Chapter VI

Conclusion: Seeking a Balance

"The only phenomenon with which writing has always been concomitant is the creation of cities and empires, that is the integration of large numbers of individuals into a political system, and their grading into castes or classes. It seems to have favored the exploitation of human beings rather than their enlightenment."

Claude Levi Strauss (French Philosopher)

"The aim of public education is not to spread enlightenment at all; it is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed a standard citizenry, to put down dissent and originality"

Henry Louis Mencken (American Journalist and Critic)

The narratives of the French travellers in India during the 17th and 18th centuries were a compilation of complex and diffused images of India advertising an Orientalist idea of India, which resulted in an idée fixe in the Western mind. The truth trumpeted by one narrative echoed through the rest of the narratives. As the
texts were interdependent on one another the voices became intermingled making it difficult to extract any one distinct individual voice. It became a vicious circle, where images and truths about the ‘other’ got distorted, eventually. Susan Bassnett is of the opinion that the cartographer, the translator, or the author of a travel narrative, is not an innocent producer of texts. The texts that they create are a part of the process of manipulation which shapes and conditions the attitudes with which one perceives another culture. Thus authenticity and imagination in such travel narratives becomes complicated and problematic, because, here, truth is set up, malleable and almost nullified. There is a clash between authenticity and imagination in a close and circumscribed zone. So it becomes difficult to demarcate because facts in a travel narrative are controlled by a supreme power. Europe seems to suffer from what cultural scientists call as Ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is a form of cultural bias. Coined first by William Graham Sumner, a social evolutionist, ethnocentricity is the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one's own culture. Sumner defines it as the viewpoint that “one’s own group is the center of everything,” on the basis of which all other groups are judged. Ethnocentricism posits the view that one’s own culture is more important, superior to and of greater value than the others. Thus individuals will become judgmental and perceive other cultures from the point of view of their own culture. Thus language, behaviour, customs, social codes of conduct, religion of other ethnic groups gets dissected by a culture that assumes its own position as central to civilization. Ethnocentrism, according to political scientists, is an unbearably selfish discourse. It keeps fluctuating. Each ethnic group has the right to see itself as the centre. Ancient Persia saw itself as the centre of the world.

1 The Empire, Travel Writing, and British Studies, Susan Bassnett
Before the Middle Ages, Constantinople had been taken as the centre of all civilizations. Jerusalem, according to Christians, was the centre of the Earth. Traditional Chinese maps show China in the centre. So, one often tends to have a diagonal view about things that are not in the centre. Thus the periphery becomes relegated to the background and is summed up with derogatory epithets like ‘barbaric’, ‘aliens’, ‘other’, etc. And the denotations vary. If Eurocentrism saw the East as the ‘other’, then the Japanese saw outsiders/foreigners as ‘gaijin’, similarly, Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood activist sees the West as a ‘jahiliyya’. The word jahili is the Greek equivalent to ‘barbarism’. For Occidentalists, the city/western world is connected to the sinful City of Man. Frantz Fanon calls the metropolitan western world the home of “traitors and knaves”. For Sayyid Qutb the West ‘is a gigantic brothel, steeped in animal lust, greed and selfishness’. Human thought, in the West, is “given the status of God”. A cursory glance at all these statements shows a picture or idea that corresponds with the Oriental idea of the East. It would not be wrong to say that the East harboured an equally exotic idea of the West. The East puts forth the view that the West was frozen by philosophy and that it was unable to apprehend an organic and natural way of life. Thus according to Occidentalists matter was God and materialism the religion of the West. And the West, unable to comprehend the innateness of Eastern life, pushed it to the boundaries of civilization and labelled it derogatorily as effeminately exotic and uncouth- in other words, ‘Oriental’. Terms like ‘other’, ‘exotic’, ‘oriental’, ‘barbaric’ are a part of the broader discourse of Eurocentrism. Critics define Eurocentrism as ‘the practice of viewing the world from a European perspective, with an implied belief, either consciously or subconsciously, in the preeminence of European (and, more generally, of Western)
Eurocentrism is a derivative of European colonialism and imperialism, symbolically manifested through the idea of Orientalism.

Edward Said speaks of the ‘exteriority’ of the orientalist. According to the Orientalist perspective, whatever is said and written about India, remains out of the Indian reality and in the domain of representation, without being able to cross its threshold. The Indian reality is perceived through a code of comprehension by these texts. The true picture of India is almost set-up, flexible and nullified in the words of such travellers. There is a clash between authenticity and imagination and hallucination. The travel narrative is also controlled by European hegemony.

India is not pictured from a natural point of view. The Indian reality (its way of living, its way of life, its customs, rituals, thoughts and dreams) is often perceived through a code of opinionated texts. Thus the ‘other’ internalized in western imagination has always been regarded as a menacing and destabilizing experience for the Europeans. It was more a matter of conquering and colonizing it than knowing it. Almost similar is the process of viewing the West. V.S. Naipaul says that all diasporic writers are in fact dispossessed writers. And their fascination for England lies in their being colonized. Naipaul, of course, gives a picture of a personalized sense of reality. He is not wrong when he argues that rootless non-Westerners perceive Western influence as an inheritance. William L. Sachs says “Dispossession is a state into which one is born, a fact not of one’s own choosing. Naipaul’s perspective begins with the non-western person’s realization of this state, of the sense of having boundaries drawn around his or her life by the West.

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2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eurocentrism

275
Having sensed this dispossession, the former colonial begins to fantasize, to dream of a greater reality, and seeks to create the conditions of liberation" (V. S. Naipaul and the Plight of the Dispossessed). But a trip down the curry routes will prove to us the fact that it was never Anglomania that prompted the native of the East to look up to the West. The initial thought had always been that of bringing the two cultures into a harmonious co-existence. We have often been told about the manner in which the West has seen the East. But the way in which the East has perceived of the West still remains unexplored. The Orient may be barbaric, but the West is seen as perverse. The West's conception of the East has been anything but positive. Interestingly the East has also been busily building psychological images of the West and concretizing it though autobiographies, novels with a diasporic flavour, travel writings and memoirs. Diasporic travelogues explore the many dimensions of visualizing the West. They have successfully shown that the West is a bundle of oppositions and negations. It is opulent but impoverished; it is beautiful but has an ugliness which it hides behind the curtain of sophistication, literacy, cleanliness, efficiency and capitalism. Imagining England may have been one of the favourite pastimes of naïve Indians, but it is an exercise taught by the West to glorify and legitimize itself. Once the idea and the image clash due to an actual encounter, the East feels the urge to fight back by writing narratives in defamiliarised Indian English.

Let us see in a nutshell how this writing back has taken shape in different writings of different writers. The writings are not confined to any specific time frame. Rather they show a continuing process from pre-colonial, to colonial and finally post-colonial era. Dean Mahomed’s travelogue cum autobiography confidently
presents the real India for the West. He takes exoticism a step further by alluring the ‘sensible’ mind of the West to an aromatic and sensual world of therapeutic massages. Dean Mahomed is a perfect example of the cosmopolitan man of the 21st century. As mentioned earlier he contributes to the idea of the ‘melting pot’ but at the same time maintains his individuality as in a ‘tossed salad’. At no point of time do we find him dissolving totally into the Anglophone society. Even the coffee-house venture serves to augment the positive aspects of the East. He brings the Far East to doorstep of the culturally naïve English and introduces them to the best of the East- from curry to champi. The book also throws open for the wide-eyed Easterner, the world of the West which was as mystifying as a fantasy world. Dean Mahomed exposes a life less ordinary lived by the ‘goras’ in Cork and Brighton. It is not a reductive account of England; rather it reduces the colossal idea of England as imagined by the East. A certain amount of detachment underlines his observations of the country. Dean Mahomed is the unbiased traveler revolutionizing both the ideas of the East and the West. He assumes the role of the objective Occidentalist out to correct the highly tinted and tainted idea of the Orient in the West. Both the Hindustanee Coffee House and the ‘champi’ disprove the myth of the East as the land of unscientific heathens. Thus one can see that Travels is peppered with convincing images of India, its culture, its way of life and customs that are essentially Eastern. Travels is the first book to break not only the philistine idea of the East and its people but also the glossy idea of England.

This idea is taken further by the views expressed by colonial India’s two most fearless and perceptive personalities, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. For both of them, the idea of England was a living experience in varying degrees (the clash between the fictional and the actual ideas of
England). Gandhi’s time in England was spent in experimenting with abstractions like honesty, integrity, sincerity and fidelity. Metropolitan London held no charm for him. Gandhi is not the sharp-eyed traveller in a foreign country. His account of his stay in England is more subjective in the sense that it concerns his ‘self’ and nobody else. England for Gandhi is imperfect and as tempting as it is generally made out to be. England, for him, is the place from where he can earn a coveted foreign degree that will fetch him a lucrative job back home. Gandhi epitomizes England as a means to an end. His fling with English ways of life and living is short-lived because the traveller in Gandhi exhibits a degree of detachment and keeps going back to his native roots. Thus here one does not find any vivid picture of England. *My Experiments With Truth*, to a certain extent, pushes the West to the periphery. One is aware of a hazy existence of England and what looms large is a singular image of Gandhi himself. Gandhi’s autobiography is written in a language with which he was not very comfortable. His speculations in English serve to destabilize the power centre of the white rulers. He launches an attack on the Eurocentric mind of the West. The pattern changes with Nehru but it is not as visibly radical as Gandhi’s. Born and brought up in a pro-English ambience Nehru’s *Autobiography* serves to show a change in the world order. It heralds that a shift from Europe to the East is in the offing. Nehru’s English lifestyle is just a façade. There is more to it than meets the eye. Nehru, like his contemporaries goes to England to study. His idea of England is largely confined to Harrow and Cambridge. England becomes the place where the young man-about-town Jawaharlal is groomed into the competent statesman Nehru. England and the exposure to western philosophies influence the intellectually responsive mind of Nehru. It is this contact with West that helps him to change colonial India’s destiny. An *Autobiography* illustrates the fact that people of the East possess a
rationally elitist mind. The West can no longer maintain a superior stance so far as access to knowledge and education is concerned. Both Gandhi and Nehru used England to recreate themselves and preserve their identities as Indians. In spite of a nationalistic flavour, Nehru did have certain affection for things associated with England, and he could never alienate himself totally from these.

But Nehru’s obsession with England is only superficial in comparison to that of the die-hard Anglophile Nirad.C.Chaudhuri. Chaudhuri’s idea of England is a merger of two ethoses- the 18th-century English values of order, precision, stability coupled with the prim and proper decorum of Victorian’s England. Like V. S. Naipaul, Chaudhuri was a native, a colonized who admired his master, the colonizer. He looks at India from an Anglicized point of view. It was a defining trait of his. Kishoreganj, for him had “nothing of the English country town about it…” (An Autobiography of an Unknown India, p.1). An Indian who takes pride in his colonial ancestry, Chaudhuri is totally in awe of England. England for him was a harmonious patchwork of familiar names, scenic beauties, a repository of a utopian culture and boyish notions. No wonder that he says that he is thankful to his parents for inculcating in him a sane outlook towards England. It helped him to treat an English gentleman for what he was. The idea is expanded in A Passage to England. A travel memoir recording the traveller’s five-week visit to England, the book meticulously documents all aspects of English life. The travelogue gives us a haloed idea of England. According to Chaudhuri England is in fact what he had always imagined it to be. It conforms to his childhood fantasies. Chaudhuri’s attitude to England in A Passage to England is unapologetically eulogistic.
The boyish fantasia crumbles when Prafulla Mohanti actually visits England. *Through Brown Eyes* is a classic blend of the myriad ideas of England expressed in all the travel-autobiographies mentioned above. It has Chaudhuri's childish and dreamy idea of a picturesque and Wordsworthian England; it has the cosmopolitan individualism of Dean Mahomed, and it embodies the fighting spirit of Gandhi and Nehru. These images are not monolithic, they have various shades and alter over a period of time. This idea is an omnipresent phenomenon Mohanti has to live with. *Through Brown Eyes* blends admiration with resentment and accommodates elements of ambivalence. But these interpretations of England concretize the Indian identity of the author. The book traces the darker aspects of the West- its racial intolerance, the angst of being alienated in a foreign land and the nostalgia that grips a lonely immigrant. Besides, the author, a man of sensitive perceptiveness observes the subtle sway the East has had over the West. Dean Mahomed introduces a slice of the East (through his coffee house and bath treatments) which resurfaces in the form of yoga, tantra, ISCKON in the England of Mohanti's. *Through Brown Eyes* brings out the brown man's idea of England as the 'other'- the ethnocentric other. Claiming a kind of equality, these writers wrested the interpretative initiatives from the West.

As Said puts it: 'Many of the most interesting postcolonial writers bear their past within them -- as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices ... as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire ... ' (Said 1993, pp. 34-35). In other words, our civilisational silence has only been broken recently through the eloquent and nuanced prose style of Prafulla Mohanti, Nirad.C.Chaudhuri, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Homi Bhabha. More
seriously, Said's plan for postcolonial narrative 'resistance' narrowly includes only that very specific class of elite third-world intelligentsia. In order to successfully instigate the 'different practices' he writes about, it seems necessary to be a certain sort of very cosmopolitan individual, educated and employable in the 'West', mobile, migratory, diasporic. To put this simply: so as to always speak back to the 'West', it is crucial to speak in a way that the 'West' understands, publishes and, paradoxically, authorises. It is crucial, that is, to hold a ticket to the new ex-colonial and globalised middle-classes. Inevitably, territories like India and Africa entered the federation of English literature very much later than those dominions founded on the English language.

Thus it became imperative on the part of writers of Indian origin to write in an independent voice. And the first step that they took was reclaiming/ recognizing their own past. Their works became a means by which they could fight the derogatory projection of the East as one of cruelty, sensuality, decadence and laziness. They are no longer the 'immoral-Other', as Peter Barry says in *Beginning Theory*. The emphasis has shifted to the quintessence of identity as doubled, hybrid or unstable. The explorations carried out on the level of the psyche with literature as the platform, makes post-colonial autobiographical writing a celebration of doing away with the charmed Occident. It takes the form and character of liberal humanism that perceives the idea of marginality as defunct, because the position of 'Otherness' is now destabilized. It acquires a positive connotation as a repertoire of energy and potential and concrete change. One can safely conclude that it is neither the 'preoccupation', the 'obsession', 'the romance', the 'fascination, nor the 'story-land' concepts of England/ Occident that gives these writers a sense of security or identity. Rather, it is their tenacious
holding on to their convictions and their art, which truly makes their narratives special, insightful and having a life of its own. They become autonomous works of imagination. They create a global culture, very distinct from the pompous occident or the slaved orient; its set rules being a holistic literary custom and cosmopolitan imagination. It will not be an exaggeration to claim that Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Prafulla Mohanti and V.S. Naipaul have successfully transgressed all forms of obstacles, be it territorial, ethnicity, time or religious beliefs to embrace a new form of literary citizenship- in the words of Peter Barry- of ‘Cultural Polyvalency’.
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283
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