



Choice and Hybridity in Colonial India: The pursuit for empowerment in social relationships

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Introduction

Since Edward Said published *Orientalism* in 1978 the concept of cultural difference has been exhaustively critiqued. According to Said, the sense of alterity between the 'European and Asiatic' divide remains 'rigid' and problematic because of imperialist and racist perspectives evoked by the West.¹ In theory, the West enforces its perception of 'Other' onto the East, reshaping the identity of the later entirely. Upon applying this to Colonial India, a relationship between the British and Indian cultures is revealed whereby the former plays a monopoly on the 'link between knowledge and power' leaving the Indian subordinated in his own nation.² The product of such a relationship is what Homi Bhabha names a 'hybrid cultural space'.³ Indian culture is forced to engage with the dominant British powers of Colonial rule creating a new mixed-cultural state. The inevitable question remains: How does the individual of British-India not only locate but also empower themselves within this new state.

This paper will seek to explore how British-Indian individuals deliberately *utilise* elements of British identity with the intent to empower or elevate themselves in their own community. Bhabha notes:

the borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress.⁴

I will draw upon three literary examples to investigate this argument: the protagonists of; *Kim* (Kim); *Untouchable* (Bakha); *The Painter of Signs* (Raman). The communities to which these characters belong are rich in diversity and attitude. Alan Roland reviews that 'although the caste system is undoubtedly the most striking feature of Hindu society... it is the kinship system, or the extended family [of India] that is the social and psychological locus through life'.⁵ It is this level of *local community*, incorporating social divisions of class, caste, gender and religion that I will maintain to explore in relation to the individual's pursuit for empowerment and also a pursuit for belonging.

If it is found possible that individuals can, through engaging with the British 'Other', successfully locate and empower themselves in this hybrid cultural space then readers' expectations may be challenged. The post-colonial reader is perpetually exposed to negative

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage, 1979) p.61.

² Bill Ashcroft and D. Ahulwalia, *Edward Said*. 2nd Edn. (London: Routledge, 2001) p.49.

³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (Oxon: Routledge, 1994) p.11.

⁴ Bhabha, p.3.

⁵ Alan Roland, *In Search of Self in India and Japan: Toward a Cross-Cultural Psychology*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988) p.209.

Eastern attitudes, such as Said's, towards Imperialism. The individual seen positively relating to or copying the British identity would seem to contradict these attitudes. Furthermore the Western approach to the 'Other', as outlined by Said above, embodies its own expectations of how any individual would approach any 'Other'. Attempting to apply elements of otherness in one's own identity therefore contradicts the theoretical Western practise and acts to surprise the Western reader.

This argument assumes three points which must be explored:

- 1) That British Identity enables an individual to become empowered.
- 2) That individuals are, at least to an extent, in control of their own hybridity; there is choice.
- 3) That if individuals are seen to pursue British identity through choice in order to improve their relationships with society, this challenges our expectations.

Embracing British Identity: The Pursuit for Empowerment

S. Laxmana-Murthy says of Mulk Raj Anand's Bakha that he 'longs for a new world'.⁶ The first and most sensitively formed character to be investigated here is the protagonist of *Untouchable*. The narrative essentially deals with his untouchability; his position as an outcaste described as the 'subhuman status he was condemned from birth'.⁷ The most vivid way in which Bakha is shown to attempt empowerment and relief from misery is through his dedication in pursuing British identity, or rather the British 'fashun'.⁸ Anand introduces the idea on the first page:

[he] had been caught by the glamour of the 'white man's' life. The Tommies had treated him as a human being and he had learnt to think of himself as superior to his fellow outcastes.⁹

British culture is hereby marked as not only glamorous, but as a means by which Bakha may elevate himself within his own outcaste community. Within it he attempts to find the 'new world' he so desires. His willing to 'sacrifice a good many comforts for the sake of what he called 'fashun'" succeeds, although only minimally, in effecting his relationship with the wider community when Havildar Charat Singh the high caste, famous hockey player deems Bakha 'a bit superior to his job' as a sweeper, considering that 'maybe it was his 'exotic' [British] dress' that suggested this superiority.¹⁰ In response to this he gives Bakha the rare gift of a free hockey stick. Through this gesture Bakha gains from a society that generally avoids a relationship with him entirely.

Here Said's definitions become relevant:

Being a White Man was therefore an idea and a reality... It was a form of authority before which nonwhites, even whites themselves, were expected to bend... Being a White Man, in short was a very concrete manner of being-

⁶ S. Laxmana-Murthy, 'Bakha: An Existential Analysis' in *The novels of Mulk Raj Anand: a critical study* eds. Manmohan Krishna Bhatnagar and Mittapalli Rajeshwar, (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2000), p.60.

⁷ Mulk Raj Arnand, *Untouchable*, 2nd Edn. (London: Penguin Books, 1940), p.20.

⁸ Ibid., p.10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.16.

in-the-world, a way of taking hold of reality, language, and thought. It made a specific style possible.¹¹

It is thus clear to evaluate why individuals like Bakha pursued the British identity when they were attempting to positively readdress their dialogue or position of power with their community. However Sara Suleri reviews that the location of power in identity is not that simple. She advises that ‘the critical field would be better served if it sought to break down the fixity of the dividing lines between domination and subordination’ as the ‘nuances of trauma’ created through colonialism are mutually experienced by both the cultures of the colonised and the coloniser.¹² Here we are reminded that individuals living in British-India were not exclusively Indian. Kipling’s *Kim* offers an exemplary version of the British-Indian individual whose predominant cultural reference is that of the ‘white man’.

Kim, although ‘burned black as any native, though he spoke the vernacular by preference, and his mother-tongue in a clipped, uncertain sing-song’ is from Irish descent.¹³ Like Anand, Kipling makes Kim’s leanings towards a particular, in this case Indian, identity clear from the first page. It is more useful and powerful for him generally, when developing his relationship with his community, to adopt elements of Indian identity. However there are times when Kim resorts to utilising elements of his British identity for empowerment. The best example of this is seen in Chapter 9 when Lurgan Sahib attempts to hypnotise Kim into believing a broken jar reforms before their eyes:

So far Kim had been thinking in Hindi, but a tremor came on him, and with an effort like that of a swimmer before sharks, who hurls himself half out of the water, his mind leaped up from a darkness that was swallowing it and took refuge in- the multiplication table in English!¹⁴

Thus Kim finds power in the logic and language of the British culture to resist hypnosis, which is in itself a very symbolic practise of an Eastern tradition. Lurgan Sahib informs us that Kim was the ‘first that ever saved himself’ from the illusion.¹⁵ By utilising the difference of the British ‘Other’ Kim effectively empowers himself in an unusual way. In comparison to the larger community, who failed to resist the trick, he appears powerful and in control of himself. Yet even Kim cannot rise above Suleri’s ‘traumas’ of a colonial hybridity. There is a limit to how empowering the applied use of British culture can be. B. J. Moore-Gilbert notes in his essay ‘The Bhabhal of tongues: Reading Kipling, reading Bhabha’ that within *Kim* the ‘fracturing of Imperial identity and power’ is symbolised ‘when Kim dissolves in tears under the stress of his inner conflict’.¹⁶ Hybridity here may act as a tool for empowerment in Kim’s relationship with society, but it also weakens him internally through the loss and confusion of the Self. Even if being British, or being partly British can be said to be empowering in Colonial India, it remains that hybridity prevents the individual from maintaining clear relationships with larger groups. Instead there forms this ‘inner conflict’ of the Self.

This is a crucial point to consider. Here the third and final character of this investigation reveals the internal and psychological tensions caused by engaging with the British ‘Other’ in hybridity. Raman in R. K. Narayan’s *The Painter of Signs* pursues Western

¹¹ Said, p.62.

¹² Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.3; p.5.

¹³ Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*, (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), p.7.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp.205-6.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.207.

¹⁶ Bart Moore-Gilbert, “The Bhabhal of Tongues”: Reading Kipling, reading Bhabha’ in *Writing India, 1757-1990: the literature of British India*, ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.125.

concepts and ideas for an intellectual empowerment that does more providing him with a personal sense of individualism than it does empowering him generally in the community. His determination to invest politically and philosophically in the ‘Age of Reason’, which he associates with the ‘great minds’ of European writers, foregrounds his attitude against that of, for example, the Lawyer and his superstitious reliance on Indian horoscopes.¹⁷ Raman’s relationship with British culture develops however upon his meeting Daisy. Daisy is Narayan’s ‘new’ woman.¹⁸ She rejects Indian traditions of domestic life, marriage and renames herself after the iconic English flower. Raman’s relationship with her inevitably entangles his own identity with her cultural choices, leaving it revealingly representational of his relationship with his own hybridity.

As soon as he actively engages with his hybridity in the context of social relationships Raman undergoes what Allen Roland describes as the ‘painfullness’ of a hybrid identity.¹⁹ His relationship with the ‘Other’ manifests itself in a romantic and sexual pursuit for Daisy. As the novel develops, this desire exposes the reader and Raman himself to his ultimate cultural needs. Despite previously rejecting marriage he suggests the traditional Hindu marriage ceremony as a means to unite Daisy to himself. He contemplates that Daisy must have been Queen Victoria ‘in a past incarnation’, effectively mixing the concepts of British history and Hinduism’s *samsara*; rebirth.²⁰ His desire to utilize elements of British identity becomes overwhelmed by his Indian culture.

Ultimately Raman, in this convoluted hybrid state, cannot engage with elements of the ‘Other’ to have a positive effect on his relationship with his community. He becomes psychologically paranoid that his community will judge him, even punish him for attempting to possess and relate to Daisy. A ‘daemon propelled him on’ into the police office where he expects, even perhaps believes he should be arrested.²¹ This is partly an issue of gender and morality but the tension in Raman remains in knowing that Daisy is the ‘Other’ in his society, and he engineered an engagement with her. When his previously nurturing Aunt neglects interest in Daisy and therefore Raman’s happiness he feels ‘insignificant and insulted’.²² When she eventually leaves for a Holy, traditional pilgrimage Raman is left abandoned and alienated in his own community. His relationship with Daisy fails as well, leaving him altogether isolated.

What can be evaluated here is that the individual may become empowered in their relationships with their communities by adopting elements of British identity; or it may alienate them even further in their own society. The difference between the two consequences depends on choice and control.

Control and Choice in Hybridity:

Anjali Prabhu notes in her book *Hybridity: limits, transformations, prospects* the following:

the idea of “choice” within the hybrid is most productive... [when connected] to the type of dialectic posited between reality and utopia and it is called up at the moment of an ethical decision made by a “free” subject... such ethical decisions call on individuals to enter into a conscious ethical engagement in their orientation with otherness, in this way disqualifying the activation of

¹⁷R. K. Narayan, *The Painter of Signs*, (London: Penguin Books, 1982), p.5.

¹⁸S. R. Ramteke, ‘R. K. Narayan: A Novelist committed to Hindu Ideals and Beliefs’ in *New Insights into the Novels of R. K. Narayan*, ed. M. K. Bhatnager, 2nd Edn. (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008), p.27.

¹⁹Roland, p.22.

²⁰Narayan, p.67.

²¹Ibid., p.97.

²²Ibid., p.122.

simplistic notions of difference without an ethical evaluation of its significance²³

What this argument stresses is that it is possible for the individual to be aware of how to deliberately, positively and independently engage with their own hybridity. When they apply elements of the British culture and identity to their own sense of self they are making a *free choice* to do so. Therefore Bakha can dress in British jackets and spend his savings on a chair of ‘European design’²⁴; Raman can read the works of ‘Bernard Shaw and Einstein’²⁵; and Daisy can give herself an Anglicised name. These are individual choices of lifestyle that are often unusual, perhaps even as Laxamana-Murthy suggests of Bakha, due to an ‘innate rebellious spirit’, and they serve to make the individual more unique.²⁶

This is an important part of empowering the individual in the relationship they have with their community. To be unique as a member of a colonised culture is to counter the Western generalisations of that culture whereby a stereotype is formed that ‘fixes individuals or groups in one place, denying their own sense of identity’ entirely.²⁷ If the intention of the individual is to locate themselves personally as unique and different within the stereotyped mass, then through utilising and exploring the British elements in their hybrid culture they have effectively provoked a positive effect on their relationship with and within larger groups.

However if the choices they make conflict with particular elements of Indian culture they may find themselves alienated from their own communities. In the cases of Bakha, Kim and Raman this is not an intended result. All the characters express a desire to belong and be a significant part of their own community: Bakha’s struggle with being rejected from society on account of his untouchable status is the premise of the whole novel; Kim meanwhile revels in being named ‘Friend of all the World’, an identity that supports his relationship with the groups he meets; Raman is affected by negative judgements on his relationship with Daisy, particularly that of his Aunt’s.

This suggests that although there is the opportunity for choice in one’s hybridity, one cannot necessarily maintain control of it. The consequences of utilising British identity in the hybrid cultural space of Colonial India are not within the individual’s control. Ultimately the one who is in control and making all the choices is the author. They are in turn individuals relating to the larger groups of their readerships. Narayan and Anand have themselves utilised the language and form of English novels so that their ideas and issues may become accessible to a Western audience. If we accept Homi Bhabha’s claim that ‘the post-colonial author searches for an audience; a good, which means a metropolitan, audience’ then we can see how they have effectively empowered themselves in terms of literary success through their engagement with British culture.²⁸

Expectations and the readers’ response:

As the introduction outlined, the reader might expect to find a rejection of British culture in the Indian community because of the damaging upheaval Imperialism had on Indian society and identity. Although this rejection does exist, in the examples observed here

²³ Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: limits, transformations, prospects*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p.148.

²⁴ Anand, p.22.

²⁵ Narayan, p.5.

²⁶ Laxamana-Murthy, p.62.

²⁷ David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2006) p.37.

²⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, (London: Routledge, 1990), p.151.

it is clear that individuals have made an aware choice in how to use British culture to strengthen their own identities and power within the community.

This is because hybridity provides a platform in which different cultures may positively affect each other so long as, Prabhu notes, they are approached via a ‘conscious ethical engagement’.²⁹ Individuals are not necessarily seeking to fully adapt or change to a new culture. Instead they use elements of British identity to test and identify themselves as a modern individual. Kim, who is technically European, demonstrates to the West that it is possible to engage with the Indian ‘Other’ by adopting elements of Indian culture thereby integrating oneself more naturally into the Indian community.

Once the reader has recognised this there is much to say about the deeper reasons for engaging with the ‘Other’. Arguably the main objective is to rebalance the power within hybridity. Only by engaging and seeking to understand the parts of British culture in the British-Indian hybrid space may individuals reassess their Indian cultural identities. Roland concurs: Individuals may readdress and empower their Indian culture by ‘incorporating Western innovations into a new synthesis’.³⁰ This is seen perfectly in the conclusion to *Untouchable*. Of the three solutions to Bakha’s position provided, one being Christianity and the other Gandhi, it is the third concept of the ‘flush system’ that Laxamana-Murthy attributes Anand to ‘believe’ in as the best alternative.³¹ This is not as overwhelming as the possibility of Christian conversion yet still resonates Western influence in a new culture of Indian technology.

The reader thus observes that although British culture may be embraced in hybridity it is used to develop and empower the elements of Indian culture. This is essentially a part of Bhabha’s main argument. Moore-Gilbert defines it as the ‘argument that hybridisation not only destabilises colonial authority from within, but opens up new and unforeseen spaces of subaltern resistance to the dominant power’.³² Narayan, who Ramteke analyses as a novelist ‘committed to Hindu ideals and beliefs’ directs Raman into re-discovering his desires for Indian culture through interaction with ‘Otherness’.³³

Perhaps what is less surprising is when individuals fail to empower themselves in their community through their choices in hybridity. Hybridity is in an ever changing state that requires ‘ongoing negotiation’ that makes it impossible to completely foresee the effects of one’s cultural choices. This maintains it as one of Post-Colonialism’s most *familiar* and ongoing concerns that the contemporary reader will consistently encounter.³⁴

Conclusion:

The individuals of British-India may through choice explore and utilise different elements of the British and Indian cultures in their hybridity. This in the least makes them more individual. In relation to the literature of British India, the Western or Post-Colonial reader may then locate characters as individuals rather than under a general ‘Other’ stereotype. Presumptions and expectations are thus challenged as such as reader encounters various and unique examples of the British-Indian. This ultimately enriches one’s experience of the text.

²⁹ Prabhu, p.148.

³⁰ Roland, p.22.

³¹ Laxamana-Murthy, p.63.

³² Moore-Gilbert, p.118.

³³ Ramteke, p.20.

³⁴ Bhabha, p.3.

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