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The Multiplicities of Postcolonialism: A Reading of K. A. Abbas' short story 'Cold Wave'

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Abstract: The paper analyses K. A. Abbas' short story 'Cold Wave' as a modern narrative of an independent nation that is dealing each day with its colonial baggage. It is a reading of the postcolonial elite individual as a product of a transition that is far from complete and who is stranded in-between to eternally undergo the upheaval of constantly shifting identities. He represents the liminality that informs the 'third space' which, however, resists homogenisation as each occupant has his own unique crisis that will not be subsumed into any larger categorization. It studies the disparity that informs how postcolonialism is nurtured and negotiated by successive generations of colonised men, belonging to same origin and class. It also charts how women resist homogenisation through professional emancipation that disrupts the home/world binary and the status quo of patriarchal gendered expectations. It traces the fluctuation in linguistic acquisition, the inadvertent transformation and translation of the colonial tongue and its connection to class identities. Alongside, other subaltern issues have been dealt with to depict how Western knowledge loses its applicability in the colonised space and gets distorted through nuances of meanings to give way to curious structures of difference, showing how postcolonialism engenders an ambivalence and, in turn, is engendered by it.

Keywords: liminality, homogenisation, difference, postcolonialism, ambivalence.

Khwaja Ahmed Abbas (1914-1987) is primarily known as a screenwriter— of famous Raj Kapoor movies like *Awāra* (1951), *Bobby* (1973), *Mera Naam Joker* (1970) and of realist films like *Neecha Nagar* (1946) and *Jagte Raho* (1956). His story-telling dexterity and also his occasional directing endeavours, as in *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946) and *Saat Hindustani* (1970), with stark portrayals of pressing socio-political and economic concerns of a new 'nation' has freshened up the Indian movie scenario. Apart from National awards, he has bagged esteemed international recognitions like Palme d'Or and the Crystal globe Grand Prix, thus representing an indigenous film culture to the international fraternity and audience. However, since a large aspect of films is performance, his identity as an author remains overshadowed, though he had started as a writer and journalist and continued writing till his last day to produce some enriching literature.

‘Cold Wave’ was published in Abbas’ short-story collection *Thirteenth Victim and Other Stories* (1986). As a man who has witnessed the challenges and dilemma of a nation struggling in its transitional phase, Abbas has had a first-hand experience of the drudgeries of hunger, poverty, rural crisis, class divide, oppression and the *baboo* culture. A follower of Hemingway’s narrative technique, Abbas showcases his journalistic expertise and combines fact and fiction to narrate the postcolonial predicament of the Indian elite man who is experiencing his own crisis amidst other lingering problems in a nation independent of any significant colonial presence.

The story narrates the existential crisis of Baldeo Raj Sharma, a Western-educated intellectual and poet of an elite family of Meerut. On renouncing his luxurious home, following his father’s disapproval of his desire to marry a prostitute girl, Baldeo is introduced to the excruciating reality outside. He faces poverty, hunger, sheer materialism, indifference and discomfort. However, he finds humanity from the least expected corner, a beggar woman who belonged to a class that is not considered ‘human’ enough and is exploited according to the needs of the wealthy. However, what appears to be a simple story is replete with layers of meanings and postcolonial undertones that add richness, depth and significance to the narrative.

The search for identity, the inevitable dilemma owing to East-West amalgamation and the transcendence of an individuality even amidst conflict and confusion is exemplified through the character of Baldeo. The discrepancies and confusions of a colonised mind surface with his anxiety as he tries to co-ordinate his Anglicised mind, that does not believe in the conventions of caste and creed, to the stamp of Brahminism that he is born with and cannot wipe away in an Indian society. He comes across as a true embodiment of a transitional yet independent India which, despite the formal abolition of the feudal exploitative order, holds on to caste categorization and associated practices, especially in the case of a Brahmin who still wears the sacred thread (*poita*) and enjoys the monopoly of chanting *mantras*.

Baldeo is the hyphenated man who, with a towering height of “five feet ten inches” and an “athletic figure”, is “quite handsome”, according to European standards where handsomeness is directly proportional to size (Abbas 12). However, the term “quite” makes a confused perception discernible, owing to the idea of “not quite/not white” (Abbas 12; Bhabha 92). He is intelligent, considering his literary flair. He acknowledges that he “[. . .] did not mind to read any further. He could write an even more exhaustive and poetic report [. . .]” (Abbas 10). The professors too applaud because he has perfectly appropriated the English language but he fails to meet the native expectations of intelligence that relate it to securing the highest marks in an examination and often prioritise academics to any other sort of accomplishment which, in fact, is often considered to hamper the former.

Baldeo is the prototypical postcolonial man who carries multiple shifting identities simultaneously and hence, often has an uncertainty pervading his consciousness. He is Janab Nirmal Meeruti in *mushairas* and Pandit Nirmalji in *kavi sammelans*. He is “a careless rich young man” and a prospective lover and groom who transforms overnight into “a jobless,

homeless vagrant on the streets, seeking shelter from the freezing cold” (15). His acute cultural crisis, torn between “Romeo and Juliet”, “Laila and Majnun” and “Charudatta and Vasantsena”, showcases the interesting connection between the British, Ottoman and Indian cultures during the 19th and 20th centuries (13). The book shelves in his house, adorned with “Milton and Byron, Kalidasa and Ghalib”, exhibit his cultural amalgamation. (13). His degree in Literature and Political Science falls redundant as, instead of following his father’s footstep and joining the swarm of anglicised clerks, he spends “much time” in *mushairas*, *kavi sammelans*, *ghazal* and *geet* sessions which represent indigenous culture (13). The in-betweenness becomes starker as, even when occasion demands, he is unable to procure himself the simplest of jobs in shops and offices, for he is too qualified. As he mentions, “[. . .] there was no job for a young, healthy graduate” (18). The resultant ambivalence, however, lends meaning to his existence even amidst all the postcolonial precariousness and finds expression in his persistent self-evaluative questions like “Who am I? What am I? Where am I? And why am I where I am?”, giving way to the divided consciousness of the once-colonised mind in a constant unsuccessful search for a seamless identity (12).

The East-West amalgamation manifests through the representation of the Connaught Place in Baldeo’s imagination. The culture of colonial construction has been a norm— to turn the barbarous native place into a recognisable, habitable one while stripping it of its indigeneity. As such, the colonies are replete with structures bearing British names. The Connaught Place of New Delhi is one such relic which is named after Prince Arthur, the Duke of Connaught who never visited the indigenous scene. Modelled after the Royal Crescent of the gorgeous British town of Bath and installed with Georgian architecture and a “stone-flagged arcade”, it is one of those “complex figures of difference” (Abbas 9; Bhabha 1). While the former is a semi-circular three-storied residential structure, the latter is an almost circular two-storied commercial and residential establishment. Moreover, Delhi was not magnificent as Bath but rather a “doomed, dead city”, “cold and foggy”, representing the ‘heart of darkness’ (Abbas 9). Moreover, Baldeo’s perspective of lights sticking out like “yellow leprosy sores on the dark face of night” is racist, reminding of the coloniser’s view of Eastern people, often accused of spreading leprosy to the rest of the world (9). These indigenous associations create something that is “almost the same, *but not quite*”— an idea further accentuated by the “tremulous litany” becoming “barely audible”, like the fading influence of England in a post-independent India (Bhabha 86; Abbas 9, 9). However, it is still present and cannot be overlooked.

The mimicking tendency of the elite man as the *baboo* highlights Baldeo’s liminal position and can be manifested in his perception of the lower classes. He exudes disgust at the beggar woman’s “Pitch-black complexion”, “Layers of dust and dirt on the unwashed face. Unkempt matted hair [. . .] her ugliness” (18). This irritation is similar to the colonial perception of the colonised who almost always appeared as a savage lot, fragmented and stripped of all recognisable humanity and whose company was best to be avoided to keep oneself from getting contaminated. His throwing the matchbox to her shows his intention to avoid her touch and his wanting to refuse the *bidi* offered by her depicts his elitism which was probably more

accustomed to having a cigarette. This depicts the economic divide that is ingrained deep in the colonised mind of the otherwise independent body. However, what is, on one hand, a manifestation of the famous colonial horror is also, at the same time, informed by the Brahmin code that considers the mere touch of an untouchable defiling. The simultaneous working of this combined consciousness addresses the idea of postcolonial resistance and justifies Ella Shohat's argument that "The 'post-colonial' inadvertently glosses over the fact that global hegemony, even in the post-cold war era, persists in forms other than overt colonial rule" (105).

Baldeo's father too is stranded in the same liminal position, nonetheless distinct, since the 'third space' resists homogenisation. He represents those indigenous elites who underwent an identity crisis, owing to the departure of the colonial masters and the consequent redundancy of British titles and accompanying privileges. He transforms from being "Rai Bahadur Ranbir Raj Sharma" to "only [. . .] Pandit Ranbir Raj Sharma", betraying a fall from the highly revered position to becoming the butt of ridicule for others who, by the colonial grid, were belittled by this class and pushed to the periphery (12). His ambivalence, indicative of his in-betweenness, can allow his son, after the contemporary fashion, to visit prostitutes but will not have a 'fallen woman' as his daughter-in-law. This reinforces the segregation of the home and the world— an orthodox idea fed further by Western education endorsing fixed categories and boundaries. However, Baldeo's leaving his home as an act of rebellion proves the tenuousness of such segregation in a postcolonial world which exists on a negotiation between the two. This incident also depicts the breaking of the joint familial structure as the younger generations, after the Western fashion, wished for freedom from the control and gaze of the older ones and from the burden of restrictions, obligations and liabilities. Baldeo's moving out, at his father's single threat of disowning him and despite his mother's repeated attempts to stop him, depicts the superficiality of the bonds that pervades the few, still intact, joint families which had till then only maintained the essential structure with, however, no vital spark within to keep it alive.

Abbas, however, depicts a difference between these two generations of the postcolonial elite man. Baldeo's father seems to be much more stagnant, not exuding any transformation, for instance, by preventing his son from leaving home or even calling him back later as an act of negotiation. Therefore, it seems appropriate that he finds no representation and loses on existence later in the narrative. By contrast, Baldeo transcends, ejecting himself out of the conventional patterns and expectations and embracing the profound truth. He realises that the essential human emotions of love, care, compassion and togetherness has little connection with class status or economic proficiency, that the idea of strict segregations is illusory and hence, finds the idea of connecting with the lower classes satisfying. He mentions, "The pleasant warmth which [. . .] emanated from the mass of people sprawled there on the floor [. . .] had saved my life. But then I too had contributed to each of them the warmth of my own body" (16). Thus, this individuality is not free of the coloniser-colonised equation which is a similar reciprocal process, instead of the desirable one-way traffic, informed by the idea of fixity and superiority of the

colonising culture. He recognises the superficiality of social class and embraces equality, sitting on the same plane in the same manner as the beggar woman, unhesitatingly smoking a *bidi* lent by the latter. His “fever” symbolises his essential cleansing and purging of the soul by punishment, followed by a revaluation of ideas that becomes more congenial to the contemporary world so that Baldeo declares, “It’s over now” (20). The engendering of fellow-feeling beyond selfish interests and treading the middle path, thus, comes across as the sustaining life-force amidst the complexities of modernity since going back to a pre-colonised state of assumed mental purity is impossible. The text, thus, ends on a note of didacticism.

Class hierarchy in a modern emergent India is best embodied through language— the post-creole continuum and linguistic hybridity driving a wedge between the pedagogical and the performative. All the conversations of the upper middle-class characters occur in Queen’s English, not interspersed with even one vernacular idiom and thus, are representations of acrolect. Instances of mesolect, to mean a mixing of lexicons or distortion of Western language, are discernible in the speeches of the two beggar characters. The old beggar appeals, “This accursed cold is killing me, *baba*. Give a blanket to a helpless old man, *baba*. May Bhagwan bless you and your children, *baba*” (20). The beggar woman asserts, “It’s only a matter of exchange, Babu. Your *machis*, my *bidi*, take it” (20,19). Her word “*namooniya*” instead of pneumonia is a prominent example of basilect.

Class divide is also implied through action. When Baldeo addresses the old blind beggar, the latter instantly scurries off, for the former’s language indicates that he does not belong to the same class. Stripped of any recognisable human speech, these downtrodden characters are depicted as “muttering”, “whining” etc. from which Baldeo, as the educated elite wishes to distance himself. He mentions, “[. . .] I am a poet, am educated, cultured, sensitive young man, not a blind old beggar that I should be whining in a voice like the moaning of a street cur stricken with asthma” (10, 9, 11). However, when Baldeo eventually realises that “[. . .] maybe, my voice too is like the moaning [. . .] Maybe [. . .] my words too would come out whining”, Spivak’s question of whether the subaltern, irrespective of class identities, can speak is reiterated (11).

The Third Class waiting hall of the railway station emerges as a symbol of this sad reality, when juxtaposed against Baldeo’s bedroom in his father’s bungalow. With “fire-place [. . .] silken *lihaaf* [. . .] silken sleeping suit [. . .] embroidered *pashmina* dressing gown [. . .] half-empty bottle of brandy”, it is representative of the financial solvency of the elite class after industrialisation— something that transformed the indigenous society and caused this empowered section to be deluded from the sorry picture of the city proletariat who “huddled” together amidst inhuman living conditions, indicated by the “stench from the latrine” (Abbas 12-13, 16, 15).

Baldeo’s experience of the real outside world makes him surmise, “He never knew that it could be cold like ice, sharp like a razor blade, and viciously, devilishly, omniscient and omnipresent” (10). This depicts the idealistic world of literariness, imagination, complacency and bootlicking that the native intelligentsia had taken refuge in, amidst the world of

dehumanisation and genocide that was making the nation bleed, wiping out all the dreams associated with *Swaraj*. It is this coldness of detachment, dividing people economically along the social ladder, that perhaps leads to a stifling of creative imagination, as experienced by Baldeo who feels that “[. . .] the very source of inspiration, the grey matter in the brain, is frozen into a block of unfeeling ice” (10).

The divide is decipherable even within the middle class. Baldeo’s poetic proficiency, “marked by an intimate and urgent sense of passion which is not to be found in any other young poet” is indicative of his family’s privilege, which allowed him to “not care” about money (12, 13). He may skip the drudgery of a regular job, unlike many other contemporary youths who had to take up jobs to run their homes. As such, this latter section treated art, or rather poeticising, as an amateur practice, unlike Baldeo who could dedicate himself fully to become an excellent practitioner.

Abbas’ portrayals make his criticism of modern acquisitive materialism extremely blatant, for it stimulates an insatiable hunger for power, wealth and even hatred amongst the citizens. Thus, the author’s ideology is reminiscent of Gandhi who saw materialism as “power”, “brute force” and “hate” that is not “taking the world a step nearer its goal” (Fischer 62, 62, 62; qtd. in Fischer 62). A by-product of materialism is the superficial connection that Baldeo shares with his friends. While Ram Dayal becomes aloof with the possibility of his asking for monetary help and Amjad has only “two rupees” for a crisis ridden friend, Gurbachan Singh is disinterested to materialise his father’s influential position in the Ministries to arrange a substantial job for Baldeo (Abbas 17).

The title ‘Cold Wave’ represents the coldness of materialism which has increasingly taken independent India in its grasp. In its race to imitate the West, India has undoubtedly stepped up the economic ladder, has moved from an agrarian economy to a mixed one, has embraced the dynamism that industrialism commands but, in turn, has cut down, as depicted by the cut-out newspaper, on essential warmth and compassion. Baldeo’s experiencing this lack, symbolised by the extreme “loneliness”, “solitude” and “the freezing touch of doom,” makes him one of Eliot’s hollow men that the Western modernity has given birth to (11). It is curious how the coldness of nature, the wilted roses, “bare, autumn-stricken trees”, overcast sky, “grey clouds” and “cold drops of rain” symbolise the essential alienation of man, informed by the dearth of emotions and human attachment (16). The “reports of more deaths”, “hundreds [. . .] frozen to death”, “the temperature” “below freezing point” and “many cases of pneumonia” further accentuate the incessant depletion of humanity with massacres happening even under self-governance (10).

Abbas upholds how Western knowledge and techniques stand challenged in the native scene. The newspaper, “[. . .] riddled with windows gaping through every column where someone had neatly cut out bits of news or advertisements”, turns ineffectual as a protective measure against extreme cold (9). The typical Indian habit of cutting newspaper clips, as such, becomes a symbol of the hostile native clime that resists the Western theory of insulation, intercepts Western knowledge of

which the English newspaper is an agent, exposes its lack and blasts the theory of indiscriminate applicability to depict how a “shield” to the West can only be a “sieve” in the East (9).

Lastly, the emancipation of the indigenous female is also an important postcolonial aspect. Radha depicts the emergence of the professional woman who has recourse to monetary income, though not honourable enough according to orthodox standards. Abbas depicts the transition through the diverse spectrum, from the conventional domestic woman, like Baldeo’s mother who is emotionally dependent and powerless, to the professional prostitute who manoeuvres power with her beauty and body over the masculine world and cannot be tamed by meaningless romantic utopia. Her pragmatism allows her to understand the link between money and a comfortable life and her limited career alternatives in the “sacrosanct” world of *baboos* (14). Despite being a woman who is conventionally deemed emotional, she rejects Baldeo, shifts from an affectionate “Nirmalji” to a cold “babuji”, and strips him of “all the illusions” (14, 14, 15). Her confident individuality breaks the boundaries by symbolically robbing away Baldeo’s conviction and forcing him to ponder about whether “Am I proud or am I obstinate? Am I suffering for an ideal or for a foolish whim?” (15).

Thus, postcolonial literature, rewriting the canon, reinterpreting the dominant colonial perspectives and reconceptualising the white living conditions in the colonised space, is extensive, acknowledging divergent ideas with each passing day. Similarly, the postcolonial modern man is a complex phenomenon, pointing out the fallacy of the western homogenous Self. The identities add dimension with time, constantly change, merge and overlap with each other, each trying to achieve superiority by attempting to subdue and subsume the other in a grappling confrontation while continuing to be together on the same plane so that a valid closure to the concept of identity is never really possible. However, without this ambivalence, the idea of identity itself will cease to be. Also, it is this ambivalence that is extremely important for postcolonialism altogether not to degenerate into another patriarchal discourse. It needs to continuously touch on the contingencies, temporalities, slippages and the overlapping of boundaries that make it the progressive reroute and make meaningful existence possible.

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