

Cultural Hegemony and Hybridity in Khushwant Singh's *Karma*

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Abstract

Karma is a short story by Indian author Khushwant Singh. In this short story the writer has deftly mastered the skills of criticizing the Indians who hate or demean their own culture, especially the diaspora ones. Diasporas are the people who migrate from their motherland to other countries for various purposes. (Bill Ashcroft et. al. 2013) Exposure to multiple cultures make them ambivalent. They feel themselves lost in diverse cultural encounters. They suffer in inferiority complex. Being in different high cultural atmosphere they tend to hide their own self-felt low cultural identity. This cultural hegemony leads them to dilemma- a state of ambivalence in them. This identity crisis results in seer mimicry of the western culture. Mimicry is the process of reproducing as the almost same but not the quite. (Homi Bhabha, 1994) Through mimicking they alienate themselves from their own culture. The protagonist Mohan Lal is the exemplary instance of all the matters of discussion. This paper will investigate that the central character Sir Mohan Lal is an anglophile and a mimic man who through showing positive attitude towards British culture drives himself far from his own Indian culture. This cultural hybridity and alienation bring untold miseries and troubles to him at the end. Mohan Lal, a hybrid, lost his identity in the long run and was thrown away for despising his own culture.

Keywords: Khushwant Singh, *Karma*, Mimicry, Hybridity, Anglophile, Cultural Alienation, Ambivalence, Hegemony.

Introduction: The Context of *Karma*

The term karma derives from Hinduism. Karma refers to the reward one gets either good or bad depending on his actions or deeds. Here, the title karma is about the protagonist Sir Mohan Lal who stayed in England for five years to study at the Oxford University and then returned to his motherland India to work as a barrister. He started to live English life even after coming back from Oxford and demonstrated a snobbish outlook to everything in India. He was ashamed of being Indian and spoke in English or Anglicized Hindustani. His attire was also British. Mohan Lal had only complaint and disgust about everything in India whereas he was mimicking every aspect of the British culture. Lady Lal, the traditional Indian woman and the wife of Sir Mohan Lal, falls victim to domination and negligence of her husband but sticks to her Indian identity. The story takes place on a train journey of Sir Mohan Lal and his wife Lachmi. Most of the events take place on the train station. Mohan Lal boarded his wife to a general compartment while he was travelling on a first-class compartment with a view to meeting Englishmen. After seeing two British soldiers on the platform he calls them in oxford accent. But to his utter astonishment Mohan Lal was humiliated and thrown out of the compartment. Lying on the platform he saw his wife in the general compartment passing by.

Literature Review

Khushwant Singh's *Karma* can be investigated from various post-colonial perspectives. Adequate researches have been undertaken to address the colonial and post-colonial issues. Yet there are issues that can be reinvestigated. Singh's short story *Karma* is rich in research elements. Various modern theories have been applied by researchers. Arup Chandra Das (2017) has conducted research on mimicry and hybridity in Singh's *Karma*. In his paper he showed the central character Mohan Lal as a mimic man who loves to imitate Englishmen and to him everything in India is dirty and vulgar. Das did not talk about cultural alienation and maltreatment of women. Lamia Khalil Hammad (2016) published an article on cultural alienation in Khushwant Singh's *Karma*. She substantiated how cultural alienation happened using theories. Maheswari (2018) in her critical analysis of Khushwant Singh's *Karma* did a splendid job of portraying humiliation towards Indian culture. Dr. Praveen Mirdha (2021) in his research paper tries to address issues in *Karma* from post-colonial perspectives. He conducted a post-colonial study on *Karma* through

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mirroring and mimicking. Above all, I feel it necessary to conduct research on *Karma* to address the issues like maltreatment of women and own culture because of mimicry and hybridity. My paper will investigate how cultural hegemony compelled Sir Mohan Lal to mimic and brought hybridity in him which later resulted in identity crisis. This paper will also discuss the common topics of post-colonial issues.

Methodology

To carry out this research the short story *Karma* by Khushwant Singh has been used as a primary source. Other than the primary source help of so many secondary sources has been taken. Various books and online journals have played vital role as secondary sources to conduct this research paper. Textual analysis mainly served as the prime method of this paper. Post-colonial theories were also the key tools of carrying out this research paper.

Discussion

Karma (1989) the short story begins in a first-class waiting room on the platform where we see Sir Mohan Lal talking to the mirror and cursing everything in India. This is just the beginning of love towards English things and hatred for everything that belongs to India. Mohan Lal's forty-five years in India vanishes to five years in England where he had acquired the manners and attitudes of higher-class people. It took only five years to start humiliating own culture of forty-five years. The protagonist took only five years to embrace the foreign culture and mimic it till he lost himself completely and come to reality being thrown out by the British soldiers. Embracing English culture and abandoning Indian culture can be traced out in these lines. 'In his five years abroad, Sir Mohan had acquired the manners and attitudes of the upper classes. He rarely spoke Hindustani. When he did, it was like an Englishman's—only the very necessary words and properly anglicized.' (Singh 1989: 9) The author begins the story at a platform in front of a mirror where Sir Mohan Lal was expressing his hatred and resentment for all the aspects of Indian culture.

In Khushwant Singh's *Karma*, Mohan Lal was talking to the mirror that "You are so very much like everything else in this country—inefficient, dirty, indifferent," he murmured. (1989:8) It is a fine example of cultural alienation and at the end of the conversation we see Mohan Lal

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talking very high of himself for using British things. “You are a bit all right, old chap,” it said. “Distinguished, efficient—even handsome. That neatly trimmed mustache, the suit from Saville Row with the carnation in the buttonhole, the aroma of eau de cologne, talcum powder and scented soap all about you! Yes, old fellow, you are a bit of all right.” (Singh 1989: 8) Singh in his short story perfectly portrayed how the central character played multiple roles of abandoning, mimicking and being a hybrid at the end and lost his self-identity. Mohan Lal gave up his own Indian culture and became an anglophile through mimicking English culture.

This cultural hegemony of the colonizer made Mohan Lal a hybrid. Cultural hybridity of Sir Mohan Lal brought miseries and engulfed his own cultural persona. Cultural alienation made Mohan Lal a hybrid and a mimic man at the same time. Imitating foreign lifestyle made Mohan Lal a complete jerk. He even did not treat his wife Lachmi properly and live in the same floor. He would like Piccadilly prostitutes over his own wife. ‘Worth far more than the forty-five in India with his dirty, vulgar countrymen, with sordid details of the road to success, of nocturnal visits to the upper story and all-too-brief sexual acts with obese old Lachmi, smelling of sweat and raw onions.’ (Singh 1989: 11) From this line Mohan Lal’s maltreatment towards Indian women is evident. Mimicry and hybridity have made the protagonist of the story Karma an ambivalent and culturally alienated him from his countrymen.

Alienated from own culture Mohan Lal started to dislike everything in India. That is why he humiliated own culture and maltreated Lady Lal. On the other hand, Lady Lal an ordinary Indian woman in the third-class compartment made herself comfortable and was at ease. Nothing disturbed her peace of mind. She was the representative of native culture. Theologically in karma good deeds get rewarded and bad gets punished. Sir Mohan Lal gets his karma accordingly being thrown out of the train by the people he would mimic. According to Vasant Sahane as in Arup Chandra (2017) Karma is the destiny that punishes a wrongdoer. The central character faces that ultimate destiny at the end.

In his post-colonial studies essay *Of Mimicry and Man* Homi Bhaba (1994) comments that the colonized subject is bound to mimic the colonizer by imitating their culture and values. The colonized subjects adopt the language, dress and cultural habits of the colonizer. Expecting to be in the same power the members of the colonized society follow the rich culture of the colonizer and ignore their own culture intentionally since they think their culture is inferior. They suffer in

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inferiority complex. But in reality, none can be identified equally with his masters even if one blindly follows his masters. The same has happened to the central character of Singh's short story *Karma*. Sir Mohan Lal in his five years in Oxford came in contact with high cultures and adopted it neglecting his own culture expecting to enjoy same privileges and be treated equally by the Englishmen. His lifestyle was completely different from Indian despite living in India. He led an English life after coming back from Oxford. Years of mimicking and instilling British culture in him in India made him to assimilate in foreign culture. Mohan Lal could neither be an Indian nor English.

Mohan Lal, at the first-class waiting room, was thrilled at the prospect of meeting British officers since there was a cantonment nearby. He groomed himself in British manner and tried scotch as he knew whiskey never failed with the English man. On the train, he was alone in the first-class compartment. Seeing two British soldiers coming he was happy at the prospect of a good conversation since he could talk on every subject. Mohan Lal decided to welcome the soldiers. One of the soldiers noticed unoccupied berth in the first-class compartment and called his companion. "Ere, Bill" he shouted. "One ere." They saw Sir Mohan Lal in there and muttered "Get the nigger out. They came in and asked half-smiling and half-protesting Mohan Lal to get out of the compartment. "Ek dum jao-get out!" Sir Mohan Lal protested in Oxford accent. (Singh 1989: 12) The soldiers were surprised at the British accent of Mohan Lal. But it was too much for their inebriated air. They threw his suitcase and flung him out of the train. Sir Mohan Lal landed on his suitcase. As the train gathered speed Mohan Lal saw Lachmi through the window of the third-class compartment passing by him undisturbed.

Conclusion

Hybridity in Sir Mohan Lal incurred him a great deal in the end. He lost his identity, maltreated woman and own culture. Mimicry of foreign culture could not bring him any benefits rather was humiliated at the hands of his imitators. It is evident that the author of *Karma* created the character Sir Mohan Lal to mock all who hate their native culture and mimic others' culture. Mimicry results in ambivalence creating dilemma in person. An ambivalent suffering from inferiority complex starts mimicking the rich culture he or she comes across even for the shortest period of time hoping to enjoy the same status and power of the imitators. But, their reveries get

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crushed when reality is exposed. Singh appropriately created ironical character Sir Mohan Lal to justify the above statement. Reality hits Sir Mohan Lal at the end of the story when he was thrown out of the train by the British soldiers. He was at a loss. He could not believe what just happened with him. His actions got rewarded accordingly at last.

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