



Indianness in themes in Subramani's the Fantasy Eaters

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The Indian English writing manifests marked Indianness in theme fairly, effortlessly, largely because writers tend to reflect the society in which they live. An important criterion for Indianness in theme relates to the experiences described. A typical Indian theme is one with which a majority of Indians would or could empathize and identify with. Within the Indian context, most Indian English texts emphasize on the independence movement or partition of India, India's modern destiny, political and religious problems, social change and cultural transformation, the peripheral and dynamic effects of progress on the community, the breakdown of the joint family, nostalgic reminiscence, the conflict between ancestral orthodoxy and rebellious individualism, marital relationship, the search for order and integration, fusion of modern and traditional value, contemporary alienation and existentialism, conflicts because of two extremes: tradition and modernity, struggle against cultural calamity, superstition, mysticism, the moral disruption caused by loss of identification, East-West encounter, cultural shocks and contrasts, Hindu metaphysics and western pragmatism, racial tensions and colonial conflict, Indian expatriatism, the effects of western values on Indian social relations and social codes, the living vitality of religious myth and social symbols, the operations of dharma, karma and moksha, involvement and renunciation, illusion and cross-cultural interaction, reality, etc. as their principal themes.

Disregard of material life is an important theme in *The Fantasy Eaters*. To make every honest effort to become economically independent is desirable, but there is hardly any need of amassing wealth. For it is a means to an end and not an end in itself. It is required for securing various amenities of life, and that can be done by spending it in the right way and not by hoarding or worshipping it.

To sacrifice oneself and all one's worldly interests for the welfare of others is the great pivot on which the life divine revolves always in motion and action and knows no stagnation. The consummation of its evolution consists in self realization, that the living recognition is the transitory. Material things are to be used and left behind as steps in a staircase and not to be treated as our permanent abodes. It has an inexhaustible store of sympathy, good advice and helpfulness to distribute freely among the suffering and struggling mankind, but its own sufferings and personal struggles have come to an end. Free from personal ambition and worldly anxiety, it is far even from the dreams of exploiting others for its own glorification and praise.

The development of the virtues of mercy and charity on the part of every individual would be a safeguard against any setback being given to those who were trying to regain what they had lost or attain to a new status in life higher than the one held by them before. These two virtues would benefit individuals to form themselves into a good, cultured society.

Differences of worldly position and ways of living may constitute reasonable ground for classifying people, but the so-called religious differences should not be any justifiable basis for dividing them. Real religious life can and does evolve in the human heart everywhere and it is a source of uniformity at all times. As regards the dogmas and doctrines; ninety-nine out of every hundred persons are mentally

unfit to think rightly about them. External rituals and ceremonial observances, mostly symbolical as they are, represent the preparatory, non-essential aspect of real religion. The idea of karma has been very crucial from the beginning of philosophic reflection. Surely one becomes good by good action, and bad by bad action'. When a man dies, the two things that accompany him are Vidya and karma. As per one's acts and conduct in this life, he gets his new life. Evolution of life goes on until salvation is attained.

Salvation or Mukti is life eternal and has nothing to do with continuance in endless time. No adequate account of Mukti can be given since it transcends the limitation with which human life is bound up. Therefore, the question of the nature of salvation, whether it is individual or universal, has no relevance or meaning when applied to life eternal, which is altogether a different life. The true object of life is to perform the karma assigned to one. One can transcend himself when he truthfully and obediently performs his karma in whatever condition.

Subramani's *The Fantasy Eaters* is, largely, based on the ideas of the above discussion. *The Fantasy Eaters* presents themes such as cultural and social changes, struggle for preserving distinctiveness of being Indian, faith in cultural and religious practices, rituals and traditions, conflict between past and present, immigrants experiences, faith in spirituality and disregard of materialism, conflict between tradition and modernity, belief in the theory of Karma, mysticism, cross cultural relationship and a sense of humanity. Though used in different ways, Subramani used these themes very creatively. In fact, Subramani has art of suggesting various things in a single situation. In this way, Subramani presents many themes in a single situation.

The whole book is based on the social and familial relationships among family members or community members or between Indians and Fijians. Society owes its strength to the presence of men who may not be able to discourse upon the meanings of charity and charitability but who do possess these virtues in their actual conduct. In the light of the above, it is they alone who deserve to be called men. Their mercy and justice will form the foundation-stone of society and their charity and charitability will cement and consolidate it.

On the mental plane also, charitability of disposition and good-will constitute the basic principles of social solidarity. Co-ordination of effort and concerted action presuppose mutual confidence and fellow-feeling. Life in society is a game of 'give' and 'take' both and not of 'take' alone. Social interests demand that besides directing one's charity towards seeing to nobody suffering from material want, one should also develop the habit of being charitably disposed in adjudging things pertaining to the mind.

The very first story 'Sautu' is about the social and familial relationship of an indentured labourer who loses his mental order because of his shattered family. His mind is overcome by Kanga's question "Is it true that a man's memory sharpens before death?"¹ He feels that his end is near. He cannot sleep. He has dreams: Ratni's madness, Ratni's dismembered limbs in machaan, he has feeling of unsupported. He feels pointlessness. Even without his family, the gods look old, ravaged, and hopeless. Subramani writes:

Now, sitting in front of the temple he saw how the protective armor had gradually disintegrated. The tenuous bond that existed among the disparate items of his daily life was breaking. More than ever he felt the pointlessness of daily rituals of toil and rest, prayer and persistence. Once they were, however, the only affirmation of his existence.²

Dhanpat shows his respect to other character like Bhairo, Tomasi, a Fijian and Bihari. When his father was brutally murdered, Manu felt sadly unsupported. The feeling becomes even deeper when

he realizes that his mother behaves mad like and stares with a terrible sight. At last, he finds consolation when his mother comes to the former state and caresses his forehead. He feels safety and exhilaration.

Nevertheless, there was a dim consoling hope in her voice. He noted that old anguish had vanished from her face as if something had snapped free. She squatted beside him, her hand caressing his forehead. It seemed to him for a moment that once again her life was entirely for his preservation. He felt strangely exhilarated and safe.³

'Marigolds' reflects on the marital relationship of Chetram and Dharma. Chetram's neurosis is related to the experience of girmit. The story is told in the first person who denies our suspicion about the reliability of the narrator, Chetram. He rationalizes his marital strife in terms of some abstract and tormented historicism and there by absolves his guilt. 'Kala' is also in the same line. Kala is in conflict with the affection. She reserves for her husband, Sukhen. The central motif explores the way human existence is like an abacus lined with balls of illusion, one succeeding another, unless one apprehends the existential nature of reality. Kala's seeming disaffection with her marriage and concomitant need for independence is not the beginning of her self-deception; it starts from the moment she weds surrogate divinity in the figure of Sukhen. Kala's childhood idealization of Krishna, epitomizing celestial prema is transmitted to her relationship with Sukhen. She puts him on a pedestal and worships him. Kala assumes the role of a latter day Mira Bai.

The theme of seeing thing, situations and characters and evaluating them through an Indian or Hindu eye is found in most of the stories. In 'Sautu' Bhairo believed that the wedding card was an odiously un-Hindu custom. Dhanpat considered his son Dhaniram a true Hindu and Somu an un-Hindu. Dhaniram remained throughout his life inviolate and a true Hindu and lived according to the Indian way of life. That is why Dhanpat could trust Dhaniram. Somu was considered as renegade by the villagers. 'Groundlings' is about the effects of cross-cultural interaction. The Indian narrator says,

The girl is dancing in the rain. Nubile and seductive, she is waiting to slide into her lover's arms in a most un-Hindu like fashion.⁴

In 'Tropical Traumas' the narrator faced an Indian girl who was resting in the sunlight sprawled on a beach towel. When she saw him, she went away like an injured minah. Dharma has absolute reverence for convention. But she is most un-Hindu in her contempt for trespassers. She despises her mother-in-law who she swears, is a demented witch and has come to destroy their house. During the whole day, her mother-in-law plays strange tricks with Dharma and laughs ghoulishly when the latter is not watching. Kala wants to be a true Indian wife. She sees in Sukhen the face of Krishna. She lives his life. She willingly submitted herself to his wishes. She was told that she must live for others. She lived for her parents then for her husband and now is living for the child. She believes that this is the role for a Hindu life. In fact she found much satisfaction in it. Even Sukhen admired the beauty of her inner life, her innocence and authenticity, her Indianness.

Another Indian quality, namely, mysticism is found in The Fantasy Eaters. For Indians the mystical tradition plays an important part in society. Indian mysticism means proper observance of customs and rituals that release people for task of controlling their inner life. For the society, it connotes a hierarchy in which those values alone are permanent which lead to spiritual realization. These events are positive that lead to Moksha. The world of Indo-Fijian was full of ghosts and demons and evil forces -bhoot, shaitan, and jadutona- that had to be pacified through a variety of precise ritual performances that would disappear with them. They continued to invoke, in incomprehensible language, the names of village and clan or caste deities for some blessing or to ward off an evil or

impeding misfortune. To cure headache, jaundice, fever or dog bite, they consulted the local magic man in whom they had faith; that was how things were done in India. They remembered Bhajans, devotional songs, which they sang with great fervor. In 'Sautu' characters observe Kali Puja. Bhairo was the protagonist in the rituals. He was in a trance, singing and dancing in complete abandon round and round the grotesque brass idol. Kashiram in 'Tell Me Where the Train Goes' tinkered with his harmonium for the most part of the morning and when everyone had lost interest he sang his favourite Bhajans. Manu finds peace and can pattern his thoughts in 'Kailas', the home of Shiva. Mrs. Gamalian takes shelter in mystical dream to escape from reality. She represents the picture of Heaven. The pundit chanted mantras when Mrs. Gamalian was in her coffin. She comes into life again and people gather around her to know what happened with her and to know their future. Mrs. Gamalian felt a bewildering sensation in her head as the flute players were transformed into so many Krishnas and the chorus girls into his maids. The gardener was Indra, the god of rain and she also saw Shiva. Gamalian also went to forests to attain Tantric knowledge and survived on goat milk and green chillies for five long years. He returned as a sadhu daubed in ashes and sandalwood paste, to cure the suffering of the slaves of the island. There were young women whose wombs had closed unexpectedly; well-to-do men with properties who had become victims of the malevolent designs of greedy relatives and children who peed in the dark and did not spit on it and thus the demons follow them to their homes. They all came to Gamalian's door. During his marriage ceremony, Anandi falls down. His mother is convinced that a mean influence is at work. She believes that it is Masiha, Anandi's grandfather. She immediately prepares an offering of cooked treacle. She arranges these carefully on a green banana leaf and invites the pundit to hurl a few couplets. Then a yogi arrived with a bundle of herbs. Anandi's mother prepares a brew of boiled herbs in a huge black pot. He is taken to the back of the house. The yogi chants incantations to the healing plants while mother pours the brew down his head. He is then driven to the sea in a taxi for a penitential dip. The yogi prescribes total abstinence for a month.

Then Anandi is taken to Muni Baba, an indentured labourer. He was sought by persons of every kind like politicians, policemen, football captains, gamblers, jealous housewives, hizras, bachelors, would-be headmasters, etc. His medications ranged from such usual elixirs as ashes raised from a dead man's entrails, cow piss, horse's milk, menstrual blood to common oils and condiments. Muni Baba, like any good Brahmin, had great fear of pollution.

Themes like social and cultural changes, faith in Indian tradition, and struggle for preserving Indian culture, immigrants' experiences, and disregard of material life are found throughout the book. The characters are always conscious about their history, disorder, disintegration and violation cause in them neurosis. To attain order they turn to different things. Some go to fantasy; some escape physically, some face reality; some die, some go to movie.

References

1. Subramani, (1988). The Fantasy Eaters, (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1988), Pp. 1.
2. Ibid., p-7
3. Ibid., p-18
4. Ibid., p-20