

Indian Ethos as Reflected in the Works of British Writers

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Abstract

India has been a topic of interest for the whole world since ages. The Indian subcontinent was doing spice trade with the Roman Empire, Egypt and the rest of the world, even before Christopher Columbus started his search for India. The British had been trading in India since 1600. The British Imperial rule was established in India in 1857 ending a century of control by the East India Company and India had been treated as a British Colony until its independence in 1947. Since then, British writers have a special interest in Indian life and culture which lays special emphasis on values be it human or ethical and in Indian ethos which is based on Indian scriptures and spiritual philosophy. But the impressions about this Asian country are quite varied in the writings of British authors. The paper explores the changing world of English minds about India by examining the image of India in the writings of British authors.

Keywords: British Imperial Rule, Indian ethos, Independence, Indian Scriptures, Spiritual philosophy.

In today's time, when the borders have blurred, the internet has produced Netizens, more and more people are getting aware of India's rich heritage and culture with so many tourists chasing the spiritual offerings of this ancient land, India is bound to be relevant for ages to come. Indian ethos is mainly reflected through its divinity of human beings which is not merely a notion but a truth which can be experienced. The ethos of any culture is its collective spirit with underlying beliefs and faiths that influence its customs and practices. The interest that made the ancient travellers come to India to study it and write about their observations, shows how much the civilisation of our country fascinated people beyond its borders. Since ages India is being painted in various colours and shades, and her social background, her spiritual teachings, her cultural multiplicity have been a centre of attraction for many explorers and writers. British who have been visiting India since 1600 and ruled India at least for 150 years have a special interest to write and know more about India.

British Raj Literature:

British writers like EM Forster (1879-1970) as in *A Passage to India*, Ruth Pravar Jhabwala (1927-2013) as in *Heat*

and *Dust*, T S Eliot (1888-1965) as in *The Wasteland*, Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) as in *The Whiteman's Burden & Kim*, John Masters (1914-1983) as in *Bhowani Junction*, Mary Margaret Kaye (1908-2004) as in *Shadow of the Moon*, V S Naipaul (1932-2018) as in *India :A Million Mutinies Now*, Paul Scott (1920-1978) as in *The Jewel in the Crown*, J G Farrell as in *The Siege of Krishnapur* and Ruskin Bond (1934-living) as in *The Blue Umbrella*, have given different shades of Indian ethos mostly during the time of British India through different perspectives.

When we take up the literature written during the British Raj we realise that it is divided mainly into two separate groups that reflected two different opinions and impressions of that time. One group put that it was the British Raj that helped to improve the standard of life in the ruled world. Examples of this opinion are Rudyard Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden* and Chamberlain's *True Conception of an Empire*. The other group thought that the British Raj's opinion was just a trick to hide their ambitions to rule these countries. Examples are Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Hobson's *Imperialism* which highlighted the faults and follies with the British colonial system. Post-colonial literature deals with many issues like how the Colonial Raj affects the way of life of the colonised, how they who were not Indians but living in India for long and tagged as Anglo-Indians, react to their Indian set-up on one hand and to the Imperial attitude towards them, and one, who was educated in the British tradition or the experiences that resulted from the Colonial Raj's influence, reacts to Indian set up. *A Passage to India* is one of the seminal texts in the postcolonial orientalist discourse, among other books like *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, and *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling.

With the culmination of World War II the British Empire started breaking up into pieces, these colonies from its Imperial Reign one by one started gaining independence and the writers of these colonies started to create their own works of literature in English language. This was the most dramatic literary phase in the history of English literature. The work of these writers was influenced by

local traditions with their hybridized experiences of their time in the British Empire. Some of the post-colonial writers who left their imprint on the pages of English history were Nadine Gordimer, V.S. Naipul, J.M. Coetzee, Wole Soyinka, and Derek Walcott, all of them won the Nobel Prize (Greenberger:1960).

Outsiders especially British either in their praise or criticism, bring forth their impressions about India which helps us to look at ourselves through other eyes. As Octavio Paz says:

India has always learnt about itself, known itself, throughout its history, from outsiders. The records of two Chinese travellers, Fa-Hien and Xuanzang helped Ambedkar fix the date of birth of untouchability. The controversial writer, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, often approvingly quoted the Iranian scholar and traveller, Al-Biruni's critical comments on India and Hindus. (Web)

But there are others whose experiences are not your regular ones, as writer Henri Michaux in *A Barbarian in Asia* wrote, "In India there is nothing to see - everything to interpret." (2016) But R.W. Lightbown paints and lauds India for her multiplicity:

"The East Indies hung before the eyes of sixteenth-century merchants, soldiers and adventurers as lands of riches and rarities, the home of pearls and spices, porcelain and silks, of powerful Oriental princes, of strange idolatrous religions and rites, of elephants and monkeys, of palms and banyan-trees." (1982)

For British during the Raj time there are three popular views: 1) everything about India is marvellous 2) everything Indian is not so marvellous 3) everything about India is abominable. In *India in the Eyes of the British: Three Views*, Gokhale (pp.31-32) identifies the three authors Rudyard Kipling with the Age of Confidence (1860s to 1918), E. M. Forster with *The Era of Anxiety* (1919-1935) and Paul Scott with *The Years of Sunset* (1935-1947). Professor Gokhale paints the portraits of India sketched by Rudyard Kipling, E. M. Forster and Paul Scott as three different periods of the British Raj, by adding historical realism, with the romantic idealism. The works of the three English authors become the richer and more meaningful because of this postscript analysis by an Indian writer.

Sympathetic Views about India:

E.M. Forster's seminal work, *A Passage to India* (1924) is probably the most impressive novel written in India by any British writer. It shows the cultural and social sides of the country and puts them beside British colonialism.

E. M. Forster shows us not heroism, self-sacrifice among the British ruling class in India, but their obtuseness, and arrogance. But Mrs Moore's sentimental impulses shown to British and Indian characters, show the considerate softer side of British. *A Passage to India* emerged at a time where portrayals of India as a savage, disorganized land in need of domination were more popular in mainstream European literature than romanticized depictions. Forster's novel departed from typical narratives about colonizer-colonized relationships and emphasized a more unknown India. More interestingly Edward Said makes reference of *A Passage to India* in both of his books *Culture and Imperialism* and *Orientalism* where he suggests that though the work did subvert typical views of colonization and colonial rule in India, it also fell short of outright condemning either nationalist movements in India or imperialism.

Pro-Imperialistic Stance:

Joseph Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) as he was born in India, his work was mainly India focused which include his novel *Kim* (1901) and his poem 'The White Man's Burden' (1899), all correspond the same idea of his pro-imperialism stance. During the height of 19th century imperialism, Rudyard Kipling published his famous poem 'The White Man's Burden'. As Victorian imperial poetry, 'The White Man's Burden' thematically corresponds to Kipling's belief that the British Empire was the Englishman's divine burden to reign God's people on Earth and celebrates British colonialism as a mission of civilisation that eventually would benefit the colonised natives. Henri Labouchere, an English politician wrote 'The Brown Man's Burden' as an opposition to Kipling's pro-imperialism stance focusing on the negative impact of imperialism on the native people. As Kipling sings in the first stanza --

Take up the White Man's burden-
 Send forth the best ye breed-
 Go bind your sons to exile
 To serve your captives' need;
 To wait in heavy harness
 On fluttered folk and wild-
 Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
 Half devil and half child.(web)

'The White Man's Burden' shows the colonial exploitation of labour of the poor nations by the rich nations of the world. (Walker: 1899) Kipling is chiefly remembered for his celebration of British imperialism, his tales and poems of British soldiers in India. Gokhale finds Kipling's Indian characters "suffer from the same polarity" (p. 81). We see

the acrimonious depictions of lower orders of British society in India in Kipling's work. In *Kim* we see Kipling's final, compensatory and nostalgic desire to cross the racial divide.

True Portrayal of Indian life:

Paul Mark Scott (1920-1978) who was an English novelist, playwright, and poet, best known for his tetralogy *The Raj Quartet*, wrote *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966) the first novel of *The Raj Quartet* and the remaining novels in the sequence were published over the next nine years: *The Day of the Scorpion* (1968), *The Towers of Silence* (1971) and *A Division of the Spoils* (1974) written about the concluding years of the British Raj in India. *The Times* called it "one of the most important landmarks of post-war fiction." For Gokhale Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet* examines four kinds of social divisions and their associated conflicts. The first division is race, explored through the rape of Daphne Manners. The second is class conflicts within the British society in India. The third is conflict between the generations with regards to Independence, explored through the characters of the Layton and Kasim families. The last is the violent conflict between Hindus and Muslims antecedent to partition.

John Masters (1914-1983) a British novelist and regular officer of the Indian Army, principally known for his historical novels set in India, notably *Bhowani Junction*, which a 1954 novel set amidst the turbulence of the British withdrawal from India. It is notable for its portrayal of the Eurasian (Anglo-Indian) community, who were caught in their loyalties between the departing British and the majority Indian population. It is set in 1946/1947, shortly before India gained independence. Victoria is an Anglo-Indian, the daughter of a railwayman in defending herself from a British army officer who is attempting to rape her unintentionally kills him. She is helped by a Sikh, Ranjit, who hopes to marry her but ultimately she decides to marry Patrick Taylor, also an Anglo-Indian.

India portrayed as Home:

Ruth Pravar Jhabvala's (1927-2013) *Heat and Dust* which was also influenced by E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) dealt with the English in India and the cultural factors that separate them from the country's natives. *Heat and Dust*, set in India, the initial stages of the novel are told in the first person, from the narrative voice of a woman who travels to India, to find out more about her step-grandmother, Olivia. We discover that Olivia, is actually smothered by British social restrictions, and longs for deliverance.

Another woman's experience of British India was of Mary Margaret Kaye known as Mollie Kaye who is a British writer (1908-2004) born in Simla, British India, who wrote her first historical epic of India *Shadow of the Moon* published in 1957 describing the political landscape in India in 1857, how the country came to be ruled by the British East India Company and the factors leading to the rebellion. The heroine, Winter de Ballesteros, born in Lucknow to an English mother and Spanish father is orphaned at the age of six, sent to England to be raised by her great-grandfather, but the country of her birth still holds a special attraction for her and she dreams of returning one day to the place of her birth. Even Mollie Kaye has the same feeling as she spent her most of the time in British India.

Understanding Indian Philosophy:

TS Eliot more often remembered as an establishment figure somewhat conservative and deeply Christian but Eliot also wrote about and studied Indian philosophy, language and culture with keen interest which is reflected in his works especially in *The Wasteland*. Eliot was influenced by both Hinduism and Buddhism, and especially by the *Bhagavad Gita*, and by the *Madhyamika* or *Middle Way Buddhist* philosophy of Nagarjuna. The references to Indian literature are particularly prominent in *The Waste Land*, for example, 'The Fire Sermon' references the sermon of the Buddha; 'Death by Water' engages with Indra's slaying of V?tra to release the waters in the *Rig Veda*; 'What the Thunder said' references the eponymous episode from the *B?hadara?yaka Upanishad*. He ends the poem with the chanting of *shantih shantih shantih*. In *Christianity and Culture* he shares his strong belief, "India has already given something of the highest value to the world ... That without spiritual knowledge man is an incomplete being." (pp. 190-191)

Thus, having examined all these works of British writers during the British occupation, it is evident that most of the writings about Indian life and society are by the writers who have some personal connections with India, whether they lived during that time of history or they travelled India for some time to stay. Though initially it was writing through a colonizer's pen but later it was to observe India and Indian people with Mrs Moore's point of view as in *A Passage to India*, it was with understanding and humane attitude. Secondly in most of the fiction writing the story was about a triangle having an Anglo Indian or British lady, victim of sexual abuse, an Indian young man to save her and sympathise with her, and a British man with Imperial traits and domineering. It is also observed that some writers who have good understanding of rich

Indian culture and heritage try to understand life through Indian scriptures and philosophy like T. S Eliot, and W B. Yeats. In all it is India and Indian people who influenced and enchanted the British writers to write about it in historical, political, cultural and spiritual perspectives.

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