

ANALYZING THE JOURNEY OF ANGREZ BADSHAH FROM OBSESSION WITH POWER TO POWERLESSNESS IN GURUCHARAN DAS' PLAY "LARINS SAHIB"

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Abstract:

The main object of my paper is to highlight how power predominantly determines the character. Das represents the history of pre-independent India into contemporary context with its relevance where the desire for power is prevalent. Psychoanalysis of the protagonist is the key aspect to explore the identity fragmentation, the unconscious desire of the self for other. The play also highlights the Indian society, subjugated condition of Indian women, the ambivalent relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, prejudices of the British against the Indians with the desire of colonial expansion. If Lawrence's philanthropic attitude to the Indians is marked by his personal attachment to the natives, his final transformation of character shows his submissiveness to and inescapability from colonial power.

Keywords: philanthropy, natives, identity, patriarchy, culture, desire, Third Space, subversion, obsessiveness, loyalty, imperialist, megalomania

Analysis: Through writing Three English Plays- Larins Sahib, Mira & 9 Jakhoo Hill, Gurucharan Das revisits the Indian history and makes it vibrant & visible in contemporary India. Mira is a poetic play that presents the life of the Bhakti saint Mira Bai, 9 Jakhoo Hill presents the aftermath of partition in India and Larins Sahib deals with the history of India after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Larins Sahib may be observed from the multi-dimensional perspective. The play, according to Das, is in a sense, search for his own identity because it takes him back to his twenties when he was reading a history of Punjab, in which he came across the unusual Lawrence brothers. In a larger context, the play depicts how the East India Company established its colonial authority over the post-Ranjit Singh Sikh kingdom which was plunged into chaos. The defeat of the Sikhs in the first Sikh war was ensured not by the British but also by the traitors of their own army i.e. Lal Singh and Tej Singh who were insincere, unpatriotic, and treacherous. The play also dramatizes the ambivalent relationship between the colonizer represented by the East India Company with its authorities like Lord Hardinge, Currie and Elliot, and the colonized represented by Rani

Jindan (widow of Ranjit Singh), Dalip Singh, Sher Singh, which is marked by the 'superiority complex' on one hand & sympathetic attitude on the other.

The play presents 'the three avatars' of Henry Lawrence: Lawrence- the enlightened empire-builder; Lawrence- would be 'Lion of Punjab'; Lawrence- the little cog in the wheels of the East India Company(Naik 2-3). As Lawrence has been appointed as the Resident of the East India Company in the court of Ranjit Singh's son, Dalip Singh, he's greater opportunity, greater scope to complete certain reformatory tasks left unfinished by the late Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He doesn't hesitate to say that the Lahore treaty imposed on the Sikh kingdom was "too harsh" & suggests that "such punitive terms should not be imposed and the dignity of the land should be ensured"(8). The peasantry of the Ferozpur district considers him a 'kind of savior'. He decides to waive off one month's land revenue for the citizens of district.

Even, he promises to build "canals, bridges, roads" and wants to ensure as much as justice as possible to each citizen. His sympathetic attitude towards the colonized Sikhs is criticized from the point of view of imperialistic temperament by addressing him a clown and an orientalist. Though Currie warns him to maintain a safe distance from the natives, he chooses 'Sardar' Sher Singh as his officer- "Currie: A word of advice, Mr. Lawrence. I hope you will restrain your orientalism and keep the natives at a distance. Keep them in their place if you have to rule them. Lawrence: Who's going to rule anyone! His Highness Dalip Singh is the Maharaja. His mother is the Regent. Sardar Lal Singh is the Wazir. I'm merely the agent of a friendly power." (43)

But behind his philanthropy, he's another motive. He is actually impressed by the late Maharaja Ranjit Singh's stature so much so that he wants to represent himself before the commoners as the second 'one-eyed Lion' of Punjab by imitating his personality. His tendency of distancing himself from the 'original identity' may be interpreted as Dissociative Identity Disorder(or Multiple Personality Disorder) which, according to Ringrose, is characterized by the presence of two or more identities or personality states that recurrently takes control of the individual's behaviour, accompanied by an inability to recall personal information that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness (Ringrose, 3).

Interestingly, Lawrence's shift from being to becoming is actually guided by his imperialist mindset, power-centrism. Like an imperialist, he orders to arrest Tej Singh and Lal Singh for they were behind the conspiracy of firing at Shah Alami Gate attempting to kidnap Maharaja Dalip Singh.

His efficiency as a strict administrator is praiseworthy. He assists a poor woman with a sick child in her lap who's in true need for medical aid. When he is aware of the fact that a Hindu widow is forced to abide by the 'Sati' practice on the pyre of her "holy wedded" husband, he immediately becomes infuriated and proclaims:

“Sati is with immediate effect abolished in all provinces & districts of Punjab. And the Hindu Reform Bill is with immediate effect extended to all parts of Punjab...”. (80)

This incident may be interpreted on two levels- firstly, this demonstrates the wretched condition of Indian women subjugated in patriarchy. Secondly, Lawrence’s attitude almost as a social reformer, ensuring “justice” as much as possible irrespective of gender makes him different from that of other Europeans. Here, his desire for the ‘other’(Ranjit Singh) may be analysed in the colonial context from Lacan's psychoanalytic approach about ‘ Desire’ originated in unconscious feelings . Desire may have brought transformation in conventional relation between the colonizer(Lawrence) and the colonized(People of Punjab) who belong to two different poles of hegemonic relations.

Nowadays, according to the cultural studies, the boundaries between classes and culture have been dissolved to a great extent; but in the era of British imperialism, culture was associated with the elite class i.e. British in this context, it was a means of domination, a way of articulating oppositional points of view to those in dominance. The conflict between the British culture and Indian culture takes a shape in the play. For instance, while crossing the Shah Alami Gate, the English soldiers find their way blocked by a couple of cows and they kill the cows brutally, though they are well aware of the fact this slaughtering would hurt the Hindu sentiment.

Lawrence realising the Indian sentiment about “sacred cow” makes a public apology on behalf of the East India Company and even threatens the young officer Lumsden to suspend him from duty. Das, by juxtaposing Lumsden and Lawrence, shows the insensitivity and bestiality of the colonizer on one hand, and the veritable justice by the colonizer on the other. The play also highlights the way the British used to belittle the natives even in appearance. Lawrence’s appearance in the Governor-General's Darbar makes the white occupants of the room look at him suspiciously “ as if they are about to receive a stranger from another land and not one of their own race”(37) as his face has been tanned by the heat of the subcontinent and he can easily be mistaken as a ‘native’.

Impressed by Lawrence’s generosity towards the Indians , Rani Jindan shows her eagerness to befriend Lawrence in a disguise of Zubheda Begum- a professional singer. Although the Rani describes her husband as “ totally illiterate”, Lawrence calls him up as a legend-“He was the Lion of Victory and left a great unified nation to his people”(63).The diamond(Koh-i-noor)which is gifted by Rani Jindan to Lawrence symbolizes a mark of friendship and growing affection between each other. Impressed by her gesture, he talks about the peasant of Punjab philosophically:

“Yes, the Punjab peasant will always be there. Isn’t it reasonable then, that we win him to our side? To win him, we must work for him, for his sake.”. (66)

The growing endearment between Lawrence and Rani Jindan, between Lawrence and the natives or between the colonizer and the colonized creates a 'contact zone', or transcultural space which may be interpreted as "Third Space" propounded by Homi Bhabha where "the symbols of culture have no primordial unity of fixity"(The Location of Culture,

55). In other words, according to Ilan Kapoor, the third space is a "non-dialectical space standing in between the binary structures of orientalist representation & imperial power"(2003:566). In fact, the colonizer and the colonized try to interact in the Third Space in need of mutual colonial relationship. Right from the beginning, we're informed his fondness for the native custom and dress, as Currie informs, "...Mr. Lawrence is at least wearing his regimental colours. Normally, I'm told, he finds native dress more comfortable"(37). To win the heart of natives, he starts putting on Indian attire including 'Chogah' and smokes a 'hookah' on a charopy. His fascination for native culture seems to be subversion of the concept of the "Colonial Mimicry" introduced by Homi Bhabha. Whereas(according to this concept) the colonized is supposed to imitate the colonizer's culture, assumption and values to be "almost the same, but not quite"(1994:122), in the play, the colonizer(Lawrence) imitates the colonized by adopting their cultural habits.

His intention of not representation but identification with the Maharaja is reflected in several instances. He openly exults in the fact people have called him 'the Angrez Badshah'. He even kisses the Rani 'passionately' and shows his strong obsession towards Ranjit Singh by echoing his dream of ideal Punjab- Lawrence: (Excited) Yes, yes, just as it was in the days of the Lion. We'll make it rich and happy. We'll build, build. Build roads, canals and the land will sing with joy Rani: Oh Larins, I know you'll do it too. Lawrence: (Glowing) Yes, they'll say that the Lion has returned! The Lion has returned! (73)

Wearing the Koh-i-noor publicly despite the prohibition suggests not only his loyalty to the Rani, but also his fascination for Ranjit Singh as he's informed that "it belonged to His Highness"(64).His obsessiveness with the "Lion of Punjab" in the following soliloquy indicates that he's reached a point of no retreat:

"Angrez Badshah! Angrez Badshah(puts his hand with the diamond condescendingly before him) Bow down to the Angrez Badshah! Bow down, you Lal Singhs & Tej Singhs. You can kiss the jewel. The Punjab is mine, as surely as the Koh-i-noor is mine.

Where is my Rani? Oh, she's in the harem, is she? So much the better. Where is my son? Asleep. Let him sleep. He needs his sleep..." (91)

His shift of loyalty from Indians to imperialism triggered by charges made against him by Hardinge, Currie and Elliot is projected through his apologetic attitude towards Lal Singh for having subjected him to imprisonment. Even the Rani chides for his unexpected change in character: "You Angrez have been helping that traitor from the very beginning...Half the Punjab knows he's a scoundrel and just because he does your dirty work..."(95).

When he's refused to return the Koh-i-noor to Queen Jindan and promised it to Queen Victoria, he actually betrays the friendship and trustworthiness

between each other. Moreover, he's not only hurt the Indian sentiment by separating Mother Jindan from his son Dalip Singh and by banishing the Queen Jindan but also betrayed the land of 'one-eyed Lion'. Sher Singh, surprised by his ruthless imperialistic attitude, speaks about the "choice" of an imperialist and a nativist, and draws a line of distinction between the colonizer and the colonized: "... It's a matter of choice. You've chosen. You could have chosen the way of the heart. Because she was your friend- you won't deny that? Or you could have chosen to obey your country's order. Your duty to her or your duty to your Queen. You've chosen. In my terms, Larins Sahib, it's a choice between the Punjab and England"(102).

Although Lawrence has victory over the land professionally, he's actually defeated personally on the level of human relationship. His remark about himself- " But I still have the Punjab. Let them go away. I don't need them. I don't need the Rani; nor Sher Singh. I have the Punjab . Angrez Badshah! The new Lion is here. I am the Punjab!"(104)- exhibits his intoxication with power and hence growing megalomania. According to Foucault, power "must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization...as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain of system...and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect".

But his Lion-like snobbery comes to an end in the form of "personal and confidential" letter from the Court of Directors of the Company confirming his transference to Calcutta from Punjab. The last words of Lawrence- " I'll take off the chogah"(104)- suggest his realisation of the loss of power on one hand and his reversion from 'becoming' to 'being', to his original identity on the other.

In conclusion, it is proved that the effect of power is more powerful than idealism, humanism which Lawrence cherished in his earlier life. On the other hand, It's usually the instinct of human being to struggle for power and Lawrence isn't an exception. Power continues to maintain its relevance in contemporary society where the methods of acquiring power may have been changed, but the desire for power remains unchangeable.

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