

Nature of Oriental Spiritual Practices in the Novels, Fasting, Feasting and the Romantics: A Novel

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Abstract

India has always been treated as a land of spirituality and mystery in the western world. The Indian English novels time and again portray different spiritual practices in India to satisfy the palate of the West. But most of the treatments are shallow and they fail to convey the actual purpose behind Indian religious practices. In fact these religious practices are based on deeper philosophy which are alien to the western mind. India considers spiritual attainment as the ultimate aim of human life. Spirituality in India is achieving equanimity of mind by going beyond the binaries of pain and pleasure. It is achieved by overcoming the sensory pleasures and fixing the soul to the permanent source of joy i.e., the super soul or 'paramatma.' Thus detachment becomes the key-word in Indian spirituality.

KEYWORDS: spirituality, materialism, renunciation, detachment, equanimity, salvation.

Introduction:

Religious practices in India have always attracted the western mind and India has been associated with mysteries, occult tantric as well as personal practices and priorities. Indian English novels from the right beginning treated religion and spirituality as one of the recurring themes. Most of the novels treat the subject in a peripheral way and present dubious saints, fake ascetics and foolish laymen who follow superstitious practices. This kind of a treatment gets wider popularity and cater to the palate of the western mind. Religious practices get sufficient room in the novels *The Romantics: A Novel* by Pankaj Mishra and *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai. In these novels also the authors merely delineate the spiritual practices of the people of India in a lighter tone. Often such treatment bring forth contempt and skepticism among the readers. In this study an attempt is made to probe into the nature of religious and spiritual practices of the characters presented in the novels.

Spiritual practices in Fasting, Feasting.

The novel *Fasting, Feasting* has got a considerable chunk of spiritual practices in its thematic concern. It is through the character called Mira-masi that the novel gives a vivid picture of the Hindu religious practices. The ways of worship in a temple is described:

powder and yellow marigolds. Then all the bells would ring – tang! Tang! – and the conch-shells blow – hrr-oom, hrr-oom, - and the priest would circle a tray full of lamps around the god's head, reciting verses in somewhat nasal Sanskrit, and finally come out to distribute sweets to the faithful.⁴¹

These scenes are described in the novel in a dramatic way, without telling what exactly the red-powder in the tray is or what its spiritual significance is. Mira-masi's method of worship in private is also described:

An altar would be made by setting out on a shelf, or a low table, or even on a few bricks placed together, the objects that accompanied her when she travelled: a little brass Shiva (she called it golden), an oil lamp, an oleograph, and copy of the Ramayana wrapped in red cotton. . . Mira-masi would seat herself before her home-made altar, her eyes closed as she recited the lord's names over and over in a fervent manner that made her sway as if she were possessed. In these moments there was graven on her face, as on a stone image, an expression so fervent that it awed Uma. If her eyes opened, they flashed with fervour, almost ferociously. Then she would burst into song and in a ringing voice sing:

‘I have travelled over the earth,
I have searched the whole earth,
Now at the lotus feet of the Lord,
I have found my salvation. . . .’ (42)

Mira-masi is a distant old relative of Arun's family and through her character the blind religious faith of the people of India is shown and her piety and fervour is juxtaposed against the lack of it by the modern people like the Papa of Arun and other members in the family:

Ever since her widowhood, she had taken up religion as her vocation. Her day was ruled by ritual, from the moment she woke to make her salutations to the sun, through her ritual bath and morning prayers, to the preparation of her widow's single and vegetarian meal of the day (that Arun found so appetising that he wolfed it down in a way Mama took as an affront) and through the evening ceremonies at the temples she visited. (39)

As Mira-masi grows older she voluntarily denounces even the vegetarian meal and disciplines herself on a diet of fruits and peanuts (138). Her whole-hearted devotion and blind faith is such that when her bronze image of the Lord Siva is stolen, she is determined to the core that she would get it back. She fervently makes prayers and ceaselessly visits pilgrim centre after pilgrim centre for this purpose. At last she finds her stolen idol in a shop in Benares that sold brass wares. It is kept as a presiding deity and is worshipped. Mira-masi throws herself at the shelf and sobs with joy. She creates such a scene and that makes people throng around the shop. She narrates how it was stolen, how she had a dream at a hilltop temple and how her dream came true. People nod and agree. The superstitious, peace loving shop-keeper parts with the idol, “and Mira-masi carried off her prize, the whole population of the lane accompanying her through the bazaar for the ritual taken in the river with great cries of “Har, har Mahadev !” (140). The scene that follows reveals the general mood and the way the religious people in India behave:

Mira-masi was able to create such drama about her Lord, her lost Lord, and the dream she had had, in a temple in the Himalayas on a previous pilgrimage, revealing that if she came to this city, visited this bazaar,

walked down this lane, this was where she would find Him, and so she had. She acted out her journey, her dream, the discovery; she laughed and wept, the great red mark a priest had drawn on her forehead that morning becoming smeared and running across her face dissolutely, whereupon everyone nodded and agreed that if it was so, if a dream had come true and a prophecy been fulfilled, then the Lord was hers. The poor shopkeeper, a peace-loving man, and superstitious too, parted with the idol. . . .

Mira-masi carried off her prize, the whole population of the lane accompanying her through the bazaar for the ritual bath in the river with great cries of 'Har har Mahadev!' (139-140)

The episode very well shows the almost blind faith and fervour of the common people of India. Myths and reality are closely interwoven in the Indian psyche that Mira-masi's story is yet another incident that happens almost every day in India in the ethereal sphere of spirituality.

Mira-masi's prejudiced mind is revealed again when she gets Uma accompany her to an ashram in the foot-hills of Himalaya. Uma is very happy in the idyllic atmosphere of the ashram, unsupervised by her MamaPapa. Mira-masi tells Uma that she is chosen by the lord. Uma gets another fits and Mira-masi declares that she is possessed by the lord. In fact the fits of Uma are described by Angelia Poon as the unconscious resistance of her body which undertakes a peculiar form of a travel from her world of immobility and she elaborates: "Thus Uma, assured of a lifetime of confinement in her parental home, nevertheless manages to experience a liberation from her body when she is overtaken by periodic fits and fainting spells which non-verbally express her protest against the oppressiveness of her family and her victimization by patriarchal Indian society" (36). Mira-masi's superstitious devotion even frightens Uma. She tells Uma, "You are the Lord's child. The Lord has chosen you. You bear His mark" (59) and a panicked Uma falls into the grip of a spasm.

When both the attempts of Uma's marriage become miserable failures Mira-masi declares "in her most dignified manner, 'She is blessed by the Lord. The Lord has rejected the men you chose for her because He has chosen her for Himself' " (96). Further human follies which hamper the pursuit of spirituality is shown when Uma is allowed to sit in an Ashram in the high folds of a mountain: "So they let her be, but the young priest who played the harmonium gazed directly at her when he sang, and his voice was no longer steady but quivered emotionally!" (61). In India spirituality means overcoming the temptations of sensory pleasures. All the practices of meditation, chanting, worship of idols as 'archa bimbams' and the tantric kriyas are with the purpose of eliminating the 'kama, krodha, and moha of ordinary mortals. When one falters in his ways he becomes feeble and nervous.

Treatment of Spiritual practices in The Romantics: A Novel

In *The Romantics: A Novel* by Pankaj Mishra the westerners are shown as more materialistic and so many of them fail to understand the significance of Oriental spiritual philosophy. Samar tells that his father used to read out stories from Mahabharat, explaining the "illusoriness of love and attachment" (71). Samar's father's desire to retreat to Pondicherry ashram after Samar's mother's demise was also an attempt to develop detachment (8). Many Indians consciously or unconsciously give utmost importance to religious practices more than anything else.

Samar's mother always carried small idols of Krishna and Rama along with her rosary beads and religious books:

These things had accompanied her all her life; they had made up her world; but it was not until I came across the heavily annotated Hindu calendar she kept hung in her room all her life that I realized how inviolably whole that world had been to her. It had been a realm of existence over and above her sorrows and disappointments on the material plane, a world with its own rhythms and seasons, virtues and habits. Nagh, Aasharh, Phagun, Sankrant, Amavasya, Nau Ratri: the sonorous poetry of these Sanskrit names, the musical chiming of these months, festivals and fasting days – they had brought a subliminal order to her time on earth; they had measured out, and made bearable, her life. (70-71)

Samar's mother chooses to live in an ashram in Benares when she realizes that she does not have much longer to live and the decision is in tune with the Indian tradition (68-69). Fascination of an Indian for the Himalayas is also shown in the novel. Samar always likes the grandeur and serenity of the Himalayas (129). When he later settles in Dharamasala, he finds it an isolated place ideal for the nourishment of his detachment. Placid life at Dahramasala was not very far from the life of a retreat (239).

Catherine fails to understand the significance of detachment or renunciation. Commenting on the life of renunciation of a young priest at Kalpi, Catherine tells that she finds it as “empty, hollow. There is no love in it. It's a life without love. What's interesting about it? Nothing” (131) Catherine says, whereas Samar finds it as “an interesting life” (131). After giving Samar his first experience in sex, Catherine with a giggle tells “But I am happy.... That you are not following your father's footsteps any more, that you are not a celibate Babaji any more” (143). Mark also shares this difference in attitude:

There is another thing I realize. It's that we are made of flesh and bone and the flesh is the most important thing we have. You know, you realize after some time what a load of bull shit ... all these great religions and philosophies are, this thing about solitude and loneliness being good for your spiritual and artistic growth. So you end up starving yourself in every way, waiting and hoping for this truly awesome spiritual jackpot that never comes, and then one day you are down there all alone on Manikarnika Ghat turning to ashes with not a single soul on the fucking planet who feel sorry for you.(237)

The difference of attitude between the West and the East is clear here and Samar says, “Mark's words even still rung in my head, as I couldn't but feel their alienness. I hadn't heard anyone speak like that for years now; the vocabulary, the concerns, the themes and the passion all came from another world” (238). Some westerners do like a radical assault on received knowledge (12) and they like to experiment with alternate ideology. Sarah the German lady is a “practicing Buddhist” (12). But many of these westerners do not fully comprehend the Oriental philosophy and soon would end up totally frustrated. So many Indians look askance at western seekers. But it is true that most of the western seekers follow a shallow pursuit.

Conclusion

The novels *The Romantics* and *Fasting, Feasting* show Westerners as pro-materialistic who could not comprehend the Oriental spiritual philosophy. A life of renunciation is empty and hollow for many of the Europeans. Most of the Indians are shown as having spiritual yearning which they take as more important than material achievements. Many of them observe rigorous religious practices such as fasting, chanting divine names and mantras and doing meditation. The novels also show the older generation in India as strictly adhering to religious practices while the young educated generation looks down on such practices as superstitious and worthless.

The religious practices of India cannot be easily understood by the west as the key concepts and philosophy of the orient is totally different from the west. The west due to the influence of Semitic religions like Christianity and Judaism has got a totally different philosophy which develops from their more or less similar theology. Semitic religions have got a hybridized philosophy of sin, meritorious deeds and reward. Daniel Boyarin in "Hybridity and Heresy: Apartheid Comparative Religion in Late Antiquity" observes: "The religious dialect map is a hybridized one, and the point is that hybridity extends even to those religious groups that would consider themselves "purely" Jewish or "purely" Christian in their self-understanding"(345). They do not have the concepts of detachment, equanimity and renunciation as in the common parlour of Oriental religions.

In Indian philosophy human beings are to follow the four paths of 'Brahmacharya', 'Grihastrama', 'Vanaprastha' and 'Sanyasa'. The elder people of India have such a teaching deep rooted in their conscious and unconscious mind. Mira-Masi in *Fasting, Feasting*, after her grihastrama gets into the other ashramas. She gradually engages herself in chanting and singing bhajans to the total renunciation of worldly pleasures. Mira-Masi takes a vegetarian meals only once a day and later she rejects cooked food and depends on fruits and nuts. Same is the case with the parents of Samar especially his mother in their later life. She is completely absorbed in her own religious practices and lives in an ashram. Yoga, chanting, meditation, bhajans etc help the mind to detach itself from the worldly pleasures including food and carnal desires. Detachment from the body consciousness leads to acquiring equanimity where pain and pleasure is taken in the same level-headedness.

Western characters like Catherine and Mark could not understand the value of such a life and they consider it as a life devoid of love. Actually it is not a life without love towards anyone. What happens here is the expansion of love towards the whole world. Attachment to individual love is overcome and unconditional love overflowing towards each and everything in this cosmos begin. It is the blissful consciousness of 'advaita' where no one else is different from the one who experiences it and therefore, it leads to an overwhelming love towards the entire cosmos.

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