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COLONIAL ANXIETY AND TRAUMA IN RABINDRANATH'S "HUNGRY STONES"

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Abstract

Rabindranath's "Hungry Stones," is generally perceived to be a tour de force supernatural story commanding our sense of wonder and mystery. By the sheer jugglery of incantatory poetic prose, he recreates a bygone era of romance, desire, and luxury. But although the story is told in the garb of the uncanny, it is, nonetheless, a powerful reflection of the precarious colonial condition marked by anxiety and worry. The story foregrounds how the process of British colonialisation set in motion crucial psychological repercussion and readjustment in the Indian natives who were faced with the dilemma of awareness– that the indigenous, pre-colonial cultural moorings and attitudes were inevitably being repressed and replaced by the alien culture of the colonisers.Indians living in that transitional phase of history experienced an anxiety, as a consequence of the Hobson's choice of acceding to the values upheld by the colonisers and relegating the prevailing value-systems and wishes to the terrain of the subconscious.What I want to mean is that the colonial situation and condition are always marked by a certain sense of anxiety arising out of the colonised subject's encounter with an alien but powerful culture and politics of the colonisers.

In Tagore's frequently translated short-story, "The Hungry Stones", the inescapable anxiety of the colonised mind is hinted at in the garb of a seemingly supernatural storyThe main protagonist of the story narrates his experience of what happened to him while he served as a Cotton Revenue Collector and incidentally stayed for a while in a deserted palace, built by Shah Mahmud as his house of pleasure. The writer and his cousin who met him in the Railway waiting room, at first took him for a North Indian Muslim. Significantly, this man is addressed as 'babu' at the beginning of the story. The word 'babu' is itself colonial in genesis and resonance. He belongs to the middle class which served the colonial masters as their trading partners, as intermediaries of revenue collection and by performing subordinate jobs in the imperial administration. The greatest beneficiary of the British rule, it was a class created by the colonisers. The narrator is an English educated aristocratic Muslim. The writer is a middle class colonial rationalist who does not believe in the irrational narrative of the Revenue Collector.

Worth noticing is the fact that the narrator speaks of himself, more than once, as a Revenue Collector who earns four hundred rupees a month as his salary. Clapping a "sola-toopee (hat) on my head like an Englishman" (Tagore, "Hungry Stones" 138), he goes to his office, "driving the trap myself" (138). In his capacity as an employee and in the context of his colonial existence, he sees at night, "the unseen mirage from two hundred and fifty years ago that had presented itself before me" (138). But he says, "Next morning the episode began to seem ridiculous" (138). But no sooner does the evening descend upon the earth than he begins to feel that the house is summoning him back. He keeps thinking that everybody in the deserted house will be waiting for him. "Who summoned me, I cannot say; but I kept thinking, it won't do to stay any longer, everybody will be waiting" (138).

Leaving his report unfinished, he drove back to the silent palace. The moment he pushed the door open and entered the great hall, he had the distinct feeling that

> I had caused an uproar–that a large gathering had suddenly broken up, and people were tumbling through the windows and out of the doors, fleeing where they could in every direction, down the terraces and corridors. In my astonishment, seeing nothing anywhere, I stayed exactly where I was. A rapture stole over my body; the mild scent of vanished perfumes and pomades, relics from another epoch, wafted past mynostrils. Standing there in that great dark empty room, amongst those long rows of ancient columns, I heard the gurgling of fountains upon the marble floor and the sound of sitars playing an unknown tune. Somewhere, a copper gong was striking the hour; from somewhere else came the ringing sound of anklets and gold jewellery; musical instruments were playing far away; crystal chandeliers tinkled in the breeze; bulbuls sang in cages on the terrace, and the palace cranes called in the garden, the whole weaving a ghostly music around me (139).

The collector loses his present identity as a colonial subject, hypnotised as he is in a different reality belonging to the past. A kind of schizophrenia seems to have gripped him, making him oblivious of his present consciousness and pushing him precariously in the dark terrains of his suppressed desires, in the labyrinth of the unconscious:

> I was in such a trance that I began to imagine that this ineffable, unattainable, unreal setting was the only reality on earth, that everything else was a mirage. That I was the person I was − So-and-so, eldest son of the late So-and-so, who earned a salary of four hundred and fifty rupees collecting cotton revenues, who went to his office every morning in a trap wearing a sola-toppe and a short jacket − all this seemed such an absurd, unfounded lie that I began to shout with laughter, standing in the middle ofthat great silent room. (139)

But the moment his servant entered the room with a lighted lamp, the uncanny world vanished and the narrator regained his present self. He had his meal of rich Muglai food, put out the lamp and went to bed. He soon drifted off to sleep. But he was awake again, with a clear sense that someone was nudging him, though he could not see anybody in the room. He sensed that a woman with five beringed fingers was beckoning him silently and gesturing him to follow her behind. He followed her stealthily with silent steps and hushed breath across the dark

passages and corridors, the sombre council-hall and airless chambers of that deserted palace. She had the knowledge in that eerie world of darkness that the woman she was following was from Arabia. "It seemed to me that a night from the Thousand and One Nights had transported itself here from the realms of fiction; that I was stealing through the narrow unlit alleyways of the sleeping city of Baghdad on a dark night, on my way to some perilous assignation." (140)

All of a sudden, his female guide stopped and he sensed that a gigantic Kafir eunuch lay drowsing at the foot of an indigo curtain. She stepped lightly over his legs and lifted up a corner of the curtain. All that the narrator could see in Persian rug-covered floor of the room was a seated female figure whose two beautifully shaped feet adorned in gold-worked slippers were resting on a cushion of pink velvet. On a table beside her, arranged on a blue crystal platter, were apples, pears, oranges, and bunches of grapes. Beside them, there were two wine glasses and a gold-encrusted decanter. An intoxicating scent of incense pervaded the room and it overcame him. With his heart pulsating fast, the narrator tried to climb over the eunuch's overstretched legs in expectation of getting near to that shadowy female figure. But the eunuch suddenly awoke, with his naked sword falling to the floor with a clatter. The narrator got startled at the sound of a piercing shout and found himself awakened from his dream on his camp-cot, drenched in seat. The waning moon had turned pale in the first light of the dawn and he saw the crazy Meher Ali marching down the empty road, shouting, 'stay away, stay away'. Every night, the touchless touch of a disembodied woman takes him from his colonial present to the world of imagination, to the fairy tales of the Arabian Nights.

The story fictionalises the conflict resulting from the narrator's dual existence. By birth he is a Muslim, drawn naturally to the mediaeval days of the dynastic rules of the Sultans. The deserted pleasure palace which is the locus of the past, recreates for him a world of crystal chandeliers, gurgling fountains, sweet perfumes, sonorous ghajals, the sounds of sitars, and the songs of bulbuls becoming one. It teases him out of his colonial profession and situation, opening up for him a world of liberty, a pre-colonial time of his imagination. But it is impossible for him to enter into this domain of history in his present capacity as a middle-class gentleman living in the colonised British India.

The Kafri eunuch is probably a personification of the colonised mind, knowledge, and habits. Anyone who wishes to cross the line set by this eunuch in order to reach the pre-colonial world of luxury and love, will be proved a misfit. One who could not negotiate with and reformulate the Conscious self in accordance with the colonising culture would be condemned to live in trauma. Meher Ali dared to disrupt the dominant colonial reality and tried to live in the subconscious, pre-colonial world and became mad. In fact, the encounter with British colonialism created a schism between the pre-colonial past, which, according to the Enlightenment ideologies of the colonial masters was irrational, and the colonial present, which was considered to be the repository of rationality. It is interesting to note that the *bhadhralok/babu class* accepted these Western views of modernity. The anxiety-ridden narrator tries to disown the pre-colonial past and the person who listens to the narrator's 'strange' story and shares the story with us, also dismisses it as utterly irrational, and hence, unconvincing: "The man took us for fools and had a good laugh at our expense. The story was all made up from beginning to end." (146)

The historical amnesia is necessary for the educated colonised to catch the train of progress, introduced by the advanced masters, the Western colonizers; and a negotiation with the

colonisers is materially beneficial and a politically correct decision. For at the end of the story, we come to know that "spotting our fellow traveller" (145), an Englishman cried out "Hullo" and invited him into his first class compartment, ascertaining perhaps the educated colonised's social mobility by becoming a comprador of the master.

Postcolonial criticism is a project aiming to analyse ideas and thoughts repressed in the individual psyche and history. Sigmund Freud used the word "uncanny" to explain "the feeling we get when experiences of childhood that have been repressed return to disrupt our everyday existence" (Huddart 78).The feeling of uncanniness is pervaded with a guilt-ridden past which someone faces even though s/he prefers to avoid it. For Freud, any repression is incomplete, so any past is always about to break-through into the present. The Revenue Collector moves from his colonial, anglicised reality to the pre-colonial Sultani regime of the mediaeval period. It is a journey into the buried, repressed history. The condition is colonial as expressed by Grace Nicholas in "We New World Blacks": "Whatever tongue / We speak/ the old ghost asserts itself / in dusky echoes" (qtd. in Nayar 56).

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