

## RE-DEFINING STEREOTYPES AND THE POLITICS OF ACCULTURATION: A STUDY OF MAKING THE MINISTER SMILE

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**Abstract:**

*Although essentialist binaries are ruled out by most of the postcolonial critics, the dichotomy still forms the basis of much of the Indian English novels. There are obvious divides between the Orient and the Occident in most of the Indian English novels in matters of economy, gender issues, romance, love and sex, and religious practices and spirituality. But a reading of Anurag Mathur's *Making the Minister Smile* reveals that the divides do not come under classificatory modes of essentialized binaries. The present article attempts to explore the novels from the mentioned perspective.*

**Keywords:** *Politics of acculturation, anurag mathur, essentialized binaries.*

M. K. Naik in *A History of Indian English Literature* points out the allegation that Indian English writers often try to sell their novels in the west and gives the very recipe of successful Indian English Novels:

... often repeated charge against Indian English Literature is that its practioners wrote with an eye on the foreign reader and hence try to provide stereo-types of both character and situation, which attract this reader. Like Benjamin Franklin's famous recipe for a New England elegy, the recipe for a successful Indian novel in English is, according to these critics, now very well patented. Take an assortment of sadhus, fakirs, maharajas, agitationists, Westernized Indian men and traditional Indian women either pious paragons or seductive sirens according to your mood and choice and let them perform against the background of communal riots and nationalistic uprisings; throw in a couple of tiger-hunts, rope-tricks, snakes and elephants; and a pinch of mysticism if you carry it off successfully and there you have your Indian English masterpiece. (287)

Such recipes are rooted in the concepts of “the Orient” and “the Occident”. Edward Said, in *Orientalism* says:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident”. Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, “mind”, destiny and so on. (Said 69)

Although essentialist binaries are ruled out by most of the postcolonial critics, the dichotomy still forms the basis of much of the Indian English novels. There are obvious divides between the Orient and the Occident in most of the Indian English novels in matters of economy, gender issues, romance, love and sex, and religious practices and spirituality. But a reading of Anurag Mathur's *Making the Minister Smile* reveals that the divides do not come under classificatory modes of essentialized binaries. Further the dichotomies are presented in a pleasant and humorous vein. In fact the novel is elusive and label-resistant but at the same time it slights the stereotypical “knowledge” about the binaries or dichotomies in conventional discourse.

In the author's earlier novel, *The Inscrutable Americans* which was published in 1991, the Orient and the Occident are depicted in conformity with the portrayal of the same in most of the Indian English novels. In that novel the protagonist, Gopal's character is constructed in such a way to represent the naivety of the Orient and the US life is constructed to show the West's profligacy. But in his novel, *Making the Minister Smile* which was published in 1996, things are depicted totally the other way round. Apparently there is no awful encounter with the West in the novel except the western character's [Chris] chancing upon the Indian characters in India. It is rather a sojourn for Chris and India does not become a second home for him. The story is told by a neuter, omniscient narrator but most of the part seems to be the perception of Chris and this shares the feeling of a glaring disparity between the West and the East. Here Chris is more or less naïve and life in India is depicted as unscrupulous and profligate.

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 of the nation itself.

The vested interests and interferences of the political leaders provide high drama for the story. The Kapoors meet Sevak Chand the minister concerned for labour affairs and also entertain Sharmaji the minister's personal assistant. Sharmaji informs the Kapoors that they should make the minister smile to solve the strike. Thus the titular phrase, "Making the Minister Smile" serves as the key to the modern Indian scenario where dirty politics spoils the true prospects of the nation.

In the novel, the nexus between a politician and an industrialist sacrifices one hundred and fifty two labourers who are charred in the inferno and the harm the vested interests of corporate giants could make is inexplicable. Curiously, even in casual talks people talk of the dangers of unbridled liberalization and its aftermath even if they do nothing against it, as seen in the novel. Sunder the manager tells Chris: "...this liberalization will be finishing India. Finishing. Now, at least they are our own public sector power cuts. I am saying to you, we will be slaves again. Slaves of Coca Cola. I am saying", Mr. Sunder's voice rose to a drunken crescendo, shrieking, "will Indian women now having Pepsi cans instead of breasts?" (56).

Gandhi, on several occasions, expressed his apprehensions about India going after the type of industrialization and modernity of the west. In *Young India* of 7<sup>th</sup> October, 1926, he says: "To make India like England and America is to find some other races and places of the earth for exploitation. So far it appears that the western nations have divided all the known races outside Europe for exploitation and that there are no worlds to discover. What can be the fate of India trying to ape the West?" (348). The novel shows that in modern India almost everyone has acquired the logic of the West and even they excel the Westerners at times to the disbelief of the Westerners. Chris wonders: "Who in hell knows in America that the guys here could be so cunning and so ruthless. Shit, the rest of the world thinks Indian politicians are all like Gandhi, sitting around in bedsheets and doing that meditation and stuff and look at the kind of things they're upto" (107).

At the same time, Chris sooner or later finds out that India is not the bulk of "millions waving pitiful stumps and begging for alms and American visas" (4). Curiously, he finds out the discrepancy that India has got quite a lot of wealthy people who enjoy better life than people in the USA. Chris thinks: "...back home, I believed being rich in India meant someone with a bigger hut than his neighbour. But now, look at the way they live, Servants, chauffeurs, houses, weekend homes. Jeez, with a bit of money, there is no life as good as in India".

The novel also very well shows the amazingly opulent ways of the wealthy Indians. Look how Chris feels at the dinner parties thrown by the affluent people in a country which is notorious for its poverty all around:

Everytime Chris went to one of these dinners anywhere in Delhi, he wondered how anyone could believe that India was full of starving people. He had never before seen so many people eat so much from such a wide selection. It was common for Chinese, Indian and Continental cuisines to be on offer at the same dinner. In fact Chris couldn't really characterize them as mere dinners anymore, preferring to think of them as events. Something in the nature of culinary Olympics. (34)

On the whole, the novel has 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. But the most disturbing factor in the novel 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 the title, "Making the Minister Smile" proves to be the key phrase in the present day India, which epitomizes all the unscrupulous political gimmicks and the related corruption which impoverishes India as it apes the Western education and concepts of development.

Religious practices and spirituality constitute another area of apparent binary existing in the Indian English novels. The West is shown as material in its interest and the East is shown as spiritual in its pursuits. But in *Making the Minister Smile*, Swamiji Ahimsa Sagar Dosco Walle who runs an ashram above Hardwar, accepts donations only in his Swiss bank account, and is shown as a fraudulent ascetic, who aims at amassing wealth (100). The religious old man Ram Avtar is shown as one full of materialistic ambitions. It is shocking to see Ram Avtar doing his prayers coolly to his heart's content when one hundred and fifty workers of his company were charred to death. The workers loyal to him were asked to lock themselves to the machine and to conduct a protest demanding the opening of the factory. The atrocious deed was apparently arranged by the old man to finish Prabhal Kumar the troublesome union leader who is behind the strike at his company. He got Prabhal Kumar arrested and ruined forever and the future of his factory as well as the future of his son was saved. This clearly shows that religiousness in India also may not have anything to do with righteousness.

Dichotomies are also supposed to exist between the East and the West in matters of gender discrimination, romance, love and sex. But in the novel, Indian men and women are shown as different from their own respective pre-set traditional roles. Kalpana is never treated as inferior to Ajai Vir or Ram Avatar. They find consolation that Kalpana entertains Chris, their prospective American collaborator. Ajai Vir never has an iota of jealousy or suspicion in Kalpana's friendship with Chris. But Kalpana is also very careful in keeping her infidelity a top secret so as to avoid any possible hurt to her future in-laws. She also informs Chris that in her premarital love making with her fiancée Ajai Vir, she sets limits, "only above the waist and below the knees" (25), so as to play the good Indian bride. Chris, the American youth's apprehension about the Indian concept of the uncompromising chastity proves to be notwithstanding.

In Kalpana's relationship with Chris, actually it is she who plays a superior role. She shows an interest on Chris and encourages him in making physical love, explaining that "one or two experiences don't really count" (24). She also encourages him telling that the possibility of tarnishing the reputation is less with foreign men and so Chris has a better chance with Indian women. She also shows a matter of fact approach in the physical intimacy while Chris is emotionally more entangled. Even Chris feels that Kalpana is using him as a tool in the whole process. The popular picture of Indian womanhood safeguarded by the sanctity of chastity is negated. Thus in the novel the themes of love, sex and morality are depicted totally in a manner deviant from the traditional way it has been treated in usual Indian English novels. The Indian womanhood under the influence of modern education and media technology has adapted itself as a highly opportunist vampire who could enjoy all its Dionysian vagaries and at the same time playing the role of a chaste Indian woman. After the second love making, when Chris foolishly describes her as a

“great lay” her sense of honour is hurt and she simply refuses all his further attempts to his utter disappointment and agony. Kalpana gets offended because of the comments which have chauvinistic overtones. She is the last one to eat the humble pie and she simply refuses even to keep friendship with Chris, even though she clearly has a fascination for Chris. She also does not allow Chris to make love with Amita with whom he was about to make physical love (141). In her relationship with Ajai Vir as well as with Chris she clearly has domination. She does what pleases her and even makes the other two yield to her.

Even the “bhabi”, who fixes up a rendezvous with a youngster also has the final word with her. In the novel Kalpana, her friends and a middle-aged woman at the pool-side party, Amita and the “bhabi” seem to be quite experienced in the art of love making. All the ladies depicted have sexual ambition and are capable of dictating the terms to fulfill their ambitions. In all the cases, the ladies when they are interested, take an equal share of responsibility and even guide the courses of action. The men never resort to any pressurizing tactics. Thus the novel shows no picture of gender discrimination and on the contrary, the female protagonist here is clearly not a weakling, but a skilful contriver.

The novel also remarks that the dancers in the Hindi films do all sorts of pelvic gyrations as if overcome by nymphomania. The ladies represent the elite Indian youth who achieve homogeneity of global culture due to the influence of modern education. The novel clearly gives the hint that the traditional concept of ladies in India as chaste and pure does not hold good in modern times. It is also notable that Ram Avatar keeps a framed photograph of his late wife along with the picture of Gods in his room for prayer and most of the time his prayers are a sort of soliloquy to her picture. This also is an indicator of his attitude to his late wife.

The various feats undertaken by the Indian ladies in the novel undermine the stereotypical gendered assumptions of male dominance in the Indian society. The ladies depicted in the novel generally represent the modern educated ladies who have deviated much from the conventional codes of modesty. Most of them are not way behind the “scheming witches” (26) as Rana Kabbani puts it when he tells about the Europe's myths of the Orient. The novel vouchsafes the disavowal of so many fundamental assumptions and values as the Indian characters are drifted away by the whirlwind of globalization and its influence on corporate and private life.

The study of the four areas - Aspects of Economics, Gender Issues, Romance and Sex and Religious practices and Spirituality - where major divides are seen between the East and the West, very well shows that the essentialized binaries are increasingly blurred. It does not mean that specific geographical areas and languages do not have long traditions with distinct features. The projected polarities do not really exist because of the increasing cross-culturalities and syncretism. Thus the study of the novel, as far as East-West encounter is concerned, reveals that the geographical terrains could no longer be studied from a reductive two-dimensional perspective.

These cross-culturalities are the result of the development of the Information Technology which has made the entire world a global village. In most of the countries, the “English Language” plays a crucial role in bringing forth this cultural syncretism. But it is mainly the Media, especially the Television Channels, the Advertisements and the Entertainment Industry that lead the world to such a hybridity where various unique features of different ethnic cultures are pushed back to oblivion. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her article, “The Anxiety of Indianness”, in *Mapping Cultural Spaces* says:

The demands of economy, both national and global, create a thrust towards a homogenization of culture and in India the language that can most effectively achieve this is English, which is also the language of upward social mobility. The sudden communication revolution that has brought CNN, MTV and Star TV inside many urban homes is helping in this amnesia where the culture constructed by the media, the advertisement and entertainment industry a slicker and more attractive package than what

real life in India can offer - is successfully obliterating the local and the regional sub-cultures unless they are brought back as 'planned authenticity' or the exportable ethnic. English being spoken, at least partially, in more upper middle class homes than ever before, kinship terms are simplified to suit a supposedly western model and clothes, behaviour pattern, footwear and leisure activities are geared towards an international norm. (91)

But when heterogeneity disappears to form homogeneity, the question--which culture prevails in the homogeneity--becomes relevant. Whether the “international norm” will unfailingly include proportionately all the elements of ethnic cultures across the globe, is the relevant question.

Here the background of homogenization through liberal education is to be examined. By the introduction of English education, the British colonial rulers intended to establish their hegemony over India. Bill Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin in their introduction to *The Empire Writes Back* says; “It can be argued that the study of English and the growth of Empire proceeded from a single ideological climate...” (3). Apparently the introduction of English studies was part of the civilizing mission which the British undertook by themselves. It was a tactful method to tame the natives and to get consent from the colonized people to establish the West's supremacy. The study of the aesthetics and ethics in English literature was supposed to nurture the mental cultivation of the natives to suit the empire's interest. In *Subject to Change* Susie Tharu says; “In fact literary studies were to provide the indefinable, but recognizable, quality that would help consolidate British rule while moderating the possibly dangerous effects of radical European ideas” (5).

Thomas Babington Macaulay with his Education Minute of 1835, claimed that they were giving the primitive natives an access to genuine values, civility and modernity. Mahasweta Sengupta says:

The English Education Act of 1835 sought to replace the diverse indigenous education systems that had catered to different communities of India, and was clearly an effort to subject the natives to the discursive network of the ruler. In other word, the Act not only replaced Sanskrit, Arabic or Persian as a medium of instruction, but, inculcated a certain ideology that was not immediately apparent to Indians who thought that gates of “modern” knowledge were being opened for them for the first time in their history. The result was not only the imposition of English and with it, the world view of those in power, but also the indoctrination of the idea that this language possessed a literature that was surely superior to anything in the native's domain of learning or knowledge. What the British needed was not merely a class of people who would staff the lower rungs of the administrative machinery, but also a class whose categories would be framed by the structures of English discourse. (219-220)

They wanted the English educated Indians to believe that the English were far superior in each and every aspect and that the natives should imitate the British. Naturally if the middle and upper class elites emulate the British, the other categories also would consider everything connected to the British as speckless, superior and covetable and this itself is the Filtration theory propounded by Macaulay and Stuart Mill. What the study of English language and literature aimed at was this formation of an alien taste, opinion, morals and intellect, i.e., establishing the hegemony of an alien culture over the ethnic culture.

Further, the paradigms of dichotomies are fast changing in the modern world of increased mobility, interconnectedness and relentlessly ongoing globalization. The possibilities of educational sharing and transfer of knowledge, cosmopolitanism, elite classes of marketable professionals, business executives and young aspirants celebrating globalization make the novel reflect a hybrid cosmopolitan culture. Geographical and cultural displacement and the celebration of hybridity have made the spatial and temporal irrelevant. The new world order of multiculturalism is swept over by globalization keeping vested interests, flanked by the boom in information technology and the media, especially the television channels with their entertainments and advertisements and thus the local is displaced to nullity.

“Production of culture” through the unending possibilities of media has been foregrounded by the neo-colonial forces along with the local, the national and the cultural spaces in between. Commodification has become the trend and luring advertisements have become the misleading modern mythologies. The products of the multinationals and values of the West are made covetable for the people through calculated propaganda. Thus we can see that colonization still works more at the intellectual or cultural level. The study of the novel unmistakably points towards the need to recognize and resist the nuanced dispositions of the neocolonial forces working in the global society of feigned acculturation.

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