

Kunal Basu's 'The Opium Clerk' – An Ontological Reading of Postcolonial Perspectives

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Abstract

Postcolonialism presents an agreed version of research methods that emphasizes the catastrophic effects and consequences of colonization. As a theory, it lances deep into the intellectual, cultural and grave sentiments of the repressed and the colonized to present a clear picture of the strategies and influences of the West on the cultural, political and academic minds of the non-West. Kunal Basu's 'The Opium Clerk' takes us on a thoughtful and illuminating journey of understanding complex and critical postcolonial strands, introspecting several spatiotemporal aspects through the labyrinths of national and international issues of the opium trade. Basu explores deep into the dangerous crevasses of the native minds created through multiple wounds inflicted strategically to make the colonized forget the glory of the native past to accept the West.

Keywords: postcolonial, Kunal Basu, Opium Clerk, resistance, European

'A seductive narrative of power & a counter narrative of the colonised politely but firmly declining the come on of colonialism' (Gandhi 22) is what one can account Kunal Basu's first novel 'The Opium Clerk' - a postcolonial fiction rooted in a colonial setting. It is enticing to dig into the very recent fiction by Basu i.e. 'The Endgame' but going through most of Basu's ventures other than the 'The Opium Clerk' i.e. 'Sarojini's Mother', 'The Miniaturist', 'Racists', 'The Yellow Emperor's Cure', 'Kalkatta' etc. one finds 'The Opium Clerk', though written long back, is still contemporary in bringing up certain swerving post-colonial issues. Postcolonialism divulges the relations of power that brings forth concepts such as knowledge, that is prejudiced, politically and culturally constructed and is decided and manufactured in the West but is disseminated as universal. Of course, Postcolonialism is a varied term now. Stephen Slemon opines that Post-colonialism as a term is used in several areas and indicates 'heterogeneous set of subject positions, professional fields, and critical enterprises'. It critiques the partial systemization of Western narrative and history and reflects itself as a hybrid term to fall into the theoretical arena of both postmodernism and poststructuralism and establishes itself as a tool of the 'third-world intellectual cadre'...(168)

Opium or Papaver Somniferum, only second to salt, was the mainstay of the British Empire during the late 19th & the early 20th century. Opium had always been one of the strong

financial pillars of the British Empire and it was responsible for almost half of the revenue generated by the then East India Company. The British were able to lay the foundation stone of capitalism and imperialism through the opium trade which had always been kept undercover as because opium was a sensitive issue, unlike indigo, cotton or oil. The dealers, buyers and sellers connected to opium had not only financially sustained themselves but in turn, they had made the business grow so much that even thousands of natives got benefitted by the trade but needless to mention that the lion share of the profit went to the British traders through business links. The great metro cities of India, particularly Bombay for its natural harbour and Calcutta for its integration with the hinterland for the supply of labour and agro products, still owe a considerable share of their development and rise on the then opium trade that was built by the colonialists. China had been a very old trusted partner of the then British empire regarding opium trade with India. The Indian peasants were involuntarily asked to grow opium to support trade with China.

The fact remains that the destiny of Bombay as a great commercial and industrial center was born of its becoming an accomplice in the drugging of countless Chinese with opium, a venture in which the Indian business class showed gear zeal alongside the East India Company. This is the sordid underside of Bombay's colonial past. (Farooqui 17, 18)

We find in the novel an Auction House of such a trade whose officer Crabbe learns some Indian fairy tales & fables from the hero of the novel Hiranyagarbha & goes on translating them to English and earns name & fame from his colleagues. In the novel, the British steal Indian fables to impress others. The overall impression imposed on the colonies that they have inferior culture & literature and no heritage is deliberately shattered. Once Crabbe asks Hiran from a fable 'why must crows and owls fight?' Hiran replies that they fight because their King Garuda is busy serving Lord Vishnu. Through the mythical narrative, Basu identifies that the ruled and the colonised are to be regulated, to avoid disorder. They conclude that any peace agreement between the subjects is only possible when their master intervenes. We find both the English & the Indians falling prey to the notion that the imperialists are 'rescuing', as Said says, the colony from cultural, political & economic degradation. Scott & Crabbe fighting against each other for more opium profits, one destroying the other, shows the amount of greed the Colonizers has, to extract as much as possible from the colonies. The impression of the English colonialists as having solidarity & a rich legacy receive severe setbacks. In fact, in the fiction, we find the colonizers rubbing shoulders with the Indian princes & Nawabs fighting against each other.

Crabbe's wife Lilian, describing her childhood at Lincolnshire where she is destined to live & die by the mill because she is a fen & poor, gives us a wretched picture of the sugar-coated empire. Lilian's trapping of Crabbe to grow up in status destroys the fabulous image of the English memsahibs. She gets addicted to opium after marriage & only dreams of a thousand babies crying for milk because she cannot produce one. This leads Vinny & Hiran to visit the Boubazar lanes & later the Viper Island to bring one for her. The babies of the colony are shown as nothing but commodities. In the British Empire, everything is a commodity. Even the dead are dragged by dogs, half-eaten, in the Ganga where they flow from Patna to Calcutta.

But resistance to such colonial forces takes various forms & shapes. In the novel we find the prostitutes throwing dung on those natives who are dressed like Europeans. Hiran is thus afraid to dress up as a Sahib and get a child, for Lilian. The novel shows the Europeans trapped in factories & rebellion growing too strong in China. This caters to the Post-Colonial demands of resistance to the forces of colonialism wherever they may lie. Basu's novel also presents a perfect setting of Edward Said's narrative and also gives us ample opportunity to understand his text. According to Said, Orientalism has a kind of accumulative and commercial uniqueness as it is connected to conventional learning and even community learning. Orientalism may be defined as a kind of standardized, controlled representation that is subjugated to certain necessities, standpoints and something that is conceptually matched with the interest of the Orient. (Said 396) Basu exposes such efforts of the colonial powers in his fiction. Various indications of revolt—the Indians agitating against drugging a nation, many of the natives returning from England to join the revolution, Gandhiji's followers dumping a boat full of opium into the Bramhaputra, even the strong-armed revolt against the Viceroy in Canton; all these show signs of resistance against the imperialist propensities. We don't have to strain our eyes to find in the novel the die-hard efforts of the revolutionaries 'to promote the construction of a politically conscious, unified a revolutionary self, standing in unmitigated antagonism opposition to the oppressor...' (Parry 15) Hiranyagarbha or the 'Golden Embryo', the hero of the novel who starts his educational career in a toll and then learns Astrology, is immediately sent to a Mission school to grow up in the English culture & get accustomed to the convent environment. The rich heritage of his native nation, its stability and its tradition are quickly destabilized. No effort is spared to bury the past. As Barry points out

The first step for colonialisised people is finding a voice and an identity to reclaim their own past. For centuries the European colonizing power will have devalued the nation's past, seeing its pre-colonial era as a pre-civilized limbo, or even as a historical void. Children, both black and white, will have been taught to see history, culture and progress as beginning with the arrival of the Europeans. If the first step towards a post-colonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past had been devalued (192).

Noteworthy is the effort of the Orientalists & the Anglicists to introduce English in schools & colleges & thereby creating a hiatus among the social classes which according to Said, is one of the primary designs of the imperial project. Again, it also caters to the '...historical process whereby the West attempts systemically to cancel or negate the cultural difference and value of the non-West' (Gandhi 16). However, Hiran cannot be uprooted. At the end of the novel, he narrates to Douglas the stories of Vishnu, Bali, Mahisasura. It is interesting to note that the morals of such ancient Indian tales have always inspired Douglas when he grows up. Douglas most of the time, has judged his circumstances from the morals of these early tales. Despite Mahim's influence neither Hiran nor Douglas has required any Iliad, Odyssey or Aeneid to understand situations or problems, as a reference point to overcome their perils.

Such is the impulse to resist the oppressors that an innocent little boy, Douglas, who is brought up by a Bengali as Hiran goes on to join a revolutionary group to enact Anandamath. Brought up in a Bengali environment he is fearless to revolt in a fiery situation. Edward

Gunaratnan, a member of the Indian Independence League, who has links with the Japanese, is fearless too in preaching revolution. Throughout the novel, Saraladebi remains as a symbol of ethnicity, still strong and defiant with her traditional ideas & ideology. She never likes Hiran to come close to Douglas because Hiran is still a Brahmin and she finds no consolation for her son turning out to be a mere clerk at the Auction House being a Brahmin.

The character of Mahim & his development sums up the whole issue. Mahim's support for Hiran to learn in a missionary school is based on the logic that Hiran after his education can earn more as a clerk serving the British empire than getting four annas on the pavement before Mon Mohan Jiu's temple. He believes like the then Anglicans, the Orient & the Orientals are surprising, mysterious, uncivilized, degraded and fruitless, and learning English is the only way to get into a more rational world. Mahim, highly educated, comes from Presidency College, wears English clothes and dreams of going to England. He read books of Bacon, Hume, Paine, Bentham, Calcutta Gazette and Calcutta Chronicle. He has portraits of David Hare, William Carey, Derozio. He visits the Corinthian Theatre, the Star to rub shoulders with the Sahibs. He even tries to sell his paternal land at Hajipur to travel to England. Even all the household members have their dreams of making money out of Mahim if he goes to England. Mahim is down the line of Halhed, William Jones, and Colebrook who presents "...Europe as a Sovereign princess and Asia as her Handmaid..." (Jones 12)

Mahim's libraries, his portraits, all cater to his notion that the west is the seat of all intellectual and cultural thoughts and studies. There are no such regional or revolutionary books on his shelf because he thinks that his land is far behind the English culture and the Europeans are eradicating the irrational and retrogressive elements of his country. His portraits and his library give us a microscopic view of the role of the European intellectuals to influence the colonies. One may remember here Shelley Wallia, who opines

Colonialism is accompanied by exploitation, annexation and conquest. Its hegemonic power rests on creating the binary opposition of self/other, white/black, good/evil, superior/inferior, and so on. Thus a part of the world was able to enjoy supremacy because it convinced the rest of the world about the 'white man's burden' and his 'civilizing machine' (77).

He suffers from the terrible disease of 'imitativeness' as quoted by Fanon in 'Black Skin White Masks'. One wonders how many of the books, present in Mahim's library, speaks about the oppression in colonies.

The keynote is however struck at the end of the play when Mahim returns barefooted in his 'dhoti and aachkan' frail disillusioned and ultimately degenerates to visit the forbidden houses in Bowbazar. England has robbed him of his thoughts and intelligence. No more is he busy with the Calcutta Gazette or Calcutta Chronicle but Sanjibani and Bangadarshan which gives him the impulse to survive. Mahim realizes this is his soil where his roots are. 'Opium Clerk' is truly a disciplinary project, even after so many years of its publication, it remains dedicated to the academic mission of reengaging, recalling and investigating the colonial past, teeming with numerous Post-Colonial strands.

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