

The Expression of Cross-cultural Communication in English Literature

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Abstract:

Human curiosity about culture has a long history. There are well known examples of writings about foreign customs and beliefs – what we may broadly call culture in Tylor’s vein –such as Herodotus’s History in Greek antiquity and Chunqiu in early China. Numerous writings about human cultural diversity, ranging in quality and sophistication, have existed throughout human history. One may be given to conjecture that perceived differences in customs and mores – any encounters with “foreign” peoples, that is – are triggers of the curiosity about culture and human diversity. When this curiosity is coupled with the utility of cultural information about “others” for trade or other worldly endeavors, it is not too surprising that there is a great deal of interest in foreign cultures and human diversity. To put it simply, the growing interest in culture seems to occur when increasing intercultural encounters, and subsequent recognition of cultural differences, are combined with the circumstances in which tangible gains or a reduction of tangible losses can result from exchanges of goods, services, and other resources with people from “foreign” backgrounds (e.g., trade, colonization, territorial expansion).

It is significant to mention here that this paper deals with the process-oriented and system-oriented conceptions of culture complement, rather than contradict or oppose, each other. A critical question we see on the agenda for the future is what makes it possible for culture to be both dynamic and enduring – how concrete individuals in interaction in situ with their natural environment and with each other can generate something that seems like a context general system of meaning.

Key Words: Tangible gains, Cultural diversity, intercultural encounters.

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A writer's work is to portray cultures and civilization in a vivid and descriptive manner in which a concord is achieved between two variant worlds, they lead to start an understanding, shape the world and let the world share a common platform on which the world meets. Yet the content of the narrative we tell has more than a little bearing on whether they supplement or obstruct the human project; they may empower some while disempowering others. Sandel wrote, "Political community depends on the narratives by which people

make sense of their condition, and interpret the common life they share" (350). The danger to which we need to be considered by us is that the narratives we tell can deliberately exclude some from having a right to share either the story or the common life. This applies to myths that peoples and nations tell about themselves, myths which privilege some ethnicities over others, or which effectively demonize others as the enemy, onto whom responsibility for all our woes and ills can so easily be displaced. In the days of the British raj, the British told a myth about themselves; they were an imperial race destined to rule others; they had a divine mission to enlighten, civilize and educate the non-Western, non-white, non-Christian world. Then, once in possession of overseas territory, their superior knowledge and their natural aptitude to rule others for their moral upliftment, meant that they, the British, knew Egyptians and Indians and so on, and their needs, better than they did themselves. Edward Said has argued and explored this thesis extensively in *Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism*. He analyses fictional narrative as well as scholarly discourse. Of Said, Rushdie says in *Imaginary Homelands*, "For those of us who see the struggle between Eastern and Western descriptions of the world as both an internal and an external struggle, Edward Said has been for many years an especially important voice" (9). Britain has lost its Empire but many of the Eurocentric attitudes continue to influence race and community relations. Many Britons today regard the black and Asian migrants as inherently inferior. They may have British passports, they may speak English but as Michael Corra puts it, if "whiteness" remains the sine qua non of Englishness "nothing can make up for its absence" (9). The best the black person can hope for is to be "almost the same but not quite ... almost the same but not white". "Complex Cultural Encounters" Involved in Colonialism at the height of its glory, the British Empire encompassed nearly a quarter of the earth's land mass and a quarter of its population. Of all its possessions, none was more precious than India, the 'jewel in the crown' of Victoria's Empire. Other possessions may have been larger or more profoss-Citable, but with none of them was there the same deep relationship as that which existed between Britain and India, a relationship whose essence was so perfectly captured by James Morris:

India was different in kind from the rest of the Empire — British for so long that it had become part of the national consciousness, so immense that it really formed, with Britain itself, the second focus of a dual power. If much of the Empire was a blank in British minds, India meant something to everybody, from the Queen herself with her Hindu menservants to the humblest family whose ne'er-do-well brother, long before, had sailed away to lose himself in the barracks of Cawnpore. India was the brightest gem, the Raj, part of the order of things: to a people of the drizzly north, the possession of such a country was like some marvel in the house, a caged phoenix perhaps, or the portrait of some fabulously endowed if distant relative. India appealed to the British love of pageantry and fairy-tale, and to most people the destinies of the two countries seemed not merely intertwined, but indissoluble.

This unique relationship found expression in a large body of English literature, so large as to constitute a genre in itself. Here in Japan, this body of literature has been almost totally ignored by scholars. Perhaps this has been due to a failure to recognize the relationship noted above, or perhaps it may be attributable to a narrow and exclusive interpretation of what is meant by 'English Literature'. Whatever be the case, any attempt to introduce the literature of British India demands at least some familiarity on the part of the reader with the subject matter of the genre. Of the thousands of fictional works, and the tens of thousands of non-fictional books written about India, the overwhelming majority deal with the interaction between the small British community in India and the march of historical events in the sub-continent. The following introduction to the literature of the British Raj is, therefore, prefaced by two summaries of the historical and social backgrounds to nearly three centuries of British involvement in India.

The British arrived in India almost as an afterthought. Founded by royal charter in 1600, the East India Company had as its primary aim a share of the valuable spice trade with Indonesia. Finding the Dutch firmly in control, it turned its attention to a secondary market — India.

The British were not the first Europeans to reach India. In the 4th century BC the conquering armies of Alexander the Great penetrated deep into the Punjab, and opened up trade routes that lasted for over 800 years. The fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Arabic power in the Middle East virtually cut off Western Europe from India, and it was not until the 16th century that Portuguese explorers began to re-establish contact. With their superior maritime technology and proselytizing fervour, the Portuguese soon carved out a large empire for themselves in the Indian Ocean. In 1580 Portugal was annexed to Spain, and in 1588 the Spanish Armada was routed by the British navy. The collapse of the Portuguese Empire opened up the way for other European nations to sail into the Indian Ocean in search of trade and profit.

Frustrated in its attempts to enter the lucrative Indonesian spice trade, the East India Company turned to India, where the Mughal Empire was only too happy to have the British rid it of the last unwelcome vestiges of Portuguese naval power. In return, the British were given trading rights and allowed to establish factories.

The 17th century was one of slow but steady consolidation. France and other European countries also obtained similar land and trading rights, but the sheer size of the market, and the relatively small scale of the enterprises, did not lead to any real competition.

The situation was dramatically altered by the War of the Austrian Succession. In 1742 England and France found themselves at war with each other, and this purely European conflict sparked a period of parallel military and political confrontation in India. Both sides made full use of political intrigue and machination, entering into fragile alliances with local Indian rulers, backing rival claimants to vacant thrones, and generally manipulating the confused domestic Indian situation of the time to their own advantage. After a

period of initial setbacks, the military genius of Robert Clive turned the tide in favour of the British, and by 1761 the French presence had been totally neutralized.

The most important gain of this period of Anglo-French conflict was the establishment of undisputed British power in Bengal. Concerned only with the preservation of their trading post in Calcutta, the British successfully countered an armed attempt to oust them. In so doing, they found themselves the de facto rulers of a vast province many times the size of England. The ultimate aim of the East India Company, however, was trade and profit, not territorial expansion. Using its position of military superiority, the Company wrested numerous commercial concessions from the local ruler. The most important of these was a total exemption from the tax levied on private trade by members of the Company. With this concession, the way was opened up for the amassing of huge private fortunes. The gross excesses of the next twenty years prompted the passage of William Pitt's India Act of 1784, which set up dual control of commerce and administration. Ultimate political power was taken from the hands of the East India Company, and the British government accepted a share of responsibility for its involvement in India.

The new century saw further changes in the pattern of British expansion in India. Hitherto, all political and economic activity had been motivated by purely mercenary considerations, but gradually there emerged a hesitant awareness of a new role: that of welding the many kingdoms of the fragmented Mughal Empire into a single, peaceful whole, and bringing Western civilization to this vast sub-continent.

By the middle of the 19th century many of these goals had been achieved. Almost all of India was either under direct British control, or under the rule of pliable native kings rendered impotent by the British monopoly of foreign affairs and military power. The great Land Settlements surveyed and apportioned land rights, and fixed the taxes due from each holding. For the first time in Indian history, the historical claims of Indian peasants to their own land were recognized in law, and an end was put to the corruption of the old tax-gathering systems. Unfortunately for the peasants, most of the tax assessments were unrealistically high, and wholesale forfeiture of land led to the creation of a new wealthy Indian land-owning class.

In 1857 the apparent tranquillity of the Indian sub-continent was shattered by the revolt of a handful of Indian soldiers in Meerut. The revolt quickly spread to Delhi, where the renegade soldiers proclaimed the decrepit titular Mughal Emperor as their leader. The Indian Mutiny lasted for only a few months. The last pockets of resistance were finally put down in 1859, but not before two new names had been etched irrevocably on the psyche of the British nation: Lucknow and Cawnpore, the first a synonym for British courage, and the second the apotheosis of Indian perfidy.

The causes of the Mutiny will, perhaps, remain forever a matter of controversy and conjecture. Even today, there is disagreement on the scale and significance of the revolt. What is clear, however, is the effect the Mutiny had on all subsequent relations between Indians and Englishmen. Even whilst the British army was

exacting a bloody toll of reprisals in India, the government in London was hastily pushing through measures to ensure that such a revolt never took place again. The Government of India Act of 1858 transferred the remnants of the power of the East India Company to the Crown, and in the same year a royal proclamation changed the direction of British policy in India. There was to be no more annexation of Indian kingdoms, no more westernization of Indian society or culture. The initial anger of the British in India was replaced with distrust and disinterest, and the small Anglo-Indian community turned in upon itself.

The relative stability and steady economic progress of the latter half of the century were marred by paranoid fears of Russian incursions in the north, and consequent involvement in the humiliating debacle of the Second Afghan War. The occasional efforts of Whitehall liberals to grant Indians a measure of self-determination in the affairs of their own country were greeted with fierce local antagonism. The Ilbert Bill of 1883, which was to have ended discrimination in the legal system, and given Indian judges the power to try Europeans, was totally emasculated as a result of the violent outcry from the white community. The tide of history was turning, however, and the attempt to partition Bengal in 1905 led to such an upsurge of organized Indian protest that the measure was finally revoked in 1911. In many ways, the Bengal crisis reflected the new political reality of India: the triangular conflict of interest between the British administration on the one hand, and the emerging Hindu Congress and Muslim League on the other.

The First World War found Indians shelving their differences and animosities, and joining wholeheartedly in the war effort. Expectations that their sacrifices would bring the reward of limited independence from a grateful Crown were dashed, however, when the Rowlatt Acts of 1919 extended existing emergency war-time powers. The Government of India Act of December 1919 was an attempt to pacify the outrage that ensued, but it did not come soon enough to avert the Amritsar Massacre.

Led by a young Gujarati lawyer called Mohandas Gandhi, the organized protests against the Rowlatt Acts reached a climax in April, with riots and demonstrations in the Punjab. The army was called upon to restore order, and on the 13th of that month a contingent of soldiers led by General Dyer opened fire on a crowd of 10,000 Indians gathered in Amritsar. When the shooting was done, over 1,500 civilians lay dead or wounded. Dyer was relieved of his command, but remained a hero in the eyes of British admirers.

As Gandhi's campaigns of civil disobedience gained impetus, the British began to make reluctant concessions, allowing Indians to occupy a limited number of administrative posts, and espousing a policy of dual government. This policy of 'dyarchy' culminated in the Government of India Act of 1935, which offered a new constitution and a wide franchise. Members of both the Hindu Congress and the Muslim League were divided as to whether to cooperate or not, but finally the decision was made to put up candidates in the first elections to be held under the new constitution. Of the 1,585 seats contested, Congress won 716 seats and absolute majorities in four states, whilst the League garnered 109 seats in Muslim-

dominated areas. Thus was born the first elected Indian Congress, and a brief period of uneasy cooperation with the British rulers began.

The Second World War intervened, and altered the course of modern Indian history. The British unilaterally declared India at war, without taking the trouble to consult Congress on its opinion in the matter. After some heart-searching indecision, Congress ministers resigned en masse and refused to cooperate with the British. As the Japanese advanced ever closer, Gandhi called upon the British to 'Quit India', and let the Indians come to a non-violent peace settlement with the Japanese. Gandhi's expectations of a Japanese victory, and the dawn of a new era in Asia, were shared by members of the Indian National Army, a small body of Indian prisoners-of-war recruited by Subhas Chandra Bose and persuaded by him that the future of an independent India lay in military cooperation with the Japanese. The INA was soon disillusioned, and abandoned by the Japanese, it was virtually annihilated at the Battle of Imphal. The Japanese advance on India was checked, and Congress hopes for a speedy British withdrawal from India again seemed to recede.

The end of the war and the election of a new Labour government in Britain, however, produced a new political climate, and the rush to independence began. Attempts to hand over the reins of power to a united and peaceful India proved fruitless, and on the 15th of August 1947, the two new states of India and Pakistan were born.

For the merchant administrators of John Company, as the old East India Company was familiarly called, India was the adventure of lifetime. An overland journey of months across Egypt, Turkey, or Persia, years of constant battle with disease and the Indian climate, and, for those that survived, an eventual return to malaria-ridden retirement in England. During the long years spent in India, England and the constraints of English society must have seemed very far away indeed. In those early years before the Mutiny, racial prejudice was unheard of, and many English [3] bachelors took native wives or mistresses, thought nothing of dressing in local costume, and enthusiastically immersed themselves in a study of Indian languages, religions, and customs. The fortunate ones returned to England outrageously wealthy men, and in retirement built themselves strange Indian-style follies in the rural tranquillity of the English countryside.

Two seemingly unrelated events changed all this. The Indian Mutiny poisoned any mutual respect that there might have been between Indians and Englishmen, and in its aftermath, direct control of administration from Whitehall rigorously defined the role of every British official in India. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, on the other hand, cut the journey time between the two countries from 3 or 4 months to as many weeks, and India ceased to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Englishmen could now return to England on regular leave, and could bring back their wives and children with them to India. Victorian society, with all its prejudices and paraphernalia, arrived with a vengeance, and took root in the unlikely soil of India. From this transplantation flowered a strange and exotic plant.

British society in India was characterized by its Janus-faced nature. To the outside world, it presented a united and aloof front, but within itself, it was fragmented by snobbery and social prejudice.

At the top of the social ladder were the administrators. Although the highest post of Viceroy was often occupied by bumbling incompetents, the day-to-day management of a nation of 300 million Indians was entrusted to the 1,300-or-so members of the elite Indian Civil Service. Entry into the Service was by competitive examination, and the standards demanded were astonishingly high. The ICS had its own hierarchy of posts and appointments, but for most people the ICS will forever be associated with the District Officers. Whilst the highest echelons of government led an august and rarefied existence in the palaces of Bombay or Calcutta, to the District Officers fell the solitary task of venturing into the vast hinterland of India, collecting taxes, administering justice, and showing the flag. One of the great enduring images of the British Raj is that of the young District Officer, wise beyond his tender years, seated at a camp table in front of his jungle tent, and dispensing justice and vernacular wisdom to the assembled villagers around him.

Next to the ICS came that other mainstay of British society in India, the Army. Before 1857, most regiments consisted of Indian soldiers commanded by British officers, but after the Mutiny the number of wholly British regiments was increased as a precautionary measure. Although army life had many rewards for the officers of both Armies, [4] there was little joy for the enlisted British soldiers serving in India. The constant spectre of another Indian revolt kept them totally separated from any possible fraternization with the natives, and barrack life was one long, bitter fight with routine, tedium, and the Indian climate.

Far below the ICS and the Army in social standing came the third and last element of British society in India, the merchants and businessmen. However wealthy or influential they might become, they were disparagingly referred to as 'box-wallahs', an epithet derived from the sample cases of travelling salesmen. The British community in India also had its own caste of outsiders: those who, either through choice or necessity, did not fit into the tripartite framework of recognized society. There were, for example, the planters — fiercely independent men who spent most of their working lives isolated from their compatriots, single-handedly ruling the vast private kingdoms of their jute, indigo, and tea plantations. And then there were the missionaries, who turned their backs on the Raj, and strove to bring Christianity, education, and medicine to even the smallest and most isolated jungle hamlet.

In addition to the complex vertical stratification of British society in India, there was another dimension of social consciousness. When their term of office or employment ended, most people packed up and returned to England, but for a few, for those born and raised there, India was home, and in some cases had been for three or four generations. For most such Anglo-Indian families, the almost mandatory period of childhood education in England did little or nothing to weaken their ties with India, and there existed a distinct sense of social superiority to other, less permanent residents.

Whatever their social status, whatever their family background, the lives of all British people in India were regulated by two great impalpables — the geography and the weather. The development of one of the earliest and greatest railway systems in the world did much to overcome the first of these, but there was little or nothing that could be done about the second.

The life of the British Raj progressed to the rhythm of three distinct seasons: Cold Weather, Hot Weather, and Rains. The summer monsoons were a period of lethargy and disease, and took by far the greatest toll of British lives. The autumn saw the advent of the 'Cold Weather', a purely relative appellation which meant little more than 'bearable' as opposed to 'unbearable'. The months from September to March were a time of great social activity, perhaps the only months when the weather made possible such pastimes as riding, shooting, and dancing. It was also the time for visitors to arrive from England. Administrators dreaded the annual nuisance of 'fact-finding' Whitehall politicians, whilst bachelors of all ages welcomed the arrival of the 'fishing fleet' — young girls of marriageable age in search of a husband.

The grim realities of Indian life made marriage a virtual impossibility before late middle age. Enormous initial debts had to be paid off out of meagre earnings, promotion to ranks that would allow the financial luxury of married life had to be awaited with patience, and the grudging approval of superior officers was an infractible social prerequisite. By the time bachelors could begin to consider looking around for a wife, they were already at least in their late thirties or forties, with high social status, a healthy income, and a guaranteed pension upon retirement — a splendid proposition indeed for any matron seeking a good match for her daughter.

Towards March the round of dances, parties, and gymkhanas began to tail off, and the visitors made their way home to England. British India, meanwhile, prepared itself for the ordeal of the Hot Weather. And an ordeal it truly was, in an age when the only method of air-conditioning was that of circulating air through water-soaked hurdles called 'tatties'; a system which, when working efficiently, was capable of lowering the temperature inside a room by all of one or two degrees. In such heat, work was unthinkable, and the officials of the Raj led those of the British community as could afford such a luxury in the annual trek into the delicious coolness of the mountains, to spend the hot weather in the pine-scented seclusion of the hill stations.

In the south, Ootacamund provided a refuge from the heat of Madras and the Carnatic, whilst in the north, the Himalayan foothills offered a profusion of small hill stations such as Mussourie, Naini Tal, and Darjeeling. The queen of them all, however, was Simla. Here it was that the Viceroy and his entourage came to stay, and with them the entire apparatus of British government. For several months of each year, a small village perched on improbably steep hillsides in the shadow of the snow-topped Himalayas became the capital of India.

Once the mould of British society in India had been set, the innate conservatism of that society ensured that there were few if any major changes over the eighty or more years to Independence.

With the advent of that Independence in 1947, the Anglo-Indians were faced with the choice of 'staying on', or pulling up roots and making a fresh start in the United Kingdom or some other part of the Commonwealth. Most decided to leave India, and time has taken its inevitable toll of the few that chose to remain.

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