

Nations within a Nation: A Study of *The Great Indian Tee and Snakes*

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Abstract

The postcolonial nations face many problems since the colonizers left the countries. The tasks for the postcolonial authors are to deal with these issues in the realistic manner to bring verisimilitude in their depiction of contemporary Indian society. Many have given a gruesome bleak picture that presents the heinous side of a secular multicultural country. The present paper focuses on how the story paints the darker side of such nation that is an ineradicable stigma on the claims for Vasudevakutumbakam.

Key Words: Religious Violence, Gender Discrimination, Caste, Nation and Nationalism

Hinduism is a faith so usual that it is the only major religion in the world that does not claim to be the true religion – Shashi Tharoor

The contemporary Indian authors have vividly delineated the picture of India in their works. The contemporary Indian regional and English literature is realistic in depicting the Indian society. People like Chetan Bhagat are sensitizing the issues of urban India while authors like Amish Tripathi, Devdutta Pattanaik and Ananda Nilkantha are reinventing and reinterpreting the Indian myth to revive ancient rich tradition of the culture which claims to be one of the oldest in the world. Like these widely read authors Kritika Pandey a young girl from Jharkhand won the overall commonwealth prize for the short story *The Great Indian Tee and Snakes* by depicting the burning issues that are being faced by Indians nowadays.

Over the ages the unity of India has been sustained, in any situation, which has

received the threat of extinction recently by some ideologues who harness the sensibilities of people who are blind to the history of the nation that has sheltered many religious communities willingly. After independence under the leadership of iron man Sardar Vallabhabhai Patel India was united and became one nation. Surprisingly this nation has many nations within it. Poverty, gender, caste, creed and religions are makers of many Indias within India. The poor, the minority communities, the lower caste communities do not feel that they are Indians. They feel and are treated like the outsiders. Instead of assimilating them in the main streams they are marginalized and victimized that caused a rift in the unity of the nation. The minority communities, women, the poor are ‘wretched of the earth’ (Frantz Fanon) in the postcolonial nations. Kritika Pandey’s story *The Great Indian Tee and Snakes* is a scathing attack on the asocial psyche of diabolical citizens who have given up the heritage of secularism.

The story is an amalgamation of various problems of Indian society that are very much prevalent in the nation, after independence they are aggravated by the present Hindutva ideology. The central characters in the story the boy and the girl are without names and this is a deliberate attempt of a writer to make the issues in the story universal. The Indians are divided by caste, creed, religion and political ideologies. These are some times the reasons for the victimization of the innocent. The people in power favour one ideology over another and miscreants and misuse the power to fulfill their vicious interests because they know that they are not going to be punished by the law since they have minimized the power entitled to the law. The incidents in the story include sarcasm over farming, caste conflict, religious jingoism, gender inequality.

The characters belonging to minor communities are at the periphery since the partition, they do not feel that India is their country and it is not their fault to feel so. Many incidents of the past riots strongly project that the communities in majority do not accept the minor communities as their fellow citizens.

The title of the story reads The Great Indian Tee and Snakes; the misspelling of the two words in the title is a deliberate attempt to show the Indian psyche under the influence of imperialism that has rendered the once colonized citizens the mimic men (Bhabha), who feel proud in using the English language with scanty knowledge. The girl's father wants the name of his bamboo hotel unique. Illiteracy of the painter makes the names ironically unique. It better be a nice and important name,' the girl's father had

told the painter, who could hardly spell, and so the tea and snacks stall was christened THE GREAT INDIAN TEE AND SNAKES. The painter had promised, 'Anyone who loves this country will love this name.' Some passersby point out the sign to each other and have a good laugh. Others nod in admiration of what they take to be high literary nonsense (3).

The poverty stricken rural farmers migrate to cities in search of work to survive. The owner of the farmland disowns his traditional profession farming because of whimsical Monsoon. He is the representative of such people who leave their motherland in the hope of better earning opportunities only to be frustrated and forced to live on small wages and in adverse conditions in slums. The short story writer says, 'It was raining less and less each year. For a while, he tried to find work at the department store with glass walls, live in a house with bedrooms. Then he gave up. He got bamboo sticks and tarpaulin and set up the stall outside their shack' (3). They do not hope that the situation will change after electing the government of different ideology. It means their pathetic situation will remain as it is despite change in the political parties. It reminds the readers the statement by George Orwell in Animal Farm all animals are equal but some are more equal (59)

The girl in the story is an unexpected child for her father, she is happy for the fact that her father did not kill her in the womb of her mother. This incident largely comments on patriarchal society in India where parents in educated and rich families also expect a male child as the owner of hereditary. This fact is very much clear from the ratio of

male child and female child. In India it is one thousand to Nine Hundred. India girls are forced to marry the boy of her family's choice. They want to expand their horizon but they cannot. Even girls have not been sent for higher education because if they get higher degrees parents will find it difficult to get bridegroom for them. When the girl goes to do Mehandi on the palms of bridegrooms she experience that a girl does not have any freedom. She interacts with one would be wife who does not remember her would be husband's name. The astonishingly asks her, 'What do you want to do then?'

'Paint pictures of the sky.'

'You can do that even if you're married.'

'I can do that even if I'm not.'

'But why the sky?'

'Because it is infinite.' (5)

The infinite things are not for Indian girls. Indian society is strictly against love inter-caste and interreligious marriages. That is why we come across news of honour killings. The girl in the story is not allowed to continue education as one girl from her school elopes with her boyfriend. She cannot pursue her dreams under the weight of tradition. She helps her father in his work. But she does not have any freedom to do anything on her own. It becomes crystal clear from the story when the author writes, 'Nevertheless, as far as the keema-eater is concerned, the girl must not get ahead of herself. Her father doesn't need to tell her that girls with black bindis are not supposed to feel this way about boys in white skull caps. She knows' (7). She wants to be like Beyonce – a famous American singer. She cut her photo from the newspaper to keep her passion alive.

The boy in the story is the protagonist. He is also forced to work at tender age instead of education due to extreme poverty in which many minority communities are in India. For them education is an unaffordable luxury. Everyday existence is more challenging than pursuing education. He waters the plants in the garden of a rich man for six hundred rupees per month. The meager income will not allow him to eat four square meals so he frequents the stall to eat snacks as meal. The boy likes to eat Keema samosa which is on menu of the stall to make more profit. The father of the girl does not like the idea of serving tea to the boy in ceramic cup as he feels that his saliva on the cup will contaminate his religion. The girl develops affinity for the boy so she tries to serve him in the best possible way available to her. The girl is in love with the boy this is clear from the fact that she preserves his cups under the banyan tree.

She gets a chance to open her heart to him at a grocery shop when she goes there to purchase sugar. Her feelings are reciprocated by the boy in the same ways. The boy has a desire to become a doctor because his mother suffers from TB. He innocently tells the works that he will treat them too. He does not realize that he belongs to a different religion which is deemed as an enemy.

One day a group of people belonging to Hindutva ideology appear at the stall. They intimidate him to wear saffron colour around his shoulder instead of his regular cap. The boy follows the instructions without any grudge. The group becomes happy and asked him to eat aloo samosa instead of Keema samosa. When the boy refuses to do so, the group gets angry. They are joined by

the workers. They beat the boy mercilessly. It happens in the broad day light. No one comes to save the boy. The boy succumbs to the injuries and dies on the spot. This is any example of mob lynching incidents that occur in the recent past in India. The girl adds cardamom in the tea of the boy. She fears that the Prime Minister might not like her act because numbers of posters of his face are hung and pasted everywhere around her. People are constantly under the fear of surveillance just as in the world of George Orwell, 1984 "Big Brother" (3) watches the people all the time.

After witnessing the murder of the boy the girl cannot bear the loss. She tries to forget him by accepting too many Mehandi assignments. The girl tries to fall in love with another boy but she cannot. She goes to the banyan tree to see the cups of the boy. It is impossible for her to live without the boy.

The people, who are frustrated, dejected, defeated, try to sooth themselves by gathering in the garden and laughing a lot. Their act is simply to hide their everyday anxieties and worries. These people gather in the garden besides the status of Mahatma Gandhi and laugh artificially to claim that all is well which is not well at all. The girl looks at the shallow laughter incidents. One of them men invites her to join the laughter club and to laugh with them. At the beginning she hesitates to join them.

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Eventually she joins the group and laughs with them mechanically. The man asks her.

‘So, young lady, are you happy now?’

She looks at the beads of sweat on his forehead, laughter lines around his mouth.

‘Are you?’ she asks. (10)

This question is asked to every India reader strategically. The story ends with the rhetorical question that is very thought provoking. Thus the story is the poignant attack on religion, political ideology, the so called progress. What has happened in the story is happening everyday across India. Certain groups of people are fearful about the religious hatred. The smallest and the slightest incidents in the story are figurative to talk about major issues in Indian society. The story highlights the age long problems that are hurdles in the real progress of our country. It indirectly forces the readers to contemplate on the issues, to change our outlook in reference to gender, caste, religion and political ideologies. If we remain adamant to change, they are going to pose a lethal threat to our existence. We cannot insist on Vasudevakutumbakam with minus one religion. As Benedict Anderson claims, let the people living in the nation for ages feel that it is their nation too irrespective of where they come from, to which ideology they belong and which god they worship. The story attempts to spread this message indirectly.

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