



## Khushwant Singh's *Karma* Viewed through the Lens of Postcolonialism

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### ABSTRACT

If the British people introduced the railways and the press, developed transport and communication, enriched infrastructure and education, they had also been exploiting India in the cruelest way possible for as long as two centuries. In both the ways, the colonizers had left indelible marks on the Indian psyche. Every sphere of life, including politics, economy, society, culture and language had had an impact of certain Englishness. Even today, when the decolonization is in its late sixties, any indigene can hardly claim to be free from the legacies of colonialism, which is generally termed as postcolonialism. While critics like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayathri Spivak, R. Siva Kumar, Dipesh Chakrabarty and many others have come forward with different theories, postcolonialism is essentially a study that relates to the colonizer-colonized issues. This paper briefly discusses Khushwant Singh's *Karma* through the lens of postcolonialism.

A short story published in 1989 in Khushwant Singh's *The Collected Stories*, *Karma* is all about a native Indian Mohan Lal who lived under the British rule. The attitude of the Indians towards the British masters may broadly be divided into three categories: blind admiration, strong abhorrence and mixed felling. And Mohan Lal belongs to the first one. According to Bhabha, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite." Yes, Sir Mohan Lal has left no stone unturned to become an Englishman. The very title 'Sir' is suggestive of that, it being "used before the first name of a man who has received one of the highest British honours (=a KNIGHT)". The story opens with Sir Mohan looking at his own image in the mirror of a 'first class' waiting room at the railway station :

Distinguished, efficient - even handsome. That neatly-trimmed moustache - the suit from Saville Row with the carnation in the buttonhole - the aroma of eau de cologne, talcum powder and scented soap all about you ! Yes, old fellow, you are a bit of all right.

He considers himself to be an emblem of Western culture and therefore efficient and different from other Indians. A middle aged man, he even looks handsome in Western suit and expensive cosmetics. In this regard, Lacan says, "The effect of mimicry is camouflage...it is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background."

A blind admirer of the western culture, Sir Mohan strongly abhors whatever is native. When he finds that the mirror, which is in a bad condition, does not reflect a 'first class' image, he readily sums up: "The mirror was obviously made in India." Metaphorically, it is the mirror of his fate, showing that he does not fit the first class waiting room reserved for the Englishmen. Unaware of the impending doom, he associates it with everything else in the country, "You are so very much like everything else in this country, inefficient, dirty, indifferent" In this regard, Rabindranath Tagore says, "...we take it for granted that India had no culture, or next to none. Then, when we hear from foreign pundits some echo of the praises of India's culture, we can contain ourselves no longer and rend the sky with the shout that all other cultures are merely human, but ours is divine- a special creation of Brahma." The selfsame is expressed in Nandalal Bose's *Vision and Creation*: "...we have remained ignorant and insensitive to the glory of our past painting, sculpture and architecture; foreign connoisseurs have

had to come and expound it to us. To our shame, even our present day art does not get any recognition in our country until it finds approval in foreign markets." This sense of dependence on the Western is the direct outcome of the colonial rule. The two-century long mastery over the Indians was likely to project the British culture and language as superior, powerful, aristocratic and glamorous enough to be followed by the slaves. Thus, Mr. Lal prefers to speak in English: "He rarely spoke Hindustani. When he did it was like an Englishman- only the very necessary words and properly anglicized." Like a cultured Englishman, he could talk on almost any subject- books, politics or people. In his five years abroad, Sir Mohan acquired 'the manners and attitudes of the upper classes.' So the native 'excitements, bustle and hurry' seem to him to be the 'exhibitions of bad breeding'. He wants everything 'ticky-boo' and prefers to walk with a 'studied gait' and wear 'an expression of matter-of-factness' like an Englishman.

Existential crisis is a major issue in the arena of post colonial discussion. There is a volley of hot critical debates regarding the definition of existentialism. But a "central proposition of Existentialism is that *existence precedes essence*, which means that the most important consideration for individuals is that they are individuals—*independently acting and responsible, conscious beings ("existence")—rather than what labels, roles, stereotypes, definitions, or other preconceived categories the individuals fit ("essence")*. The actual life of the individuals is what constitutes what could be called their "true essence" instead of there being an arbitrarily attributed essence others use to define them. Thus, human beings, through their own consciousness, create their own values and determine a meaning to their life." The denial of the self and hankering after the foreign ("The desire of the moth for the star") makes Mohan Lal alienated from the world around him and he suffers from existential crisis. He can neither travel together with his wife, nor live with her in the same floor, nor have mutual sex with her:

She lived in the upper storey of the house and he on the ground floor ... He came up to her once in a while and stayed for a few minutes. He just ordered her about in anglicised Hindustani, and she obeyed passively. These nocturnal visits had, however, borne no fruit.

Sir Mohan's sexual frustration ('all-too-brief sexual acts'), the hidden violence in his order in 'anglicised Hindustani' and the passive obedience of his 'subject' are suggestive of the colo-

nizer-colonized experiences. In a sense, Lachmi, 'obese', 'old' and 'smelling of sweat and raw onions' (his wife) hardly exists for him. Naturally, the 'illiterate' relatives and the 'dirty, vulgar countrymen' have no significance in his life.

Having been thus alienated from his own wife, own people and own culture, he desperately tries to identify himself with the English people whom he thinks himself to be a part of. Far away from any traditional attire, say, a 'white sari with a red border', he wears foreign suit and Balliol tie only to fly in fancy to "the fairy land of Oxford colleges, masters, dons, tutors, boat races and ruggger matches", where once he had perhaps existed. He always carries with him the English daily *The Times*, English wine whiskey and English cigarettes in handsome gold case only to impose an Englishness on himself. He is always ready to express the long suppressed "five years of grey bags and gowns, of sports blazers and mixed doubles, of dinners at the inns of Court and nights with Piccadilly prostitutes", but there is no Englishman to listen to him.

Sitting in the empty compartment, Sir Mohan looks out of the window, as if for getting disillusioned. When he sees two English soldiers coming, he decides to welcome them and even speak to the guard so that they can travel with him in the 'first-class coupe'. But to his utter dismay, he finds that he is none but a 'nigger' in their eyes. He is asked to get out of the compartment, of course in 'anglicised Hindustani: 'Ek Dum jao'. Mr. Lal tries hard to protest in his 'Oxford accent' but in vain: "They picked up Sir Mohan's suitcase and flung it on to the platform. Then followed his thermos flask, briefcase, bedding and *The Times*." Hoarse with rage, he shouts again in British tone: 'Preposterous, preposterous,' but only to be slapped and thrown out of the train. And he "reeled backwards, tripped on the bedding and landed on the suitcase." Thus Mohan Lal's long cherished balloon of Englishness gets punctured at the end. The illusion of Oxford is over. Now he belongs neither to the Balliol nor to the betel. As it were, he does not exist at all: 'he lost his speech.' He is a nowhere man who is in a nowhere land with no purpose in life.

In striking contrast to Mohan Lal, Lachmi is presented as a simple woman representing the ordinary native Indian during colonial rule. Short fat and in her middle forties, she is found sitting on a small grey steel trunk, chewing a betel leaf and fanning herself with a newspaper. As a typical Indian woman, she loves to wear ornaments. She is also fond of chatting with people, irrespective of any social status. She likes to travel where she fits and has the guts to admit it without any hesitation: "I can't understand English and don't know their ways, so I keep to my zenana inter-class." She has no pretention. She is always true to her self. She is a devoted wife either. Though her husband has no time to spare for her, she never complains. She always tries to be happy with what she has or she is. She enjoys a simple meal of chapattis and mango pickle. The portrayal of this simple, straight forward image of Lachmi thus serves to bring out the sustenance of essential Indianness amid colonial influence. Side by side, the bearer and the porter are the representative of the working class of the then society, whereas the two soldiers stand for the ruling class. All these constitute the postcolonial flavor of the text.

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