hurting the sentiments of the natives Larins breaks all the customs and laws of the natives to show them that they are inferior and thereby incapable to rule. He calls the Wazir and Commander of the Khalsa in front of the Darbar to answer the charges when Wazir is supposed to answer to the Regent only. He starts wearing Maharaja Ranjit Singh's robes because he says that “If you Indians respect authority from its appearances, then it's sensible to appear properly ... (Das 64). Notwithstanding the fact that Sardars won't like to see Ranjit Singh's royal robes to be worn by a foreigner, Larins dares to wear the royal clothes. It is his concealed wish to see himself as the second “Lion” of the Punjab. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was venerated as a “Lion of Punjab”. In fact he was the Punjab. Most of the Kings in India were associated with the names of royal beasts like Tiger and Lion. Great warrior Tipu Sultan was revered as “Tiger of Mysore”. Lion, Tiger are associated with, vigilance, strength, power and authority. Precisely Lion is the King of Jungle. Tiger hunting was one of the symbols in the construction of British imperial and masculine identities in colonial era. By capturing Punjab Lawrence has hunted “One-eyed Lion”. He roars at the end of the play; “I have the Punjab. Angrez Badshah! The new Lion is here. I am the Punjab!” (Das 96). Instead of following the lesson taught by great Maharaja Ranjit Singh that “...the surest way to escape a pursuing tiger is to turn yourself into one. Then he won't touch you”, Indians got caught in the net of colonial policy and started regarding themselves inferior to the British (Das 41).

Process and Practice of Colonialism in Larins Sahib- Social, Cultural and Personal Level

When two different cultures confront each other the powerful or dominant culture alters the indigenous culture. This always helps the colonizers in upholding their power. Under the pressure of the colonizers, the local culture gets reshaped. Cow in Indian society is worshiped as “Gomata” (cow mother). Especially in Hindu culture 'Mata' (mother), 'Bharat Mata' (Mother India) and 'Gomata' (cow mother) are equal. It is a Hindu belief that a cow bears thirty three crores of Gods'. It is highly revered and regarded as a sacred entity. Hindu people worship cow on sacred occasions. Abbot doesn't know “...why in heaven's name are the niggers so touchy about cows?” (Das 47). Lumsden “deliberately and perversely” kills the cow under the pretense that it was blocking his way. But as Larins says, Lumsden went out of his way to kill the cow, “knowing all the time that the sensitivities of the people there would be outraged by this” (Das 48). This is the deliberate act of the colonizer to change the cultural priorities.

Larins Sahib issues a proclamation to abolish the tradition of 'sati' immediately in all provinces and districts of Punjab and to extend Hindu Reform Bill to all parts of the Punjab. Prima-facie it may look colonizer's noble intention for the welfare of the colonized women. But as Mrinalini Sinha says, the concern for the condition of Indian women “was motivated by the political necessity of demonstrating the inferiority of Indian, particularly Bengali, masculinity” (218). This can be applicable to Punjabi masculinity too. The act of Lawrence to separate Rani from her son and sending this “Mother of the Punjab” in jail bears the testimony of the hypocrisy of Britishers' claim of social concern. If Britishers had concern for the welfare of women they would not have sent Rani Jindan Kaur to jail at Sheikhpura. Angrez keep son, Dalip, because he is needed for legitimacy and Rani is thrown away. Hardinge doubts that she was plotting against the Britishers and guiding Dalip too. Even if the colonial government did undertake reforms to rescue women from the ill effects of exploitative Hindu customs, (legislation against sati and child marriage) as Sinha has pointed out, “official policy toward women was often contradictory in nature

because it could seldom be divorced from the dictates of the colonial situation. The government claimed to be the champions of female emancipation in India on the one hand and reinforced the oppression of Indian women on the other” (Sinha 219).

When natives understand that they have been made effeminate and have been deceived in the politics of colonialism they start rebellion. At the end of the play Sher Singh understands this politics. He takes vow to overthrow Angrez out of the country. He says:

I shall come to avenge my queen. I shall be armed and the whole Punjab army will be behind me. The Angrez will be thrown out of the Punjab or I shall die. Larins Sahib, you've made a man of me, and I thank you. It was another Sher Singh who wanted to be an English gentleman. . . . [he shouts] 'Come on men. Take your swords. Remember the Lion, and save your land'. I shall rally every son and father. We shall kick out the Angrez. And we shall save our land. Farewell, Larins Sahib, we shall meet on the battlefield again. (Das 95)

Thus the colonizer and the colonized get locked in an unending struggle. This individual rebellion becomes a mass revolt like 1857 Rebellion.

CONCLUSION

Imperialism operates in the play on psychological, political, economic, social, cultural and individual level. The play also throws light on the changing cultural priorities in the process of colonialism. Colonial power initially defeats natives to show them that they are inferior and thereby incapable to rule. Secondly it lays down strict political, economic, geographical and military conditions to sustain control over them. On the cultural level, under the pretext of development and social reform, colonizers change cultural priorities. Once the colonizers have gained full power and altered social and cultural priorities, they start to harass the colonized on individual level. And when the colonized understand that they have been trapped in the net, they start rebellion to overthrow the colonial rule. Thus the colonizer and the colonized get locked in an unending struggle. However, the norms of the struggle are always set by the colonizer. The play under assessment is a good example of the process and practice of imperialism.

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