

Monocled Indian: Stereotyping British Raj as Vitalising a Divided, Misogynist and Jingoist India in *The House of Blue Mangoes*

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The House of Blue Mangoes is a transsocial novel which straddles the realm of magic realism and the arabesque. Set in a fictitious small town, Chevathar in Kerela, the novel takes us through three generations of Dorai family which drift apart but remain connected in memories. Its progenitors appear to be different facets of a person who finds it challenging to accept his contradictory impulses. We move across a trajectory where individuals, their surroundings and socio-political circumstances, all coalesce to underline a unitarian world where people across continents have similar aspirations, hopes and sorrow; what keeps them from accepting and assimilating with each other is distance and ignorance of the other. The backdrop of the novel is India's pre-independence era. With humour and delightful candour, David Davidar shows us how myopia colours the European and the South Asian who do not realise that their bigotries impede progress and an egalitarian world. Defiance in the face of tradition and an obdurate unwillingness to accept the given creates a vicious cycle of vendetta and escapism that ameliorates only when people open their hearts, become less obdurate and go with the flow. The novel climaxes in a surreal hunting scene where a tiger is scouted out and killed because it is presumed to be a maneater. It is only after it is caught and is about to be thrown into a valley covered in mist that we discover that the tiger is maimed and had never been a threat to the human habitation. This visceral scene is a nuanced critique of India's struggle for independence which the writer says overthrew a White race which was not altogether morally insolvent or absolutely persecutionary. *The House of Blue Mangoes* microcosms the Indian minority sentiment which was pro-British and indifferent to the vicissitudes of the freedom struggle. Here Indians come across as clannish and patriarchal. Their interests are immediate

and local. What happens in the nation at large is nonsensical to the novel's community who have scant respect for Gandhi's Dandi March or Quit India Movement. The British officers and the British gentry are limned as polished and cultured. One is not shocked when toward the culmination of its narration, the novel is apologetic at ousting the British from India—a nation of rascals according to the novel which does not deserve the British Raj that seems to have moved beyond its imperialistic overreach. It is in sync with the novel's ethos that it celebrates, abjures and nostalgizes over the Anglo-Indians who are the closest Indians can ever come to being British. It correctly captures India's bittersweet relationship with the English whose language and culture continue to have an enormous clout over its denizens.

India in the pages of the novel is maleficent and crooked. Here crimes target the vulnerable and the weaker sections of society while the privileged upper classes remain beyond the pale of law. Brahmins are condemned perfunctorily without any acknowledgement of their contribution to India's spiritual and social repository. The nation is seen as a nepotic playground for upper classes who do nothing except persecute the lower castes and their women: a world where fair play is only barely possible when one opts out of Hinduism. The *house* that we enter in the novel is Christian and yet radically unjust to its women—the men rehash and play out the oppressive politics of upper castes who remain in power because they prey on the vulnerable. We come across men who dream to control without giving a thought or consideration to the *other* and their contrasting views. Where the novel does acknowledge Indian philosophical and medicinal legacy, it blacklists Indians as cowering, uncouth and undisciplined. Similarly, though we are mesmerised with exquisite

descriptions of Kerala's landscape where history is part of everyday lived experience – "...a grey outcrop of granite polished by wind and rain to a smooth rounded shape that resembles the knobby forehead of an elephant. Anaikal... popular with children playing hide-and-peek..." or the sacred mountain Agastya Malai, to which the sage Agasthiar had retired and which is the source of the river Tamraparani that the Dorai patriarch Solomon dreams of swimming – there is a lingering grief in these majestic sights which mars the idyl. We discover fear and disparagement that paradoxically create clamour and disquiet as well as quietism and fatalistic acquiescence.

The novel begins on a note of festivity where girls are going to a fair on the auspicious *Pangunni Uthiram* – the last day of the Hindu calendar that celebrates the wedding of Ram and Sita. However, we discover that all is not okay. The girls are sexually violated by unidentified upper caste men. The year is 1899 and the backdrop to these disturbing occurrences are the infamous *Breast Laws*, promulgated by the king of Travancore, which forbade lower caste women from covering their upper bodies except when breast taxes – *Mulakkaram* – had been paid. Apparently, these girls are from the lower castes and have irked the upper castes by covering themselves. Chevethar is unsettled by this crime since the community is close knit and secure. Its head is a Christian who sees to it that people of various castes keep to their demarcated areas so that problems of caste pollution do not occur and peace prevails. However, at the advent of the twentieth century, as roads and transportation improve, it becomes difficult to check the movement of people. An anonymous scrawl in bold letters inscribed on the Anaikal outcrop calls the Chevethar community "LOW CASTE DOGS" who are warned of dire consequences if they ignore the *breast laws*. Inexplicably, the culprits are neither tracked down nor punished. Shockingly, the women fatalistically justify and accept the rape as destined: "women ...move on... no terrible spill of anger here... This way was... more practical, perhaps the only way..." One fails to justify David Davidar portrayal of Keralite women as passive and defeatist whereas history and myth have been witness to their exceptional courage: Nangeli (early nineteenth century) chose self-respect and death over paying the ignominious *Mulakkaram* – she slashed off her breasts in protest; the mythical Kannagi refused to cow down in the face of injustice and burnt the entire

city of Madurai when her husband was wrongfully indicted of a crime he had never committed; Velu Nachiyar (1780-1790) from Tamil Nadu was the first Indian queen to fight the British; Rani Abbakka Chowta from Mangalore is the "only woman in history to confront, fight and repeatedly defeat the Portugese"¹ for forty years. Travestyng a manifest matriarchal community, the novel portrays a society where women are tolerated as long as they abide by their man's word. The men are invariably shown to have a violent streak, and always bent on having it no other way but their way. It is a strangely masochist nation where women are beaten by their men and only grudgingly accommodated when they do not contradict him. Nowhere do we find women who work and to date continue to work in various capacities as farmers, labourers, traders and administrators.² In *The House of Blue Mangoes* women vegetate as mothers, grannies and cooks even though a housemaker's engagement can never be insulated from the real world. Solomon's wife, Charity whom we meet at the beginning of the novel and their grandson Kannan's wife, Helen who leaves toward its ending come from plush background where they had independent involved existence. Post marriage, while Charity becomes an ingenious doormat to Solomon, Helen refuses to broker her self-respect or her private space which eventually causes her marriage to break down. Our journey begins through a nation which is shown to have a rich cultural and religious legacy but one where lived reality reeks shame and indignities. It is appalling that nobody is worried for Kaveri, Solomon's brother's wife who is regularly beaten so badly by her husband that she is frequently rendered immobile. Women are conditioned to accept "the deep sadness of being born a woman" as destined. The society we find ourselves in is unremarkable for its bickering and misogyny. It is a rare Kannan who treats his wife "as an equal... curbing his instinctual response to be dismissive and superior in order to cherish and adore his wife." Helen's friend Cynthia stereotypes Indian men as "double-dealing Indian bastards" with scant respect for women who wear western clothes and move around freely. The novel takes a surreptitious dig at women in general. While the British are generally lauded for their zeal to civilize the world with an increasing inclusive spirit, their women are blamed for perpetuating snobbery and

class consciousness. To these women, “good Indians were Indians who knew their place.”

Pre-independent India is discredited as divisive, where power and privilege are a one way traffic to abuse and exploit the lower castes. It is a spiritual powerhouse marred by the ugliness of “caste wars” with “One miserable set of natives trying to keep another miserable set of natives down by cooking up... fantastic rules... attributed to... Gods... a lot of twaddle.” There is passionate lashing at the upper castes: the Brahmins are considered “...more dangerous than the cobra, more destructive than a cyclone.” Christianity is celebrated for its egalitarianism wherein all are equal. The British pastor, Ashworth is one of the very few characters in the novel who rises above the race divide and embraces Indians with love, without discrimination or judgement. He is emblematic of true humanity and brotherhood in “a violent land” where slackening of the White man’s authority makes “the smallest of men... a tyrant.” Indians are seen as trouble makers and the Whites as fair-minded and just. Abraham condescendingly refers to the Indian revolutionary aspirations as “city talk” and his community as “peaceful people.” He empathises with the British who he says “have ruled us wisely. Before... it was village, rajah against rajah...” The novel dramatizes the anxiety of “Won’t there be chaos when the British leave?” We are unable to explain why Kerela is so besmirched by the author when in reality, despite an entrenched caste system, different religions co-existed in harmony here. Even Jews had been given refuge here. Kerela’s uniqueness also lies in its lower castes having spearheaded social reforms in the pre-independent era unlike other states where the higher castes led. The novel has a very simplistic take on Indian society which it cubicizes into an accomplished, harsh, but on the whole a just British ruling elite vis a vis a clannish, casteist, myopic Indian society.

Aaron, the only person from Chevathar who enlists as a freedom fighter is a spirited, rebellious, aimless drifter who loafs around and teases girls. He and his comrades cold-bloodedly murder an innocent, innocuous Indian head constable. These nationalists are condescendingly called terrorists without an explanation or by-note. Daniel unapologetically, even righteously dismisses Gandhi’s Non-Cooperation Movement to boycott foreign clothes and Western

education. He bans all forms of political engagement, ensures work gets done on time and education is not obstructed in any way. Nationalism is nothing if not senseless jingoism to him for which he has zero tolerance. When a group of students gather outside his door, raising slogans and denouncing the rulers, entreating him to join the Quit India Movement, he retaliates by hurling all sorts of objects, even slippers at them. To Daniel, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre “is at the other end of the universe.” It is a pathetic paradox that though Doraipuram is built in Aaron’s memory who laid his life to free India, it has no space for either Gandhi, the nationalist ideals or the freedom struggle! Aaron is tortured and treated contemptibly by the British jail authorities who virtually murder him *but* there is shockingly not a word of condemnation. Daniel remains an Anglophile to the end who believes that “the white man was less disruptive” than the Indian and that “it’s always useful to learn the ways and tongue of the rulers.” His son, Kannan, on getting a job on the Pulimed Tea Estate, is sure that Daniel will be “proud of him, making his mark in the white man’s world.” Daniel confides to Kannan that he “wholeheartedly” approves the imprisonment of the Indian Congress leaders. Unsurprisingly, his views are like the British who refer derogatorily to Indians as “puffed-up little natives,” and the nationalists as “a bunch of thugs” who “should be left to rot in prison for life.” Rarely a fair-minded person like Cooke accepts with candour that reprehensible and shameful indignities had been committed by the British, and that the Natives cannot be controlled “with a whip” or by being kept “illiterate and unchristian.”

We find ourselves in a micro-India where there is only petty politics, clanship and regionalism. Daniel tries to keep Chevathar away from what he considers “Nationalist trouble None of that sort of nonsense here.” It is always about “Indians versus Indians” who are “actively intolerant or inert:” non-Brahmins collaborate with the British to overthrow the Brahminical hold, while many Brahmins lead the nationalist movement. Coercion, not cooperation works here. Families disintegrate and splinter because it is always about toeing the line, never initiation. Acceptance is conditional and arbitrary. We find a society where free-spiritedness is tantamount to rebellion. In the Chevathar community, there are no dreamers or artists. Daniel, an introvert and a philosopher, is the closest to being an artist in the

novel. He remains a misfit among his people. When he becomes a success it is as a medical entrepreneur not an artist. His visionary streak has more pragmatism than imagination. In a nation whose architectural feats are legendary, Daniel is unable to locate even one sensible architect. Eventually Western architects are hired to build Doraipuram. Everything cultured is British and European: while Indians are wild and regressive, their rulers are polished, suave and progressive – “Real posh” as Helen puts it. Daniel is sure the Kannan will imbibe “Discipline, hard work, the desire to strive for perfection” from the British. The British play the finest of sports and have excellent mannerisms (even if eccentric and theatrical). Inferiority complex as a postcolonial baggage remains an ugly axiomatic truth even after seventy-five years of independence. Kannan, who makes it into independent India, has much bitterness toward his fellow citizens. He returns to Doraipuram not out of love or loyalty but because he is disillusioned trying to emulate the *White*: “White for fair, brave, decent, courageous and heroic...” He realises that he will always be an outsider under “scrutiny” never White enough. He is the perfect example of an educated and ambitious middle-class Indian caught between a dying world order and a forceful world scrambling to establish itself. He represents a nascent fight to self-assertion against the imposition that non-Whites – “brown, black, yellow, olive” are synonymous with “revolting things that have crawled out of the dark.” The White community at Pulimed disdain Harrison, a White planter because he cohabits with a local coolie woman. It is poetic justice that Harrison forces Kannan to consider the deliberated discourse of the White man which propagates their natural superiority as “brave, fair, courageous, honest, white” to justify their presumptuous prerogative “to control... heathen natives.” The novel has an odd segment where Kannan tracks down a tiger with Harrison’s help. It is not in sync with the storyline but for its powerful symbolism and the fact that once the tiger is disposed off, the White man ceases to play an active role in the novel. Apparently the tiger that is scouted out is erroneously believed to be a man-eater. It actually has an injured claw and is in no shape to hunt even animals. A tiger which conventionally symbolises courage, valour, power and magnificence represents a decapitated British Raj here. Apparently, the tiger represents the White man who has lost his former glory and

authority. However, the tiger also represents the Indians who are abused and disempowered by their White masters to strengthen their hold on the country. When the tiger is eventually disposed off in the novel by being thrown off a cliff, Harrison forbids Kannan from telling anyone that it is dead. Figuratively, the myth of the Englishman’s superiority continues to loom large across India even after her independence. The novel ends with Kannan hoping to reunite with his Anglo-Indian wife, Helen. It is a beautiful and intelligent culmination to a novel where the home is celebrated and nostalgia for inclusiveness remains integral to its existence. The British legacy lives on.

REFERENCE

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