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Postmodern Bricolage: A Study of Rahul Bhattacharya's *The Sly Company of People who Care*

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This research paper analyses the Indian Contemporary novel *The Sly Company of People who Care* (2011) written by Rahul Bhattacharya. The novel won *The Hindu Literary Prize* for best fiction in 2011, *Royal Society of literature Ondaatje Prize* in 2012, selected as a *Kansas City Star* Best Fiction Book of the year and *Kirkus* Best Fiction Book of the year. The novel explores Guyana (Georgetown) where Africans, Portuguese, Chinese, Whites, Guyanese (West Indians), Amerindians (the indigenous people) and Indians (Indian Nationals) are thrown altogether. This paper analyses how another multicultural land is documented by an Indian writer. As it is a contemporary novel it is read under the tenets of Postmodernism.

Introduction

Postmodernism is the umbrella term used to denote the contemporary happenings. Primarily it is the period soon after post world war II worldwide. Secondly, the effect created by the war on human beings and their behaviour. Third, its impact on human artifacts including art, literature, culture etc. Its impact on literature particularly finds expression in novels. The novels of this period are named 'metafiction' by Linda Hutcheon (1998) as they carry small-narratives rather than 'meta-narratives' or 'grand narratives'. These fragmented narratives are caused by various types, one such type is the bricolage or mixture of genre. Eclecticism is the supposed best mode of finding solution to the contemporary issues. It is choosing the best from new and available sources as well. Rather than manufacturing individually, getting best parts of thing and assembling to get an assorted best out product is in trend. This can otherwise be called a compilation of fragments. Likewise in writing novel new mixtures are being experimented and turns out to be successful. In Indian writing in English Vikram Seth's *Golden Gate* (1986), is a mixture of poetry and novel. It won Sahitya Akademi Award. This mixture can otherwise be called a bricolage. Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novels too are an outcome of postmodern bricolage. Rahul Bhattacharya's *The Sly Company of People who Care* (2011) fuses travelogue and fiction. As the blurb says: it is "A deft synthesis of travelogue and Bildungsroman, by turns antic and introspective ...so satisfying" (Wall Street Journal). This mixture of fragmentary sensation is achieved in this novel. It is a perfect mixture of reality and verse. The narrator is a sports reporter who spends a year off in Guyana. It presents a land which is materially postcolonial but spiritually devoid of the quest for self discovery. The people are still in the tempo of running away, fleeing and not withstanding and succeeding. In the process of seeking employment most of the Guyanese have converted to Christianity. And this migration is the easiest mode of economic upliftment for converted Christians. This journalist writes on his one year off (2002) in Guyana. It is his travel tale. In the first part of the novel Geographical exploration prevails. It is an account of another man of the similar postcolonial backdrop.

Guyana is full of drenched forests, decaying houses filled with Indian and African characters. This novel is considered a great local fiction by an outsider. It carries fun and sadness as well. The novel is full of passing numerous characters. The only holding link is its narrator. The First half of the novel describes about flora, fauna and geographical details. The remaining half tells about the journalist's fall in love for the coolie girl Jan.

Mr. Bhombal, a water-work technician is an Indian national. He had 'gloomy eyes', 'melancholy face', 'drooping eyebrows', and 'defeated lips'. He is fighting to defeat the defeat. It is a multi ethnic ambience in Guyana. The street had Chine, Buck, Coolie, Blackman. 'Arse' and 'Fuck' are the very common colloquial derogatory words commonly used in the novel. It is the Creoles- English that is used more than Standard English. In the struggle of sustaining the life, brutalities have become unaccountable. The Lawyer who won the Lady's care killed her child suspecting that it was by a black man. But she claimed that the child choked on his vomit and won the case too. The lawyer was a Putagee – of Portuguese extraction. The Portuguese had come to Guyana as indentured labourers even before Indians and Chinese. They are light skinned, independent-minded, of high-ranks. They look at race as something they were not a part of.

The narration starts with avid description of Georgetown. The reporter saw Baby who has come out of prison for he murdered a companion with his cutlass during his journey of Diamond hunting. Action Jackson is the husband of the reporter's landlady. Rabindranauth Latchman and Action Jack are waging a cold war over a small patch of land. Rahul Bhattacharya's narration leads to a new visualization and curiosity. But the tenements are not in good condition, so it earned low rent. The reporter stayed in the upper storey. The other tenants are Hass, the dead-eyed minibus driver, a pair of busty Indian-Chinese cashiers, Kwesi the youthman, who did electrical odd jobs, and he frequently makes pining phone calls and a secret couple.

Another character is Uncle Lance. According to Uncle Lance economically India is growing. He asks: "How about Delhi? Is a rape there every one minute, rass. Rape Capital of the World" (SCPC 10). Rahul Bhattacharya is highly prophetic about Delhi's notoriety in 2011 itself which was proven to be true in due course. When the literary writers forebode such negatives it becomes a shock, a matter of contempt and later felt sorry for such current status.

Shops are run by different Sindhis. There is a shopping Mall which has Guyana's First ever escalator. There is the cricket ground. These common laymen of Guyana are very much practical. For a day or two the reporter drifted in camp and street. Then he reached Georgetown. He inquired about the murder done by Baby with the man by the prison gate. He replied that Magistrate Van Cooten is dead for twenty years.

Pork Knocking was attempted by many. Even a single piece of Diamond can change one's life forever. Hustlers were there, the trade of aphrodisiacs and sex oils were there. He passed Mandirs, the new cricket stadium being constructed by the government of Indian Nationals. The reader comes to know that Guyana's economical hard time is due to the low price of Bauxite, sugar, and timber. Only Gold and Diamond could do well. The interior of Guyana is not a fixed one. It may be savannah, swamp, jungle and plateau. It could begin anywhere as well as end. At fifty eight miles they stopped for late lunch with deer curry. He passed the longest Pontoon bridge in Demerara. His poetic narration states that the forest is tugging at each other.

The bus ride gets over, and then he gets into a jeep. The narration is carried on with fun:

So Everard tell Everton about Neil Armstrong. Everton ask, who, the same Armstrongs from St Andrew's parish? No, boy, say Everard, the Armstrong fella who climb the moon. So next time they go climb the sun, Everton ask. Boy, Everton, is too hot up there. Hear what Everton say: so why they cyan go at night? (SCPS 32)

Guyana used to grow its own coffee indeed. It was the first plantation. This novel tells the story of being idyllic.

Their travel continues in a motor boat in the river. On the either sides of the river the multiple shades of green talks off vegetation. The reporter made the reason for his trip that to come to Kaieteur National Park for doing the study of certain specimen like plant etc. If he is about to fly over he needn't to get permit, but to go through the land he has to. Travis is their boatman. His grandfather is from Patamona tribe. Travis and his brother did not speak Patamona because they were a cross. Next they climbed for nearly three hours, and they are soaked in the humidity of the forest. Next landing is in Menzies. He met a few more people they are Dr. Red and Mr. Johnson. The following quote proves the blend of poetry and reality:

At night I took a last dip in the Potaro, cool and brown in the morning at Pamela Landing, hot and foaming at the head of the falls in the evening, now red and viscous in twilight. (SCPC 45)

The continent is re-entered from the slender slit that is the Moruka. The boat wends through forest. The high trees drop off to walls of mokamoka bush, wild and arrowshaped. The mokamoka recede to savannah of bisibisi, thick, reedish, bright green there... (SCPC 207)

The condition of a postmodern traveler is exactly narrated as follows:

I returned to the settlement. And here we stopped awhile, Baby and I, among the shops of the Siddiques and Big Leaf, among Nasty, Dacta Red, Roots and Labba and other creatures like us, alone, amiss and awander. (SCPC 45)

Another keen observation is that Brazilian miners invade Guyana. They sexually abuse the native wives. The author states that it was the uniform, universal contempt for indigenous peoples everywhere (47).

There were so many mixed bloods. Because of the biological mixture of different communities there is redness of the skin among the Guyanese people. Another postmodern feature of people is that they are highly brutal for the sake of earning money and saving their women. For instance of the later kind a blackman wanted to fuck a buck girl, when he attempted it he was chopped thirty two times by a cutlass by the other buckman. Brutality is proved by flourishing serial killers like Watusi. "In the papers one read about murders between brothers, between couples, over a game of dominoes...murders by hot oil of broken bottles" (100 SCPC). Another observation is that the people didn't like the town despite the frequent talk about it. They enjoyed the bush life, everyone was a hero. They thought that they could do anything, turn film star, fly fighter jet, fuck the greatest women, and open Casino in Brazil. The filthy mind of a

postmodern, postcolonial man is vivid. Women are yet to find out what they are to these men. Ganja is an inbuilt part of their lives. Guyanese English in a mixture of Creolese and English. Roots used 'overstand' for 'understand' and 'shitstem' for 'system'. 'He ate ital' instead 'He ate it all', 'I going fly ome' instead 'I am going to fly home'. Throughout the novel Guyanese's English register is followed, that requires more reading time for comprehension. This is Indian novelist's serious attempt to register Guyanese's English variant. The familiar vocabulary looks alien while reading the novel due to local dialect mingling.

Another common source of earning is Pork – Knocking. They are strictly alcoholic and Polygamists. Reggae and Soca are common night time enjoyments. Postmodernism in post colonial land partly exhibits the wound created by colonialism and its affectation on economy. Guyana is still one of the most impoverished regions of the entire universe. The educated have realized to flee away and not to compete with the barrenness and establish. Almost eighty percent of the educated fled away. This craze to flee away from their own land made Jan to fall for the protagonist. The relationship is neither for love nor for sex. It is for money and to flee away from her destiny in her own motherland. The novel creates postmodern blur of reality and fiction with the surprise that a postcolonial land is depicted devoid of irony. In the process of flying away from their own homeland India has attained saturation which paves way to establishing Indian Brands overseas particularly in service sector. Rahul Bhattacharya has abnormally juxtaposed the words 'silent' and 'noise' in the following narration: "Fragrant transparent water ran in them with silent noise". (SCPC 75)

Author is non – satiric about Guyana but he mocks at the general mankind as:

We weren't like the ants. They had collective insight and collective force. Man was doomed to be subservient to his personality.

There is no development of plot. It is a flat one containing the description of the different parts, people, life, poverty, condition, forest, water of Guyana. Except the reporter and Jan all the other characters are flat and short lived. Tony, the guide is another man of Indian descent. His grandfather was a Pandit, he had repatriated to India. But his village had not accepted him. The story never tells the reporter's name, it is the generalized common noun the sports reporter. He is affected by low grade dengue fever. While he was sick he is nostalgic about his parents. His mother died of infirmity and his father due to sadness. When he says that this Guyana trip is aimed at writing a feature to "National Geographic", it clarifies that it is an intended travelogue. This self reflexivity blurs the dividing line between reality and fiction.

The libraries in Georgetown are in a very poor condition. Self education is yet to free itself from colonial bounds. The narrator finds most of the things 'tacky', 'duttiest' that denotes the poverty and slowness of the country as the title suggests 'sly'. The novel is made up of quite a few small narratives which tell about the life in Guyana, and how the hard work is swayed by misfortune etc. Though the author is never satiric about Guyana, he never fails in self mocking of his land. Self –Mocking is an inbuilt Pattern of postmodern novels, the author never failed to mock at his mother land and its practices. He mocks at the different postures of Yoga. He highlights the drastically changed version of Indian cinema from reality, the language is different, and the names are different. He mocks: "What a strange India does the Indian National come from!" (109). Guyana has the highest suicide rate; a psychiatrist explains the socio-economic reasons. Because Guyana was the poorest state, it was hard to make any living. There

is little recreation in the country besides drinking. As the author is wearied of his mundane routine, he takes off in Guyana. This is the postmodern condition everywhere. This pleasure out of being idle could not be achieved in one's own place. The class division that could be understood from the novel is whether working or idle.

The people are closely associated with the land like Indians. Hibiscus, frangipani, marigold, low fruit bush, cherry, lime, jandhis, bamboo, mandhir in the front yard. Peas, bhaji, boulangee, squash, yam, sweet potato, aloe, tulsi, mango, coconut, fowl were in the backyard. The prominent danger is that the earth lay just below sea level, so the threat of flood is constant.

When the narration presents the history of Guyana, it can be considered as historiographic meta-fiction. Guyana was primarily colonized by Dutch and then by English. To build an extensive network of Dams, canals, the Amerindians were brought as coolies, they proved to be slippery. Then the slaves from Africa were imported. Africans sold Africans for cloth, weapons, and utensils, "upon arrival the slaves were stripped naked for examination and sold to planters" (SCPS 114). Then the colony under British was abolished at 1834 with four more years of apprenticeship. At this stage, planters benefitted and not the slaves. By the end of the apprenticeship, the slaves left the plantation. Rahul Bhattacharya has presented ample chronology of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial strata of the nation to the reader for better comprehension. With no money they formed the village; each person was eligible for equal share. Gradually there emerged a serving class i.e. low-level civil servants, policemen, nurses, and teachers.

Coolies from India kept on coming; at one stage they outnumbered the Africans in Guyana. In order to stop repatriating the coolies were offered land, thus Indian community flourished. The natives' hatred against the new settlers is quite common:

At worst the Africans saw the Indians as illiterate, barefooted, clannish heathens, misers who hoarded coins under their bed, who had strange customs and rituals and wore strange uncivilized costumes, who spread dung on the walls and floors of their homes, stunted, thin-limbed and shifty-eyed. At worst the Indians saw the Africans as the condemned: ugly, black of skin, with wide noses and twisted coir for hair, mimics of the white masters, without a language, culture or religion of their own, frivolous, promiscuous, violent, lazy. (SCPC 120)

The Postmodern way of looking at things that is everything is manmade is very oblique in the narrative. Author writes: "And the society which had seemed to me so accidental was once made in the most deliberately manufactured way possible." (SCPC 121)

Ramotar Seven Curry, a short man accompanied the sport reporter to attend the different kinds of weddings that took place in Guyana. Seven Curry was the Hindu Ceremony food of Guyana. Particularly the Indian descent male is in want of an Indian wife. As a typical travelogue this describes in plenty about the different cuisine that is a part of Guyana weddings.

There are two political parties one of African and another of Indian. They were one against their English masters, but race split them. Its leaders are Cheddi Jagan and Burnham. Cheddi Jagan was an Indian, America trained dentist. Forbes Burnham, an African, a London – educated Lawyer. For twenty – one year Burnham ruled Guyana and was helped by America and

Britain. He alienated Indians. In 1992 a fair election came and Jagan won. Indian party stayed in power. 2002 Jailbreak was an important occurrence; it was more a political and racial thing. They set up a camp to tutor a group of youth soldiers. Guns were put in their hands and Ganja in their mouth and ideology in their minds. They ravage the Police and Indians. The leader of this group is Douglas. These black freedom fighters demand government expenditure not only in Cricket and squash but also in athletics, football, boxing, basketball, music and art.

Roger Khan (Shaheed Khan) was a tycoon. He went young to the United States at the age of twenty two. He was involved in drug and gun running. In 1994 he fled to Guyana, he was a wanted man in USA ever since. His principal business was Cocaine, a huge trade in Guyana; he got it from Atlantic. Roger Khan governed Phantom Squad. Particularly ex-lawmen were part of this group. Indians are particularly the businessmen. At one stage he was wanted by Americans for trafficking Cocaine. They got him. He is a fallen don. But, to much of the Indian Population, he is a folk hero and demigod as Andrew Douglas is to Americans. Both African Taliban and Phantom are the absurd manifestation of race struggle. "A section of society was disillusioned with the state so they turned to crime... The state's response was to suppress the moment with more crime" (SCPC 154). Africans and Indians are thrust against brutally in South America as 'Five for freedom' versus 'Phantom' and Blackies and his heirs versus Roger Khan and his Cohorts.

Conclusion

Unlike V.S. Naipaul who aimed at satisfying his western readers, Rahul Bhattacharya, a postmodern writer from a post colonial land, aims at the Universal readers rather than of particular region. From his statement, "Life was attitude to circumstance, no more no less" (SCPC 276) his universality is clearly understood. The third part of the novel is typically a fiction that narrates the affair in between the sports reporter and Janki. The reporter's wife and child are in India. And Jan's husband is Goldy Persaud, doing export business. In spite of the fact that they are already married and fathered and mothered a child, they fall in love with each other, celebrate their consummation of love, indulge in 'hurtsmanship' and depart. The main cause of the breakup of their relationship is the unreliability. What this traveler wanted is a physical companion and this girl wanted somebody to spend for her and an escape from Guyana. The novel carries unabashed narration of sex as in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*. Jan's mother Savitri turned Anglican, and lived with the man who converted her. In the first part of the narration it is a travelogue and in the second part it is a fiction. But it is hard to label it as a pure form of fiction.

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