Chapter VII

Six Indian Queens
And
The Queen’s English

The English Queens
The English Queens is Chaman Nahal’s fourth novel. In its theme and treatment, it is hailed as a refreshing wave in the stream of the Indian English novel. It is a satire on the Anglicized upper class of Indian society. Chaman Nahal, in his Silent Life, writes,

My novel The English Queens deals with ...Anglophiles in India. Speaking English, or writing English, is one thing; cultivating English mannerisms another. I identify six such groups in that novel who are especially bitten by the English bug: teachers of English like myself; the military, those in the army, navy or air force; Anglo-Indians married to British spouses; the bureaucrats, those in the civil service or the judiciary; and the nouveau riche, those who had suddenly amassed huge wealth. Such people are fun to watch. They speak English all the time, presumably even in their dreams, utter English exclamations, exchange greetings in English, and encourage their children to do the same. ¹

Nahal also mentions why he chose this theme and why he chose six women as the major characters in the novel:

To me the situation looks comic. Why in hot India we should be exchanging Xmas cards with snow-capped houses, or why we should be talking of autumn when such a season doesn’t exist over here – there are anomalies by the thousand. And
since the female of the species seems to be even more badly
smitten by this imported culture than the males, I concentrate
on six such women and weave a story around them. ²

_The English Queens_ is the story of six women representing the six
categories of Anglophiles that Nahal mentions. This novel, thus, is an
allegory about the Indian elite and their colonized mentality. Even though
the novel is light and entertaining, it has a social purpose. Nahal uses
every rhetorical device of fiction – surprise, parody, farce – to make the
readers realize how and why they should decolonize. The novel presents a
very grave situation in which the elite of India, the educated upper and
middle classes, are so deeply colonized that they do not even realize that
they are colonized nor do they know how deeply. Nahal has succeeded in
avoiding astringent criticism. Instead, as Viney Kirpal observes,

…he has the reader laughing at the characters – caricatures of
colonized Indians – and even though in comedy there is
absence of identification with the character/s, in laughing at
them in all their ludicrousness as shown up in the novel, the
reader seems to affirm that at least he would not want to be
like them. That could be the first step to self-awareness.³

Thus, behind the comic exposure, the novel has a serious purpose. The six
women are “embodiments not only of the Indians’ weakness for the
English language, but also of their cultural confusion resulting in the loss
of their national identity and their becoming sixth-rate carbon copies of the West." This phenomenon is largely confined to the top echelons of Indian society. An atmosphere of unreality pervades the lives and attitudes of all these women.

It is quite interesting to note that in this novel Nahal has included caricatures of the six ladies including a caption under each picture.

Sumitra Pandey, the chief queen, is a spinster and head of the English Department at a prestigious Delhi University College (the only lady principal of a co-ed college in Delhi). Her one great disappointment is that she has not found an English husband. However, casting aside the regrets of youth gone by, she wholly dedicates herself to the teaching of the noble language, and English literature brings her both pleasure and solace in her spinsterhood:

...what were husbands compared to the pleasure and solace Lawrence (which she pronounced as Lawr-hence) gave one or Shelley (pronounced as Sell-eh) or Shakespeare (pronounced as Sex-pair)? They made the dull Indian days brighten up for her, and they opened her eyes to things which did not even exist in India. Seasons like autumn. Murmuring rivers and brooks (Indian rivers flowed without a ripple). The sound of laughter. And the sight of rosy-cheeked children (Indian
children had no cheeks at all, what to speak of any colour on them). (10)

Renuka Chopra is never tired of calling herself “an army wife,” though her husband, Brigadier Bhupesh Chopra, never fired a bullet in his life. Caroline Oaks, wife of Headmaster Oaks, is of course British, and what puzzles her is why people should refuse to see that. The following passage gives an interesting account of her ancestry:

...her great-grandfather, Colonel Thomas Sterns, came from a solid Yorkshire stock. He had married a Mohammaden lady in India, the fourth personal maid of Jahan Ara Begum, the seventh wife of the deposed Moghul Emperor Bahadur Shah, and the offspring of this Muslim lady and the Yorkshire Colonel had married a second generation Christian convert from an untouchable Hindu. Yet that did not take away the quality of the blood in her veins, did it? All her brothers and sisters were taught from the cradle they were ‘British’. Only the British refused to refer to them as anything but Indians, and the Indians too called them only Christians or Anglo-Indians and never fully British! But they were loyal to the far-off motherland still. For the last thirty years, Mr Oaks had headed the most prestigious boys’ public school in New Delhi, turning out faithful servants of the Empire though the
Empire no longer existed, and where the boys still dressed up like the boys in Harrow. (13)

Barbara Smiles, from London, is divorced from her Indian husband, Inderjit Smiles:

Born in Hayes, Barbara was working as a waitress in an Ealing restaurant. They had a quick and tumultuous love affair, after which she was left with a baby son and no other alternative but to shift to India with Inderjit since her family refused to accept her marriage with him. All the same, she had thrived here and over the years had drifted into writing. She now turned out charming romances about the Indians, which were devoured in all the fashion capitals of the world. (14)

The next queen is the wife of a retired judge, Shrimati Hemakanta Mathur, who, “having faithfully served her clan by making three Mathur sons, was devoting all her energies to social welfare. She was the honorary director of several women’s organizations, the most notable of the being ‘Rape While Awake’ ” (15).

Sardarni Stwant Kaur is the sixth queen. Her family...

...belong to a class that outdid all the other Indian snobs put together: the newly rich. It was only accidental that they were Sikhs; they could as well have been Hindus. They had
amassed huge wealth overnight and didn’t know what to do with that ill-gotten money. So they spent it on self-grooming and self-aggrandizement. Satwant Kaur shaved her legs and plucked her eyebrows every single day, while even Barbara Smiles, the only European female of the group, did these barely twice a week. And she only used imported make-up for her face: eye-lining, eye-shadow, mascara, brush-on-powder, lipstick and what you will. And furthermore, like the other newly rich, she had the remarkable knack of making her English most mellifluous by suffixing ‘ji’ to any word or sentence she spoke. ‘Yes, ji.’ ‘No, ji.’ ‘You have dinner with us, ji.’ ‘Papaji.’ ‘Mummyji.’ ‘We’re all friends, ji.’ (16)

Through these six characters, the novel presents a picture of the so-called sophisticated Indians. The six women and their families represent the small but influential elite in urban India. The passages quoted mirror not six individuals but six species of people who try to dominate urban societies in India. It is said that the novel is “openly critical of the attempts of the Indian educated classes to identify with the British value system (epitomized in their use of English and other English ways) while denigrating their own.”5 As Lakshmi Maksay points out, “Though the sun has set on the British Raj, it is ironic that the values held by these people remain British and imported.”6 However, in the novel, the satire against
the Anglophiles is not pungent but light-hearted, not Juvenalian but Horatian. In Horatian satire the narrator is an urbane, witty, and tolerant man of the world, who is moved more often to wry amusement than to indignation at the spectacle of human folly, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy, and who uses a relaxed and informal language to evoke from readers a wry smile at human failings and absurdities. In *The English Queens*, the narrator seems to be more amused than indignant at the attitude of the six queens. Even the colony where the six women live has an interesting name, Bide-a-Wee, suggesting “bide away” and also referring to the Bide-a-Wee Cottage Garden in England.

*The English Queens* parodies, in a way, both historical and fantasy novels in that it makes use of a historical character, Lord Louis Mountbatten, and supernatural element, Lord Chetana in the form of Pradeep. In fact, the narrator of the story is a god: “all of us in the heavens”(168).

The entire novel is based on the incident on the fourteenth of August, 1947. Lord Mountbatten was of the view that Indians:

…were the most gullible people he had ever seen. Tell them anything and they will believe it! In other words you could play any hoax upon them for your pleasure, without the least fear of being found out. And soon as he had discovered this
remarkable virtue of the Indians, he set about exploiting it to the best of his ability. (30)

Not satisfied with his successfully selling the idea of Partition to Indians, Lord Mountbatten hit upon something that he wanted. He handed over a Royal Charter to the six women which read:

By virtue of the authority vested in me as the Viceroy of India, I, Lord Louis Francis Albert Victor Nicholas Mountbatten, ICE, KCG, BCD, hereby declare that:

1. Effective the fifteenth of August, 1947, at the time when India becomes free, the British people will cease to use English as their tongue.

2. The British are gifting the language to India, and henceforth the Indians alone will have the sole copyright of it.

... 

5. For the safe transfer of linguistic power, the King-in-Parliament has created a new Order in India, to be known as The Order of the Queens, to which six Indian females will be appointed.

6. These Queens will see to the preservation, propagation and spread of English in India.
7. Any of these principal Queens may create more Queens, so long as they vouch to abide by this Charter, and attest henceforth to swear in English, sing in English, and die with on an English word on their lips. (31-32)

The English queens naively swallowed that statement. So great was their faith in the British master that they did not know that they were being guiled. The Viceroy also administered the oath of office to the six queens: “The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog” (36). Nahal employs farce when he describes the way the six queens and their tribe faithfully recite the prayer:

Since the day they had received the charter from Lord Mountbatten, this had become the prayer of the tribe. No organization can exist without some kind of metaphysical faith, and the queens had adopted ‘The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog’ as their sacred mantra. Each morning, and each evening, all family members of officially admitted queens – and there were thousands by the year 1975 – sat down with a rosary and recited Quick Fox one hundred and eight time (corresponding to the beads in the rosary). (44)

The irony is that the Quick Fox, regarded with such reverence by the queens, is merely a sentence used in routine typing lessons in every typing school. Its virtue lies in the fact that it contains all the twenty-six letters of
the English alphabet. The Viceroy laughed at the foolish, pompous queens just before handing the charter to them:

It would only be appropriate that the English queens, as the Viceroy nicknamed them, should swear by the whole length of the language they were inheriting. And the more he thought of it the more he liked the sentence. Lady Mountbatten had an intuitive awareness of how his mind worked. Said she: ‘You think it has also a symbolic meaning, don’t you? Who is quick and who is lazy and who is jumping over whom?’ Lord Mountbatten pressed his lady’s hand mildly and replied: ‘My dearest, certain things are better left unsaid.’ (36)

Thus Mountbatten had a double success, geographic in that the country was divided into two and linguistic in that English was hypocritically made the most sought-after language in India. Mountbatten, like Macaulay, knew that it was through language that a country could be kept enslaved. As Viney Kirpal points out, “The British attempt to colonize the native with the imposition of English is seen as a deliberate attempt on the part of the colonizer to de-culture the native and rob him of his personality, dignity and intellectual capacity…” To make his plan more effective, Mountbatten chose women – “‘Because their females are even more gullible than their men are’” (33) – and chose women “already bitten by
the English bug" (34). He was immensely happy that his crooked plan was a success and India would continue to be a slave, at least to English if not to the English. He says to General Loudfoot,

‘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 misuse it, misspell it, mispronounce it – they will mutilate their own languages and consequently their thinking capacity.’ (33)

And on the day they were leaving, “…when at the rally near India gate the crowd cheered the end of the British Raj, Lord Mountbatten only shook his head like a modern Machiavelli. He knew the Raj had not ended” (36).

Chaman Nahal makes use of every opportunity to satirize the follies and foibles of Indians. As D. H. Goodyear Jr. observes, “If satire brings into full critical light the follies and foibles of a nation, then *The English Queens* stands as a most skilful work.”8 In chapter two of the novel there is an account of the difference between the reel life and real life: “There are two types of bastis in India. Those that you see in Indian movies, and those you find in large Indian cities” (17). The basti-wallahs are not simple, suffering people, which is how they are often depicted in popular Hindi movies. However there is a clear line drawn between the residents
of Bide-a-Wee and of the JJ Colony Bide-a-Wee, the former representing the elite and the latter, the poor. As mentioned earlier, Chaman Nahal uses irony, farce, and parody. By making Rekha of the Bide-a-Wee Colony and Pradeep of the JJ Colony fall in love with each other, the novelist seems to parody the love between the hero and the heroine in a typical Indian movie.

Rekha is the only child of the Chopras. As Renuka Chopra describes her daughter,

She was never allowed to mix with other children of the street, and when she went to school – to top convent schools, mind you – she studies only British history and geography and not Indian. Later she studied English literature at college. She was given her piano lessons, her ballet lessons, and her ballroom dancing lessons, as done by other families belonging to the Order. We also taught her to swim and to ride. Not once did we allow her to travel in a bus or in a tonga; she was ever driven about in the car. So far as I know she has never read an Indian magazine written in Hindi. (107)

On the other hand, Pradeep is

...a commoner – a man not only from a lower social stratum, but who was indecent enough to dress like an Indian in pyjamas, wear open-necked shirts without a tie ('is
tantamount to going about naked’), and of all things did his talking and thinking in Hindi. (106-107)

This comparison by Renuka Chopra of the two youngsters makes it clear that “given the virulent nature of caste-dominated Indian society, this group becomes yet another caste within the complex structure. Like the other twice-born castes, this group also has to maintain its superior status by observing rules of ritual purity and diet.” 9 Thus Pradeep and Rekha represent the East and the pseudo-West respectively. Rekha’s decision to marry Pradeep raises a storm. The two classes that Rekha and Pradeep represent are pitted against each other in a clash. The basti-wallahs resort to crude pressure tactics to harass the residents of the Bide-a-Wee Colony. Here it is worthwhile mentioning that while Nahal satirizes life in Bide-a-Wee Colony, his portrayal of the basti is also not a positive one. There is irony in Nahal’s treatment of Fauja Singh, the aged Sikh carpenter who had killed three men in brawls, who is generally feared by both men and women, and who has fathered several children – yet he is regarded as the patriarch of the basti. He is respected by the basti-wallahs. The narrator expresses total disapproval of Fauja Singh’s intimidating tactics to obtain Chopra’s consent to Rekha’s marriage; he also frowns upon their total inconsideration for others when they lead their buffaloes, camels, donkeys, goats and pigs to graze on the front lawns of Bide-a-Wee.
The basti dwellers succeed in their efforts to make the Chopras and their friends relent and agree to the marriage of Rekha to Pradeep. Thus, as Munideva Rajendra points out, “The plot of The English Queens has a triangular structure of six Queens united by the Royal Charter, the basti people of JJ Colony and love between Rekha and Pradeep, which serves as a connecting link. The cartoon-like characterization of the English queens and good-humoured satire directed against several aspects of the Indian society provide the unity of tone to the novel.”

When the marriage ceremony is going on, Pradeep refuses to take the seventh perambulation around the sacred fire and refuses to move until the Royal Charter is surrendered to him. Though startled at his wish, the queens hand over the Charter to him and the marriage is complete. However, like in a Hindi movie, the Charter given to Pradeep is not the original but a xerox.

The concluding part of the novel is full of ironic fantasy:

It is from here that this story moves into the realm of the supernatural, of the occult pure and absolute, and it is for each individual to believe it or not in accordance with dictates of his conscience. It is that realm where even the advice of a preceptor will not help the other. One has to find one’s own mooring, and somehow come to terms with what’s happening.
It is revealed to everyone present that Pradeep is not a mortal human being but an incarnation of divinity, an avatar. He claims himself to be Lord Chetana, Lord Krishna’s first cousin, and quotes lines from the *Bhagavad Gita*:

*Yada Yada Hi Dharamasya Glenirbhavati Bharata*

*Abhyutthanam Adharmasya Tadatmanam Srijamyaham*

(Whenever there is decay of dharma and rise of adharma, then I embody Myself, O Bharata.)

He explains to the crowd the purpose of his visit to the earth:

…to awaken them from their slumber. The great gods above had thought of sending one down while the Indians were fighting the British for their independence. But then Gandhi and Nehru were not doing too badly and they left the matter to them. Now had arrived a stage when the gods could hold back no longer. A deadlier enemy than the English was eating away this land of rishis and saints. It was the English tongue. The plot to leave that maggot behind was hatched by the English, but it was the Indians who nursed it. (155)

Chaman Nahal seems to be against linguistic slavery, not against learning an additional language:

After all, to be able to speak an additional language is no handicap, it is an advantage. And over the years the gods
waited for the Indians to evolve a special English of their own, having its own peculiarities and eccentricities. Indeed when some of the Indians began producing creative writing in English the gods were overjoyed. These writers had checkmated Mountbatten: the Indians would employ a variety of English a shade finer than the original. The gods would still allow them the use of Indian English if they so wanted. But the cheap imitation of English mannerisms the gods could not tolerate. (156)

The passage quoted above clearly shows that Nahal – being an Indian English novelist himself – is for an Indian variety of English but against blind imitation of English mannerisms.

Using his supernatural powers, Lord Chetana makes the gathering visualize the consequences if the present trend continues. He presents to them five tableaux, each of which gives them a clear picture of what the loss of linguistic identity has led them to: “This loss of linguistic identity seems to have been broadened into the realization of a deeper cultural malaise: the predominance of the artificial, the unreal, the mechanical over the sincere and the natural....”

In the first tableau, the attack is on the western types of schools: ‘Living in India, eating Indian food, breathing Indian air, an Indian couple are unsure of the education of their child. They
want to make a small American of him, little realizing that his true dignity lies in living and dying as an Indian...' (158)

The second tableau is a satire on those Indians who try to be more Westernized than the Westerners; they have no respect for Indian tradition. Mr. Nair, an Indian English poet, tells a British poet who says, “I’m the poet of today in England only. Surely, you must be the poet of today here,” “No, no, I fashion my poems after your poems only” (159). She does not hesitate to say that her intellectual background is basically Judaic-Greek thought. Lord Chetana attacks such individuals as follows:

‘Now, I put it to you, how can the background of an Indian lady be Judaic-Greek? This Mrs. Nair may have spent a few years abroad, but that doesn’t change her tradition. Her background is the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. But Mrs. Nair feels she can survive only by aligning herself with the West. Never mind, look again.’ (160)

The third tableau is about those Indians who have lost their individuality and do not have the courage to correct the mispronunciation of Indian words by Westerners, but ape them even when using their own Indian language. When Doreen Smith mispronounces her name as “Prahmula,” and “lungi” as “lunji,” Pramila does not try to correct her: “The woman doesn’t have the guts to correct a Westerner. Not only that,
she meekly adopts the wrong pronunciation herself, when every child in India knows that a lungi has to be called a ‘lungi’ and not a ‘lunji’ ” (161).

The fourth tableau is about those Indians – especially in the South – who consider Hindi, an Indian language, more alien than English, a foreign language. Shankar Pillai, a typical South Indian, says,

I have been working in it [Ministry of Finance] for the last ten years and each day of my life has been vitiated by the attempt of the northerners to impose their ways and customs on us from the south. And they are doing this with the open connivance of the Central government. My nights have become nightmares, my hopes have turned to ashes, there is no flower blooming in my tender heart. The worst thorn in my side is this talk of Hindi replacing English as our national language. Now, you know what noble language English is. Even a low-paid man like myself can command some respect by abbreviating his rank....The Tamil Nadu government has been able to do nothing to resist the impertinence of the Central government, and every hour the noble English words are being removed from our vocabulary and Hindi words brought in. I have therefore decided to end my life. (162)
Lord Chetana is shocked at the absurd attitude and stupid views of such Indians: “Imagine someone in England, killing himself for making Hindi as the national language there” (163).

The fifth and last tableau focuses on the cultural bankruptcy of Indians. Lord Chetana shows the people a farewell party at a college in Oxford. In the programme a Japanese, a Thai, and a Spanish couple present cultural items of their own countries. However an Indian student cannot present any cultural item of India. The irony is quite clear when the people see a girl from the Soviet Union singing a Hindi song.

Lord Chetana’s obvious conclusion is that “an Indian today was the most despicable creature on the entire earth, with nothing of his own to offer to others” (emphasis added) (165). It is only in this statement that the irony is a little pungent.

Frightened by the appearance of a god, Sumitra Pandey hands over the original Charter to Lord Chetana. He takes the Charter with him and flies off into the heavens in a chariot but the Charter slips out of his hands and floats out of the window back to India straight into the waiting lap of Sumitra Pandey, and “Where, to the dismay of all of us in the heavens, it is doing the same old mischief all over again!” (168). Thus even Lord Chetana, who seems to stand for consciousness, as his name indicates, fails to awaken Indians from their deep slumber.
Thus, Chaman Nahal – using irony, farce, parody, and fantasy – satirizes the socio-cultural scene in modern India. However, to quote K. Venkata Reddy,

"Behind the comic exposure, the author has a serious purpose: he seeks to make Indians realize the worth and greatness of their cultural values and abide by them without making their lives and manners artificial by aping the west. The theme also gives scope to the author to make a satiric observation of the contemporary social life in India with a veiled appeal for introspection and correction."
REFERENCES