

THE ENGLISH QUEENS: A QUINTESSENCE OF INGRAINED COLONIAL ATTITUDE AND CULTURE IN THE NATIVES

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Abstract

*The consideration on the word colonization is not new. In fact, intellectuals all over the world have been analyzing it for decades. Debates, conferences, seminars have been organized and swarm of articles, journals and books have come into being. In the present scenario debates over moral obligation of the British for the ex-colonies ruled by them is the hot potato of the time. Recently a debate was held on May 28, 2015 by the Oxford Union, The proposition for the debate was: "This House Believes Britain Owes Reparations to her Former Colonies", distinguished speakers from Ghana and Jamaica, spoke in its favour. British and American intellectuals spoke in opposition. Congress MP and Indian writer Shashi Tharoor brilliantly argued why Britain owes reparations for its exploitation of the subcontinent. To support Mr. Tharoor's argument, here, by presenting **The English Queens** by Chaman Nahal, as an example in which the circumstances lead not to only economic colonization but cultural one too, there is an attempt to justify the demands of atonement which Britain owes.*

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In Indian literary milieu, Chaman Nahal's writings are known to talk about India without any touch of exoticism. He is well known for his novel *Azadi* (1975). Nahal's themes include tradition versus Westernization, east-west encounter, satire on anglicized Indians, the three phases of India's epic struggle for freedom and vivisection of India. His novel *The English Queens* (1979) is a satire on anglophiles. He satirizes the anglicized Indians; the black British devoted to perpetuating cultural imperialism and un-indianizing themselves. The novelist has focused six such types of elite class Indian women who develop passionate interest in English. They are out to preserve the inheritance of the British mannerisms for the sake of supremacy and self-enlargement. The first chapter in the novel begins with the title 'All Six of Them'. Strangely enough, in free India the black Memsahibs are estranging themselves from the others, as hiring of colonial conscience. The author has satirically called them the English Queens and reveals jokingly and ironically their thousand and one egotisms. The six queens of Bide-a-Wee locality are more concerned with the type of people living around them:

They had to measure up their expectations to qualify for the honour. A mission school or convent background. Shoulder-length hair for men, bobbed hair for women (pig tails were out, out, out!). Pedigreed pets in their arms or trailing behind them. At least one car per family. Personal grooming, like manicured nails and toes. The ability of the men to blow their nose into their handkerchiefs. And above all, all conversation in home and outside to be always in *English*.(9)

The attitude which these queens have formed is due to the major responsibility which was bestowed on them in the form of their coronation to perpetuate English in India, on the eve of the independence of India, i.e. 14 August 1947 by Lord Mountbatten. The novelist's Lord Louis Francis Albert Victor Nicholas Mountbatten, ICE, KCG, BCD reads out the Royal character which says that from the 15 August 1947 the British people will stop to use English as their tongue. The British are giving the language as gift to India, and hereafter the Indians solitary will have its sole copyright. Other Dominions, viz. Canada, New Zealand and Australia too will cease to use English although it is their mother tongue currently. They are required to evolve other languages for their use. And added, for the safe transfer of linguistic power, the King-in-Parliament has created a new order in India, which is known as the order of the Queens. Six Indian females will be chosen for it. But as the Viceroy has some hidden plan, he signs the charter with a single 't' to make it vulnerable and untenable in a court of law.

Although it is fiction, the charter's order can still be seen as followed in India. When Lord Mountbatten introduces this subject to his intimate friends, they become worried and raise objection on which Lord Mountbatten very cleverly clarifies his plan to them by giving example of Macaulay what he did, he only taught these Indians English and not gifted it away to them. He says:

You darn well know the strength of a nation depends on the purity of its people, which depends on the purity of personality, which depends on the purity of language. If the Indians continue to speak English—and I know they will mutilate their own languages and consequently their thinking capacity.(33)

This very plan of Mountbatten seems to be successful as we proceed towards the later chapters. The six Ladies bitten by the English bug are found ultimately. He completes his work by appointing the six queens and handing over the charter to them for the perpetuation of the English language.

Among these ladies are Sumitra Pandey, a spinster and a lecturer in English at Ashoka College in Delhi University, Renuka Chopra- an army wife who has outdone all other army wives in collecting donations for the defence services, Caroline oaks, wife of headmaster oaks, all her brothers and sisters were taught from the cradle they were "British", Barbara smiles who turned out charming romances about the Indians, which were devoured in all the fashion capitals of the world, Shrimati Hemkanta Mathur- wife of a retired judge is the honorary director of several women's organizations, the most notable of them being "Rape While Awake", and Sardarni

Satwant kaur who has the remarkable knack of making her English most mellifluous by suffixing “ji” to any word or sentence she speaks. These ladies take oath in the form of the mantra: ‘The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.’ It is the sentence used in routine typing lessons in every typing school. Its virtue lies in the fact it has all twenty-six letters of the alphabet in it. However, These ladies are fully devotional to their work which is assigned to them. Since the day they have received the charter from Lord Mountbatten, this has become their prayer. Every morning and evening, all family members of officially admitted queens –and there are *thousands* others who sit down with a rosary and recite Quick fox one hundred and eight times (corresponding to the beads in the rosary).

Sumitra Pandey is the Queen who has been given the custody of the Royal Charter by Lord Mountbatten. It is so that any meeting of the queens takes place at her home. She is the youngest of the group, and is likely to outlive the others and Lord Mountbatten has left it to her to will the custody to some other young and fully ordained queen, to inherit it after her. Sumitra Pandey, as the principal of Ashoka College has control over the University decisions. She chooses staffs of various departments with utmost care. She is the principal expert at the interviews and she puts the candidates through the strictest grilling. She doesn’t question them on their respective subjects; she leaves that to university experts. Her prime concern is with the candidate’s awareness of his English heritage. Questions like Who was Sri Aurobindo? Who wrote Gitanjali? Can the candidate speak, read and write any other Indian language as well as English? Etc. and answers to any such questions in the affirmative immediately disqualifies the candidate. According to Sumitra Pandey the students have to belong to the ‘English’ world for their proper development. She is known well for her pronunciation of ‘Lawrence’ as ‘Lawr-hence’, ‘Shelley’ as ‘sell-eh’, and ‘Shakespeare’ as sex-pair. It is known throughout the city that to get admission in the Ashoka College of Delhi University is tougher than getting into the Indian Administrative Service or the Indian Foreign Service. However in order to get admission the candidates would try and fake answers at the interview:

‘Which is the national language of India?’

‘English.’

‘Do you consider Nehru to be a man of letters?’

‘No.’

‘But he has written in English.’

‘Nehru’s last book, *The Discovery of India*, was published in 1946. Only Indians writing in English after 1947 can be regarded as men of letters.’

‘Why after 1947?’

‘That’s when English became our national language.’

‘Who was Tagore?’

‘I don’t know.’ (46)

And apart from this several other shafts of questions related to India are thrown on the candidate and he deliberately continues to give fake answers:

‘What is Hindi?’

‘It is some kind of a fruit.’

‘Have you ever eaten it?’

‘No.’
‘What are mangoes?’
‘Never heard of them.’
‘Where is kanya Kumari located?’
‘In Kashmir.’
‘Have you heard of the river Yamuna?’
‘No’
‘And the Ganges?’
‘I’m afraid not.’
‘Which is the most sacred river in the world.’
‘The Thames.’(47)

If Sumitra Pandey senses the fake replies she has her way of exposing the fakes. And after exposure the candidate is rejected. This is the pinnacle of vandalism by one of the English queens. It tickles and teases; it delights and devastates at the same time. The Novelist’s point is unambiguous unalloyed condemnation of the Indian people’s attitude to belittle Indians and upholding the positive attitude.

A storm takes place in bide-a-Wee colony when they come to know that one of the English Queens’ daughter has fallen head over heels in love with a poor Indian musician. Rekha, a Lecturer in English and daughter of Renuka Chopra contrary to her upbringing finds attraction and love in Pradeep, a musician from JJ Colony. When the news reaches Rekha’s father Brigadier Chopra’s ears, he explodes and says he will shoot the man. However, reluctantly he agrees to marry his daughter to Pradeep.

Brigadier Chopra too isn’t untouched with English hypocrisy. He, the husband of one of the six English Queens too has imbibed the same mentality as his wife has. However his love and crave for English is seen through his demand of transferring Indian whiskies to empty English bottles and drinks instead that due to unaffordable condition. These empty scotch bottles are purchased from junk shops around the Jama Masjid, where Muslim Junk dealers, who till the other day, sold used newspapers or empty tins and starved, now sell these empty bottles. An illustration is given:

The tradition in the services was that officers drank only scotch; Indian whiskies were meant for the jawans, for the ‘men’. But with the import duties being what they were, the price of scotch had skyrocketed to Rs 250 per bottle and it was quite out of the question for the officers to afford it. And yet traditions, as you know well, die hard ji, and the Commanders-in-Chief of the army, navy and air force had sent round discreet orders-of-the day, saying it would be perfectly in order to transfer Indian whiskies to empty Scotch bottles and drink instead that.(80)

Here by Chopra’s conversation we may understand his love for English bottle:

‘ Sir I couldn’t find a single bottle of Johnnie Walker anywhere,’ said Ramu, his legs shaking.

‘What, no Johnnie Walker?’ shouted Brigadier Chopra beside himself with rage.

‘No, sir. Only John Haig or Vat 69.’

‘Goodness. What’s the country coming to?’

‘And what’s this Indian gin doing here?’ he asked after a pause. It was Ramu’s duty to transfer the Indian drinks into the other bottles. ‘You know it’s against regulations! Get a few bottles of Beefeater from Jama Masjid tomorrow itself.’

The belief, that English is as the Englishman does, is quite obvious in the above quoted examples of the novel. Rudyard Kipling’s “white man's burden” justifying imperialism as a noble enterprise seems totally a fake attitude imbibed by the British, what we go through in the novel where Lord Mountbatten says “If the hoax works, we will have recovered with the other hand what we have given away with one. India will continue to be tethered to the feet of England for all time to come”(33). And this very plan of Mountbatten works. We may see throughout the novel. In contemporary time too we realize the effect of the so called British Raj.

However, we come to know at the end of the novel that Pradeep is an incarnation of Lord Chetana, and has come to awaken the Indians from their slumber. He states that “Bharat, mischievously called by the English as India, has reached a similar period of crisis and once again divinity had to appear in the form of a human being(155).” He wouldn’t have interfered in this matter if Indians would have employed a variety of English a shade finer than original. Indeed they were happy when some of the Indians Began producing creative writing in English, and to be able to speak an additional language is no handicap, it is an advantage. But blind imitation is not good for the natives:

But the cheap imitation of English mannerisms the gods couldn’t tolerate. If today the English go on to wear long hair, tomorrow the Indians would do it here. Beads around the neck there, beads around the neck here. Even kurta and pyjamas became respectable for the Indians only when the English started wearing them. And this nonsense of ‘daddy’ and ‘mummy’ even in poor homes as though the Indians had no words of their own for a father or a mother. To watch the Delhi TV was a pain in the neck for Lord Chetana. Well-groomed men and women couldn’t complete a sentence in Hindi without throwing a few words of English. This decline the God’s couldn’t swallow.(156)

He takes the charter and flies back to the heaven, but it drops out of his hand accidentally and comes back in the lap of Sumitra Pandey to continue its disastrous job. The dropping of the 'charter' from Lord Chetana's hands denotes the supremacy of the snooty Anglophiles who persist in withstanding any change, though English in its own land is undergoing major changes. Nahal of course wants to remind the elite class Indians that they should confront the reality around them and assert their national identity as soon as possible.

Although this novel, a highly imaginative satire of Indian anglophiles was written in seventies, it still has relevance. We have been going through the same experiences as there is description in the novel. Vimal Ram Rao in “Decolonization Not Disinheritance: English in India Today” says:

As is well-known, Britain's chief post-war export is her \$640 million industry of English language software. Evidently neither the nearby European countries nor America nor Australia provide a market for the English-language teaching Industry. It is the so-called Third-world countries which provide a ready market for the endless array of learning aids, teaching aids, manuals, Primers, Readers, cassettes, video-tapes and so forth that flow out of England every year. These are available and on display in the British Council Libraries and Indian Universities with a small budget for books invest in these at the cost of books which would enrich libraries.144

Thus, we see throughout the novel that English has hegemonized the mentality of even educated Indians and is still continuing its work in the prevailing Indian society. Cultural loss of any society is irreparable unlike economic loss. The point of moral obligation to make reparation, raised by Mr. Tharoor is highly considerable and Britain should ponder over it. And where there is question of imbibing English, it should be used as a language only and should not be mingled with our culture. Then only we can retain our identity, peace, belongingness and pride.

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