



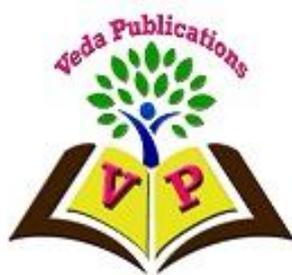
WEST MEETS EAST: A STUDY OF SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN'S *THE SIMPLE ADVENTURES OF A MEMSAHIB*

Rishika Sharma

(Research Scholar, Dept. of English, University of Jammu, Jammu.)

Email: rishika.sharma10@gmail.com

ABSTRACT



Sara Jeannette Duncan was among the greatest women journalists of her times in Canada. She was very zealous and enthusiastic and was very objective in her approach as far as her journalistic career was concerned. Her connection with India was established when she married a British civil servant Everard Cotes who worked as a curator at a museum in Calcutta. Duncan arrived in India and was subsequently welcomed by the powerful colonial discourse that was already existent in India. The motive of colonial dominance was camouflaged under the names of 'White man's burden' and 'Civilizing missions'. The author succumbed to these discourses and her writing style got transformed and from an objective writer she turned into a subjective one. In this paper an attempt has been made to look at the East-West encounter in *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib*.

Keywords: *East, West, Colonial discourse, Race.*

Citation:

APA Sharma,R.(2018) West meets East: A Study of Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Simple Adventures of A Memsahib*.*Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 5(1), 35- 38.

MLA Sharma,Rishika. "West meets East: A Study of Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Simple Adventures of A Memsahib*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.5, no.1, 2018, pp.35-38.



The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib is the story of transformation of Helen Brown, an English lady who comes to India with full enthusiasm but in the end gets transformed herself. The perils of the life of British people living in India are dealt with in the novel. The novel from the very beginning seems to be overshadowed by the pre-conceived notions about India and Indians.

"Simple adventures is written by a Canadian but set in India, focusing upon British citizens in temporary exile" (Lawn 21). This can also be related to Duncan's own life because she also came to India after her marriage and settled here like the protagonist of the novel, Helen Browne. The boredom, hypocrisy and snobbery in the life of English community is beautifully presented however, she fails to draw any positive image of the colonized Indians. Her piece of fiction dealt only with whites and the work appears to be racially biased.

The discourse of racism, Orientalism and her fictional methods of creating 'types' resulted in her depicting Indians as incapable of self-governance. In this regard Jitesh Parikh and Vimal Dhawan in *India in Canadian Literature* contends:

For Duncan, the Indian background brings all her personal and social difficulties to the surface. . . it is not surprising, then, that a recurring theme of Duncan's Indian fiction is the idea that most talented western people in India are doomed to waste their youths and energies in a cultural desert. It is especially true for women, whose isolated lives are portrayed as cultural and emotional suicides. Duncan's heroines realize that in India all western values amount to nothing. (27)

In the novel, India, its people, its locale, everything that is Indian is mocked at. From the very opening of the novel there occur numerous instances where a deteriorated and tarnished image of India is presented. Starting from the climate and geographical setup; to the people and the society, everything is wrong and therefore not suitable for an Englishman to live in. According to the text, "it is

impossible to keep good dresses in India" and that living in India is "a heartbreaking experience" (8). The doctrine of civilizing mission as proposed during colonial reign also finds expression in *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* when Mrs. Peachey contends that, "Helen's going to India was the good she would probably be able to do to those surrounding her" and for Helen " . . . it was a sustaining thought that she was going amongst those whose need for her was so much greater than Canbury's" (12).

Use of terms like 'little blacks', 'heathen' and 'brown' clearly stands as a proof that the novel was over shadowed by colonial discourse. Misao Dean in *A Different point of view: Sara Jeannette Duncan* also confirms that Duncan's "Indian novels also depict racial difference" (111).

No Indian character is called by his name. He is either a *Khitmudgar*, *Khansama*, *Mallie* or a *Rajah*; all types and no individuals. Misao Dean in her article "Paintbrush and Scalpel : Sara Jeannette Duncan representing India" says, "To define 'the native' is to bring them into existence for English reader who has no knowledge of them outside the text and so to deny them an existence in themselves, is to deny them power to name themselves" (89).

The Englishmen who come to India do not find it interesting and become dull and monotonous. K. Mallika in this context holds that:

The English society. . . is dominated by a sense of community . . . India may provide them with opportunities, raise their social status and surround them with an army of servants but still it is a colony, a poor substitute for home, and as such it is kindles nostalgic memories. (219)

The established superiority of the west over the east comes to surface when the Indian landlord follows his British tenants with humility like a coolie. Although he is a landlord yet the treatment he gets from the white race is pathetic. The couple Mr. and Mrs. Browne were different from the brown Indians and the difference was that of their colour of skin. Throughout the novel the western animals are given more importance over eastern subjects. The pony of



Helen Brown is properly fed and nurtured, whereas the syce is living in a deplorable condition. Critics Jitesh Parikh and Vimal Dhawan observe it as:

The callous indifference shown towards the syce, a human being, is symptomatic of Duncan's attitude towards Indians who are less valuable than animals owned by British masters. Between the two "animals" – the Indian and the pony – the latter is better than the former. This highly prejudiced view treating human beings worse than animals show a dehumanised Duncan, a typical colonial. (28)

In another instance when during the summer season, cholera spreaded, "the Lovitt's lost a bearer from this cause and a valuable polo pony from heat apoplexy. The latter bereavement was in the paper" (Duncan 215). Human beings, especially the Indians were treated as very lower form of life. Throughout the text we find numerous animal images which stand in comparison to Indians. The servants are likened to cockroaches and the *khansama* resembles a goat. Not only this, the innocent Indian fowl is also lower in grace and taste as compared to its fellow Christian counterpart found in England. Throughout the novel readers are being told that India is a land of snakes, centipedes and tigers and that barbarism is in the very blood and soul of Indians.

It is not that the novel does not portray the hypocrisy and snobbery of the English society. At times the author is very critical about the British living in India, their way of life and their diplomatic nature. Helen is informed by her husband that tagging of people is done in Calcutta on the basis of the amount of salaries they draw every month. In another such instance Mrs. Toote reveals that the English ladies "mess about charities and keep their husbands in their pockets and write eternal letters to their children in England" (Duncan 114). But on a larger level the one who needs to be criticised was the Indian persona, thus Duncan has tried very hard to justify the presence of British in India through her work of fiction, although their presence here has no positive impact upon them.

The British were totally against the globe-trotting M.P.'s who were not blind to what all was going on in the Indian subcontinent. As a result of it Mr. Batcham was also hated and ridiculed in the novel. Mr. Batcham who believes in the natives is shown as being cheated by them. This ultimately results in projecting the natives as cheats. The novel that tends to be critical of the English community at times turn back and targets the natives and their lifestyle. The language of the native Indians i.e. *Hindustani* is also not spared by the Englishmen. Helen was asked to learn a few words of the native language so that she could easily order her servants. The Englishmen learn the language so that they can easily give their orders but *Hindustani* has been labelled as the language "that belongs to the land of *khitmudgar*" (Duncan 232) and the Englishmen were supposed to know just a little bit of it and they can afford to forget it as soon as they would leave this country. In this context critic Jennifer Lawn states:

Thus the sahib learns only the familiar forms of addresses, for he has no intention of speaking to a native as an equal . . . To wield authority, the colonising power must never meet colonized culture halfway; it is 'the essence of the imperialist vision' that one world-view; one language – English – should reign supreme. (22)

The Browne's during their visit to Dehradun came across a sick Englishman who was riding in a dandy, when Mr. Browne enquired of him he replied, "Liver complication. We all come to it, your turn next hot weather. This country isn't fit for a Christian to live in!" (Duncan 298). India has also been called as "a land of regrets" (300) in the text.

The perils of the English people in India and their subsequent degeneration get highlighted through the character of Helen Browne who has turned into a memsahib towards the end of the novel. Helen has transformed not only physically but mentally as well. Helen who had come to India with some inclination to help the natives and to become their saviour has been "growing dull to India" (Duncan 310) and towards the end of the novel Helen was not concerned about anything except her



husband and her little baby. Silvia Albertazzi in this context says that, "while in Duncan's cosmos all ideals are reduced to meaningless echo, the most significant factors of human life birth, love, death cease to make sense; living is just carrying on, mere survival" (58). Helen's capacity of radical thinking is lost ultimately and she has developed a strong sense of dislike and irritation against all the natives.

To conclude it may be stated that the novel openly deals with the life of British community living in India and their gradual calcification during their stay. The adventures of Helen Browne which are called simple do not appear to be so because beneath the surface the hidden discourse of western dominance over the East plays and the adventures of the protagonist are guided by this discourse.

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