
BORDERS OF SHADOWS IN RITA CHOWDHURY'S *CHINATOWN DAYS*

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Abstract

The most powerful kingdom that colonized every land in the world was Britain. Almost all the lands which were rich in natural resources and culture were colonized by the British Empire. It drained out all the richness and spirit out of those lands until they were left hollow inside. It happened almost everywhere. The kingdoms which attracted the attention of those British traders are all located in South Asia. These lands offered so much wealth that they could never imagine. One of the things that the English people considered as treasure or a thing of luxury was 'Tea'. Tea symbolized power or the financial status of the person. If a household could offer their guests a cup of warm tea, then they were people to be reckoned with! Such was the power of a cup of tea. So, tea trade practically played an essential role in the lives of many merchants. The kingdom which had found this drink was China. China alone had a monopoly over the trade of tea all over the world. Now the British had to overcome this and it involved the fates of many innocent lives.

Keywords: *tea trade, East India Company, hybridity, the slave trade, nationality, identity.*

During the 1820s, tea had become a highly popular drink in England. It was a symbol of power and status. No household of the upper or elite class would hold any kind of meeting without having tea as the main drink. Tea had also become a part of English culture. But, it was not really a part of English culture. The drink originated in China and only those people knew how to brew tea. They had the tea plantations and they did not allow any other nation to know about this. They actually had a strong monopoly over the tea trade across the globe. Rita Chowdhury portrays this history as the main reason for the arrival of many innocent Chinese as slaves in India. The discovery of an alternative for tea would solve all the problems of the East India Company and they would not have to pay heavy prices to China. Tea was the drink of the rich but it had a bitter history behind it, which is often not shown outside. Many such people had formed their unique world in such tea plantations. They had created beautiful and diverse families. Their children belonged to both cultures. This was how hybridity came to be beautiful. It had no definite borders because it had no value for geographical limitations.

“The European tea traders, therefore, had to transport large quantities of silver, braving pirates, on their long oceanic voyages. The East India Company was looking for alternatives to break out of this impasse. The Company had flooded the Chinese market with opium produced in India” (Chowdhury, 17). The British Empire had not only exploited India but also China; this could be read in Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* Trilogy. Agricultural lands were converted into poppy lands, where the Indian farmers were forced to grow poppy. From the poppies, opium was produced in huge opium factories in India and transported to China. This was the commercial war trick played by the British Empire. But soon the emperor of China had imposed a ban on the sales and use of opium in China, but the damage was done. Now the Company had announced that it would reward anyone who would find an alternative for tea. That is how the British officer Robert Bruce had found a similar drink in the Singpho kingdom (Upper Assam).

“If the beverage turned out to be tea, not only would the company’s problem be solved, Robert would also become a rich tea trader!” (Chowdhury, 17). Soon the dreams of the Empire come true and it starts its usual strategy: exploitation. The kingdom of Singpho was a peaceful and prosperous land in Upper Assam, but after the discovery of a ‘Phalap’, a tree from whose leaves the people of Singpho prepared a drink. This drink tasted just like tea and it changed the future for the Empire. Then, the land of those people was seized for the cultivation of phalap trees. At first, the natives refused to do works of the British, but they were exploited. Those natives were not enough for the Company, so they imported slaves from China. The Chinese knew very well to cultivate tea. That is how thousands of Chinese came to India.

These people were made to work in the tea plantations without any hope for their return. Everything was new and foreign to them. But they had to move on. A similar scene is portrayed by Ghosh in *The Glass Palace*, where there were separate groups of men who were sent to different parts of the Indian continent to bring young men and women by deceit:

Baburao rented two ox-carts at a small market town and had them tricked out in festive clothes... and recruited some half-dozen stick-wielding lathiyals to act as guards...they headed into the countryside accompanied by drummers: it was as though they were a bridal procession...on the way Baburao asked passers-by about the villagers ahead. Were they rich or poor? Did the villagers own or work for shares? What were the castes of the people who lived in them? ...he held up his hand so that everyone could see his gold and ruby rings (Ghosh, 125-126).

This is how it all worked. People often went with them in hopes of a better future, but the future was entirely different from their imagination. The situation of cultural hybridity had resulted due to British colonization. The British officials had to cultivate tea and so they brought Chinese tea experts. Along with those experts came the Chinese slaves. They did not know the language of the natives, they did not know the land and still, they adapted their lives to the environment. "The post-colonial world is one in which destructive cultural encounter is changing

to an acceptance of difference on equal terms" (EWB, 35). It was not only the Chinese who were brought as slaves; people from different parts of India were also brought as slaves to various tea plantations in upper Assam.

Many people like the Chinese came here to work in the gardens. Neither the Chinese nor the Indian slaves could dream of returning to their native land. There were no possibilities. Some Chinese fell in love with the dark-skinned Indian women and got married happily. It was not just a marriage between two people of two different races. It was a union of two cultures. In this way, the tea plantation garden had become a place of cultural harmony. "Gradually the place began to feel like home to them. Most of the workers had started speaking a different dialect: a mix of the languages of different provinces of British India along with the local language and Hindustani" (Chowdhury, 74).

All these did not matter to the English masters, because marriage meant more laborers and more laborers meant more profit. Anyways after the Indian Independence everything changed, the slaves were free and they had passed away happily paving the way for their future generation. Now all those families were independent and had own businesses and other jobs to do. But as usual there came the border dispute and everything went topsy-turvy. Soon war broke out between China and India. The people who got terribly affected were the Chinese Indians. Even after living for so many years in India, they never got Indian citizenship. But still, they were all Indians. They had respected this. But did the other Indians respect their feeling? They might be Chinese but their families belonged to the Indian soil, they were culturally unique but they identified themselves as Indians.

War does not see if people belong to this country or that. It destroys everything that comes in its path. That is how this community of Chinese Indians suffered. Their identities criticized and they were used as spoils of war. Due to the injustice done to them, their notion of national identities and national conscious had transformed completely. The ideas of nationality and identity were all socially constructed according to them. They had lost their values because if they had been true these people would not have been stereotyped by others. They would not have been used as spoils of war. After their deportation, the Chinese Indians settled in different parts of the world. But wherever they went, they always carry the past within their hearts.

Works Cited

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