ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the poetical representations made by British men and women pertaining to the socio-cultural milieu of India during the Raj. These poems show the different attitudes of the British men and women towards India which they ruled. These poems unveil the pro-Indian, anti-Indian and ambivalent views of the Colonial British-Indian poets towards the socio-cultural milieu of India. These poets extensively wrote about the minutest details of India. They made representations about the exotic beauty of India, Indian gardens, monuments, spiritualism, temples, Gods and Goddesses, festivals, marriages, caste-system, superstitions, illiteracy, poverty, native servants and nautch girls of India and in their poems.

KEY WORDS: Exotic, Spiritual, Festivals, Superstitions, Ignorance, Illiteracy, Servants, Nautch Girls.

INTRODUCTION

Colonial British-Indian Poetry is a unique territorial English poetry of British India which was written by a comparatively small body of British men and women who resided in India during the Raj. British men in the form of civil and military servants, merchants, commercial travelers, soldiers, agents for trading and shipping firms, members of the professional missionaries, adventurers, artisans and unskilled workers came to India during the Raj and from around 1780, a handful of daring British women, braving the hazards and hardships of the journey from England also started sailing to India every year. A few of these British men and women got enchanted by India and composed many poems pertaining to the socio-cultural milieu of India. A critical analysis of the Colonial British-Indian poetry reveals that sufficient attention has not been paid to the representations made by the Colonial British-Indian poets about the socio-cultural milieu of India. In this paper, an attempt is being made to study the multifarious representations made by the Colonial British-Indian poets about the socio-cultural milieu of India.

SUMMARY

The premise of this paper is based on the theoretical stand that all the representations of the West about the East were not just a cumulative and hegemonic discourse. Edward W. Said, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser and Stuart Hall have argued that the Occident always represented the Orient as
strange, servile, exotic, dark, mysterious, erotic and dangerous which helped it to define itself through this contrasting and dichotomous image and which led to the formation of a “western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3) as stated by Said. Said’s theoretical notion has been more or less accepted by most of the post colonial theorists but this is just “one part of the story of Western encounters” with the east. (Oldmeadow 15) Besides the “relationship of power; of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony” (Said 321) there was also a relationship of “real understanding of an actual Orient” by the Occident “which has been made invisible” (Sardar vii) by Said and others. Post colonial theorists like Homi K Bhabha, W J Thomas Mitchell, Aijaz Ahmad, Dipesh Chakraborty, Uma Narayan, Sara Suleri, Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak and Gyan Prakash have tried to extend, qualify and repudiate Said’s work. They have observed that the Occident while exerting its “hegemony over the East, had simultaneously admired it, elevated it, and held it up as a model, an ideal to be aspired to and emulated.” (Clarke 6) They have claimed that in colonial representations, the colonized subject is always in motion and is sliding ambivalently between the polarities of similarity and difference. They have also argued that representations about any nation can never be a homogenous field or grid of relationships governed by a single principle rather they are “multidimensional and a heterogeneous terrain, a collage or patchwork quilt assembled over time out of fragments.” (Mitchell 419) and portray an image of diversity and heterogeneity. Aijaz Ahmad and Dipesh Chakrabarty did not entirely dismiss Said’s views but like Bhabha they have renewed the premises that all the colonial texts do not portray a binary division. Uma Narayan too states that representation is “the author’s own point of view, consisting of her posing of questions, her marshalling of the evidence, her articulation of what is taking place, and her recommendations for change” (Narayan 147) and so it can never be unidirectional as Said assumes. Sara Suleri, further adding to Uma Narayan’s views, avers that the Colonial British-Indian poetry was the product of the ‘ubiquity’, ‘proximity’ and ‘the peculiar intimacy’ between the colonizer and the colonized. These critics state that as the perception of individuals differ from each other on the same subject so their representations of the same cannot be monolithic in nature.

An in depth analysis of the Colonial British-Indian poetry, reveals that on the one hand a few Colonial British-Indian poets have negated, criticized and condemned the socio-cultural milieu of India in their poems but on the other hand, many Colonial British-Indian poets have approached India “at various moments with perfectly honourable intentions and genuine respect for its people in order to learn from and value the beauty, religion and culture of India” (Mackenzie 60) as stated by post colonial critics like Homi K Bhabha and others. A detailed study of the representations made by the Colonial British-Indian poets about the socio-cultural milieu of India reveals that a few poets are talking mainly from occidental point of view just creating a binary division between the east and the west in their poems. They consider it as ‘an inauspicious hour’ in which they landed in India and “Curse on the ship in evil hour that bore” their “jolted frame to India’s burning shore!”(Dunn 21) They address it as “a fudge… from beginning to end!” (Dunn 28) and as ‘an alien soil’ full of sickness and disease where
‘neither the mind nor the body is at rest.’ A few of the poets refer to India as the most dreaded place on earth where insects settle on your meat, where scorpions crawl beneath your feet, and deadly snakes infest (Vernede 90) and where weeks of fever temper months of toil; …Where tape accumulates, and men decay. (Bignold 5).

Sir Alfred Comyn Lyall in the poem “The Land of Regrets” addresses it as “sultry and sombre Noverca!/O Land of Regrets!” (Dunn 112) whereas Thomas Francis Bignold in the poem “On a Station in Lower Bengal” states that in India

The lands are low-lying lands

And the people are low lying people. (Dunn 127). Rudyard Kipling in his poem “The Ballad of East and West” openly declares “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” (Kipling 245). These poets in their poems have depicted India as malignant, dark and threatening and created an unbridgeable divide between the east and the west as stated by Said and others.

On the other hand, there are poets who have represented the ‘green Bengal’s palmy groves’, ‘Almorah hills’, ‘Delhi’s kingly gates’, ‘towers of Bombay’, ‘the dal lake’, ‘the Mughal gardens’, ‘the nishant bagh’, ‘the bird life’, ‘the deodar trees of Kashmir’, ‘the marble dome that glitters in the sun’ i.e. the Taj Mahal and the beauty of rural India which made their “Hearts (feel) so light and gay” (Dunn 31-32) in their poems. A few got enthralled by the spiritual facet of India and expressed their reverence towards India’s holy land where “Gods are worshipped, and their sires revered;” (Richardson 336). Sir William Jones, the first Colonial British-Indian poet, got so fascinated by the spiritual side of India that he composed nine hymns addressed to different Hindu Gods and Goddesses whereas Sir Alfred Comyn Lyall wrote about Lord Siva. A few of them wrote about the innumerable ‘palaces of prayer’ in India and the “Pearly-white temples in numbers untold” which “Shine in thy brightness, all gorgeous with gold” (Sinha 102) and ‘breathe a solemn air.’ They wrote about the immense faith of Indians in the holy river Ganges where Pilgrims in thousands kneel down by thy shore Gaze upon Ganga, and want nothing more. (Sinha 102)

The festivities of India also grabbed their attention and thrilled them to compose verses. They represented the most elaborately celebrated festival of India, Diwali in their poems and also occasionally wrote about Holi, Durga Puja and the pious festival of Rakhi when the sister ties a bracelet on her brother’s wrist and the brother
Bound by a sacred gift, in happier hours
To prove a brother’s undecaying faith;…
rushes on to danger or to death,
to save his sister in distress. (Roberts127).

A few poets got enamoured by the enthusiasm and fervour with which the Indians celebrated the marriages and found that celebration ‘no less than a festivity’ in India. They have elaborated how a few days before the marriage every evening at the brides and the bridegroom’s place respectively one “hears the women singing, and the throbbing of the drum” (Hope 2) and when the marriage is solemnized the bridegroom promises to share everything with his bride and declares
I give you my house and my lands, all golden with harvest;
My sword, my shield, and my jewels, and My strength and my dreams.” (Hope 21)

Apart from their appreciations of India’s beauty and its meaningful customs and their anger and frustrations, many Colonial British-Indian poets also have represented in their poems the rigid caste system, the monstrous superstitions, poverty and illiteracy prevalent in India which had engulfed India and had “tainted the fair stream” (Burke 48) of India. A few of them presented a satirical account of the Hindus in India who “to caste do so cling” (Dunn 30) that they prefer dieing instead of having food offered to them by some other caste person. While pointing towards the rigid caste stratifications and caste restrictions, they have presented that inter caste marriages were treated as a heinous act in India where it is a deadly sin
For those who hold the Hindu creed.
To love or wed, except within
The pale of caste, which is their meed:” (Hutchinson 7).

Some poets have also expressed their sheer disappointment on seeing the “superstition’s most alluring art,/ Clothed in its bright radiance” (Burke 49) engulfing the Indian natives. A few have quite ironically presented that whereas the entire world was moving ahead, the Indians were still entangled in their age-old superstitions and believed in ‘the priests’ who assured them that to make their barren lands fertile, they should “…buri a child around its roots” (Hope 29), ‘the quacks’ who gave them “some hakim’s powder” for the cure of all diseases (Hope 172) and ‘the power of shradh’ to “make the parted spirit glad.” (Hutchinson 4). Laurence Hope in the poem “Marriage Thoughts” has given a humorous account of a ridiculous superstition prevalent in India. She states that here in India during the marriage, the younger sisters and friends of the bride, to ensure that next “would be there turn to wed!” throw “sweet perfume upon her (bride’s) head./ And delicate flowers round her bed.” (Hope 20). There have been presented a few gruesome pictures of India where a few Indians forced by poverty go
to the Forest
reserved by the Sarkar
and cut some logs and sold them
in the neighbouring bazaar (Vernede 62)
whereas on the other hand a few Indian mothers are forced to sell
their children to get breads…
When food was none; some kissed her infant’s head,
And then contentedly laid down to die!” (Burke 87)

Seeing the plight of Indians due to their utter ignorance and illiteracy, a few poets have also represented their views of reforming India in their poems. Richardson in the poem “Lines in the Memory of David Hare” states that the British should come forward and devote their lives to ‘one generous end.’ They should “bless the Hindu mind with British lore” (Dunn 78) to eradicate their superstitious attitude. Lyall in the poem “The Old Pindaree” says that most of the Indians “can’t read, write, nor cipher” (Dunn113) which was the sole reason behind their backwardness. He decides to “Set up a school in the village!” and requests Indian natives that “my wishes are./ That you make the boys learn regular” so that they learn about equality and fraternity and make India free from the shackles of caste divisions, superstitions and ignorance. Whereas, Bignold translated a few Hindi nursery rhymes into simple English e.g.

Dekho re, Dekho re, dekh!
Ghari bajegi ek!
Jab ghanta hua,
to kud para chhua,
Dekho re, Dekho re, Dekh. (Vernede 214)

which he translated as “Dickory, Dickory, Dock;/ the mouse ran up the clock,/ the clock struck one/ and down she run./ Dickory, Dickory, Dock” (Vernede 214). Similarly another famous Hindi nursery rhyme

Hamti Damti chargaya chat;
Hamti Damti girkaya phat,
Raja ka paltan, Rani ke ghore
Hamti Damti kabhi na jore. (Vernede 215)

was translated as “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,/ Humpty Dumpty had a great fall./ Not all the Queen’s horses,/ not all the King’s men/ could put Humpty Dumpty together again”(Vernede 215) to lure
the Indian students to learn English. On the other hand, there were a few poets who were least concerned about the upliftment of India and Indians, whom they were ruling. They through out the day just enjoyed sleeping on the ‘the most luxurious couch’ imaginable all over the world i.e. the charpai under the punkah being waved by the punkah coolies or smoked hookah “Oft grasped at morn, and played upon till night.” (Nevile 161) A few listened to the music of India, played Indian games like ‘playing tom-tom’, ‘hog hunting’ and ‘antelope shooting’ and relished the Indian madiera.

In the representations of the servants, nautch girls and women too we find different perceptions and representations in the poems of Colonial British-Indian poets. Post colonial theorists like Ranajit Guha (1997), Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (1999) and Gyan Prakash (2002) have argued that there is a lack of address to these representations in Said’s Orientalism but an in depth study of these representations revealed that most of the Colonial British-Indian poets in their poems behaved like Occidents as stated by Said. They have negated their servants in their poems and addressed them as ‘shrewd’, ‘irresponsible’, ‘crook’, ‘bad fellows’, ‘theives’, ‘dirty heads’, ‘ghosts.’ and “naukar(s) full of dhoka and exceedingly chalak” (Vernede 115). A few points are there were they have rebuked these servants as ‘slaves’ and ‘niggers.’ At a few places Indian servants are threatened with dire consequences that if they don’t obey their master, they “ll get up” and ‘break’ their ‘head.’ (Vernede 80). A few of the poets represent how the British used and exploited the Indian servants where

One puts on a stocking, one holds a serie
Another with chillumchees stands ready by,
A third has a mirror, he brings to your view,
A fourth fellow’s tying the string of your shoe!
Or perhaps if undressing, a bearer’s undoing
Your shoes or cravat, there’s another shampooing
Your arms or your legs,(Dunn 30).

These British-Indians missed the servant class of India when they went back home not only for their services but also because now they had “no one left to snub.” (Vernede 262).

No butler staid in gold brocade
to serve him with his grub;
no khitmatgar to bring cigar,
or fill the brown tobacco jar;
no chauffeur now to wash his car,
no sweepress to scrub.
No bishti thin with glistening skin
to fill his morning tub;
no dhobi foots to iron his suits,
no beaters to attend his shoots,
no bearer to remove his boots,
or give his back a rub.
No fellow bore to share the floor,
no crony at the pub;
no boy around to feed the hound,
no syce to bring the pony round;
no-one to meet on common-ground
and no-one left to snub. (Vernede 261-262).

There were a few poets who appreciated these servants and expressed the Britishers concern towards them, as stated by Bhabha and others. They had all praises for them and regard them as the most dutiful Indian natives who use to be at the beck and call of their master and mistress all the time and use to stand “…in a row, behind each Sa’ib’s or lady’s back” (Cheem 220) and looked after them as if they “were an infant not yet weaned.” (Vernede 9). A few of them even declared them as “the best/ of all the domestic waiting creatures…Throughout the world” (Vernede 131). A few poets are seen sympathizing with the Indian servants, who are ‘kicked’ brutally by their masters and asked to “jump down and lick the ground”(Vernede 80) for their slightest mistake. These poets show their concern for them that besides such inhumane treatment these servants do not retaliate and exhibit their commitment by stating that “I do my best for master here.” (Vernede 80).

Many Colonial British-Indian poets got immensely captivated by the nautch girls of India and had something to say about them “exciting or boring, graceful or awkward, glamorous or dull.” (Nevile 45) Most of these poets have condemned the nautch and the nautch girls in their poems. They regarded the nautch as “a most diabolical sort of debauch” and the nautch girls “as wicked as devils.” (Cheem 45) and have claimed that the nautch girls dance’s voluptuous mazes “Would turn a man’s brain and allure him to blazes!” (Cheem 45). The irony is that on the other hand there were a few poets who were quite appreciative about them. They compared them to ‘a silken undulation’, ‘a glossy sweet of ocean’ (Nevile 36) and have considered them “as beauteous as angels.” (Cheem 45). These poets found their performances ‘the modestest’ and “superior to all the operas of the world.” (Nevile 23). A few Colonial British-Indian poets wrote about the beauty of Indian women on whom “nature seems to have showered beauty…with a more lavish hand than in most of the other countries” (Orme 75) whereas a few others have focused on the submissive Indian women who spent their entire lives secluded in zenanas and in
Ramandeep Kaur

purdah. Aliph Cheem in the poem “Moral” has highlighted the rich culture of India where the chastity of women is considered supreme and

He who steals a woman’s honour
Is the lowest sort of thief;
Brings all sorts of sorrows on her,
And is bound to come to grief (Cheem 60).

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the Colonial British-Indian poets in their poems extensively represented the socio-cultural milieu of India. They wrote about the bewildering diversity of the people of India, the caste system, superstitious attitude, the lively fairs, festivals, marriages, manners and customs of India. They wrote about the sights, scenes, monuments and the weather and climate of India. Their poems also included subjects from real life which included men and women of every possible caste and calling, from the high caste Brahmin to their servants and the nautch girls. These poems break ‘the myth’ prevalent till date, of considering that the entire Colonial British-Indian poetry was impermeable or monolithic by nature, as stated by Said. There is no gainsaying the brilliance of Edward Said’s work and “it would be foolish to turn away from his many insights or to ignore the challenges he has posed.” (Oldmeadow 11) but it can’t be denied that Said’s perception has its own limitations. The in depth study of the poems written by the Colonial British-Indian Poets pertaining to the socio-cultural milieu of India reveals that they were not just a uniform monolithic structure but were rather a collage or jigsaw puzzle and were multiple and ambivalent in nature.

REFERENCES