

# Souring dreams (Some post-Independence problems in former colonies: a statement and an example)

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**Abstract** - One of the novels written by the Nobel Prize winning Doris Lessing, *The Sweetest Dream* (Flamingo Paperback, 2001), presents the post-independence situation in a fictionalized African country as one of its themes. Many African countries were under colonial domination of European powers. Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Kenya were some of the British occupied- African countries, like India, Ceylon and other South Asian countries. All of them experienced exploitation of one kind or the other. We in India have noticed the impact of colonization on our economy and culture, and on our country's heritage, in general. The situation in the African countries had been more acute than in India. As the novels of Chinua Achebe testify, there had been a total or near-total deculturization of their native cultures and their near-total westernization. Things simply fell apart in these countries.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian situation was slightly better, though the exploitation was as wide. Perhaps because of stronger cultural roots or a well-organized intelligentsia, or maybe a more advanced civilization, India did not succumb to the colonial pressures to the same degree as the African Nations did. But in historical terms, Indians were already weakened economically and morally, so that Europeans did not have too much difficulty in overcoming the native powers and established their regime.

There was also a lot of difference in the way India got independence from the way many African countries did. Once again the intellectual and cultural heritage helped India become free without any armed conflict. Nations like Nigeria and Kenya were not so lucky. They were dogged by the myth of backwardness in terms of civilization: for the Europeans, Africa had, for long, been a 'dark continent'. Foreign forces or imported ideologies had to come to their rescue as they fought the British imperial powers for their freedom. Novels like *Kanthapura* present the comparatively peaceful means by which India attained Independence. In contrast we see bloody conflicts or emergence of insurgent outfits (like the Mau Mau in Kenya) such as are described in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*. Whatever differences one could notice in the post-independence situation maybe in terms of greater intensity of experience in the African countries and the longer time it has taken for some of the symptoms to come to surface in India. After over 50 years of independence, and after so much of visible development in industrial and technological sectors, India remains far behind many developed and even some developing countries in the field of health services, in literacy and in controlling the fast growing population and galloping poverty. Even now we hear of villages and hamlets which do not possess primary health centres, do not have a school for children, not even roads to connect them with the civilized world. No young person who has spent a great amount of money to qualify as doctor cares to

make a career in a village, away from the comforts of city life. No politician would sincerely strive to better the lot of the poor people: it serves him well to keep them poor and illiterate.

The greatest negative point is corruption. A time has come when corruption has become universal. Responsible and educated political leaders have publicly stated that corruption is a global phenomenon. Such statements and attitudes indicate complacency, and may also imply endorsement, making corruption a virtue, so that one who is not corrupt in public life is considered weak and incompetent. The newspapers and other media proclaim this every day. There is no need for it to get reflected in literature.

## II. OTHER NOVELS

But Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955), *A Handful of Rice* (1906), *The Coffee Dams* (1969), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) present these aspects clearly enough. With Harshad Mehtas all around us and with innumerable scams, from grass to Oil to IT, involving semi-literate political leaders to highly educated intellectuals, there is no need for fictional representation. All the same, Vikram Seth's *ASuitable Boy* (1993) deals with the days soon after Independence, and gives a satirical picture of national politics and caste system, particularly the conflict between the upper castes and the poorer castes. Vikas Sarup's *Q & A* (2005 - the source for the movie, *The Slumdog Millionaire*) presents life in the slums of Bombay: poverty and squalor, the crimes and the romances, male chauvinism and chivalry – all serve as the background against which the Quiz programme is played out.

## III. THE WHITE TIGER

Similarly, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) talks of class struggle and corruption in higher places: it tries to present a nation trying "to shed a history of poverty" and backwardness, and the rat race in which "whoever succeeds

is the hero" (*Jo jeetasikandar*, as the Hindi saying goes). The young hero, Balaram, learns the art of corruption through his association with his betters, and through murder and bribery rises to a strong position in the society. He rationalizes and defends his actions: he believes that his freedom (personal) was worth the loss of his entire family and worth all the crimes he had committed. The more recent *Revolution 2020* by Chetan Bhagat has as its theme love, personal ambition and corruption in political and educational fields. The cynical attitude of the people towards education, which should be establishing and maintaining values in the society emerging into the new century, is vitiated by bribery and political corruption. The situation in African countries is no different: Achebe's *A Man of the People* presents, like the later novels of Ngugi, a portrait of political corruption in Nigeria and Kenya respectively.

#### IV. DORIS LESSING

All these fictional presentations take one or two of the issues for treatment. Evidently these are all the common themes of the erstwhile colonies. But in Doris Lessing's novel, they all come together. While dealing with the spirit of the 1960s and the various factors that were weakening Communism, *The Sweetest Dream* devotes nearly 200 pages to the experiences in Zimlia, a thinly veiled version of Zimbabwe, from where Ms Lessing had been alienated and exiled for personal and political reasons. This is only a segment of the novel, but a significant segment in which some of the characters from the 'main' story participate, and the fallout from which reshapes the later part of the main narrative.

All the former colonies had enjoyed a different kind of economy to the industrial one the European powers imposed on them. People had an emotional bond with the land: the tiller of the soil in India, or the farmer in Zimbabwe, felt that they belonged to the land. The introduction of industrial economy, leading to consumer economy, gave rise to personal possessions, worship of money, and desecration and destruction of land and landscape, in the interest of profit. This is well brought out by Markandaya in *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Coffer Dams*. Here is Doris Lessing describing the bond between man and land:

...A hundred years ago the whites had arrived in a country the size of Spain, with a quarter of a million black people in all that enormous territory. You'd think – the *you* here is the Eye of History, from the future – that there had been no need to take anyone's land, with so much. But what that eye, using a commonsensical view, would be discounting were the pomp and greed of Empire. Besides, the whites wanted land to have and to hold, with tidy fences and clear-cut boundaries, while the blacks' attitude to land was that it was their mother and could not be individually owned. (357)

This passage also echoes the anguish of Rukmani and Nathan in *Nectar in a Sieve* when their land is taken away for the tannery.

The common people look forward fondly for a better tomorrow; they "had been promised everything by their rulers" (369) – food, a bit of literacy and a little more of health. There are the paltry sheds and huts of Africa, "wanting everything, lacking everything, and everywhere people ... working so hard to – well, what? To put a little plaster on an old weeping wound" (367). Here is a description of the pathetic condition of the school in Kwadere: the school Inspector, Mr Phini, comes visiting the 'school', only to find the buildings in poor condition, the teachers unqualified, and no text books nor exercise books. He is shocked:

Six buildings, each holding four class rooms, bursting with children, from small ones to young men and women. They were all exuberantly welcoming and all complained to the Representative from the higher places of power that they needed textbooks... There was neither a globe nor an atlas in the whole school. When he had asked, the children did not know what they were. (310)

And what about the hospital where Sylvia comes to work?

The path turned down a rocky slope and in front of her were some grass roofs supporting poles stuck in reddish earth, and a shed whose door was half open. A hen emerged from it. Other chicken lay on their sides under bushes, panting, their beaks open...

'Where is the hospital?'

'Here is the hospital'

Now Sylvia took in that lying around under the trees, bushes, or under the grass shelters, were people. Some were cripples. 'A long time, no doctor', said the youth, 'and now we have a doctor again'...

She made a quick tour of her patients lying about here and there... A dislocated shoulder... She put it back there and told the young man not to stay and rest, and not to use it for a bit, etc... (176-178)

In both cases, schools as well as hospitals, the bureaucrats are incompetent and corrupt and the politicians are too busy sharing power or amassing wealth to care for the common man or look to his needs.

#### V. SYLVIA'S NARRATION

Sylvia, the protagonist of this section of the narrative, is the daughter by a former marriage of Johnny's second wife, Phillida. She is nurtured and brought up by Frances and Julia, the first wife and the mother of the irresponsible communist leader Johnny. After Julia's death Sylvia volunteers to work in the hospital run by Christian missionaries in Kwadere. The patients are dying of Malaria, broken limbs and AIDS. She works with missionary zeal to do something for these poor patients. But she is defeated

because the authorities choose to close down the hospital. When the president of the country is busy making money, the other ministers cannot be far behind. Replying to a question from a Correspondent, Minister Franklin says, in justification of his acts:

“And why should we not own a farm? Am I to be barred from owning land because I am a Minister? And when I retire how shall I live? I must tell you, I would muchher be a simple farmer, living with my family on my own land.”  
(387)

This is not too different from Balaram’s attitude in *The White Tiger*. Franklin had learnt the ways of corruption, inspired by their president Comrade Ho. Towards the end of the narrative Sylvia is forced to go to him for getting visas for the two kids whose mother had died for want of medicine. The hospital had been closed based upon the misinformation given by cantankerous Rose about some ‘stolen equipment’ for the hospital. Since Franklin is not as bad as others in the matter of corruption and because he had admiration for Sylvia, he is persuaded to issue visas for the kids at her request.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Some of the youngsters who had been nurtured by Frances and had been fed at her dining table in the other part of the novel had their roles to play: Andrew, Geoffrey, Daniel, and Rose, and Franklin; they play out their roles and recede into the background. Their actions undermine the efforts of Sylvia, herself one of those youngsters. While she dies, her dreams remain in the shape of the two kids she hands over to Frances to be cared for. These dreams for the people of Zimlia are far more meaningful than the dreams of Johnny. They are the sweet dreams every newly independent nation has dreamt, and continues to dream. Sylvia’s dreams are for the welfare of the common man, whether it is in Zimlia, India or elsewhere. In that sense this segment of the novel assumes greater significance, because it connects directly to the title of the novel.

## REFERENCES

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