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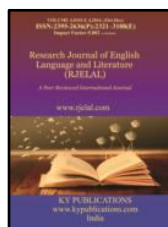
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A STUDY OF SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN'S *VERNON'S AUNT: BEING THE ORIENTAL EXPERIENCE OF MISS LAVINIA MOFFAT* THROUGH COLONIAL GLASSES

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ABSTRACT

Vernon's Aunt: Being the Oriental Experience of Miss Lavinia Moffat by Sara Jeanette Duncan, as the title clearly demonstrates, it is the story of Miss Lavinia Moffat and her experience of the orient. Marian Fowler comprehends, "*Vernon's Aunt* was written first - written off the top of her head to make money" (216). Fowler also states that anything that made the image of east conform to the set stereotypes was easily and happily grasped by the west during the colonial era and thus the author thought it best to write a story of an English lady who would come to India to explore its vast and never ending terrain and to experience exotic lands of India. It comes out therefore that this novel was written only with a mindset to earn profits and for that the author thought it best to portray a stereotypical image of the most talked about east for her readers in the west. This paper tries to examine *Vernon's Aunt* from the glasses of Orientalism. The novel lacks any definite plot and pattern and seems to be an attempt on part of the author to present to the readers, particularly of the west, what they already know about the orient.

Key words: Orientalism, Stereotypes, Occident.

The novel opens and the readers are introduced to Miss Lavinia Moffat, a spinster of forty two years of age. Miss Moffat was too occupied with the fantasy of the east that she had many sleepless nights thinking about "oriental matters" (VA 2). She "tossed about for hours wrestling, so to speak with coconut palms and the sacred Ganges and a little heathen with nothing on" and in her mind there "was a chaos of temples to Krishna and Rampore chudders, mosques and nose rings, Hindu widows and Brahminy bulls" (VA 2). She was so obsessed with the oriental thoughts that she almost forgot the sole reason behind her visit, that was, her nephew Mr. Vernon Hugo Hawkins, who works in the forest department in India. He is a high official and is enjoying a comfortable existence in his colony. He has vast forest cover under his

administration and many natives also work under his supervision.

The very first chapter is a true embodiment of what Said calls 'Orientalism'. For Said orient is to occident:

The place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilization and language, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other. In addition, the orient has helped to define Europe (or the west) as its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that

part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial style. (1-2)

Miss Moffat was also in the process of gathering the images of the orient as she was deeply involved in the process of reading and hearing about books of travel, to the east, written by her countrymen. A reflection of orient is provided to her through the texts on the east. Although Lavinia had never been out of her home town in England and thus was a little hesitant to leave her place but her hesitation gave way to courage on account of watching those monkeys of the east who have been described to break open the hard coconuts and to make out that up to "what extent the natives actually were adopting our civilization, our clothes and the thirty nine articles" (VA 2). She felt the charm towards east and thus decides to move towards it in order to explore it by herself and to see whether the descriptions she has read about the orient, were true or not.

During colonial times everyone in the west wanted to know about what exactly the east stands for and thus people (common masses) of the west used to grab everything that used to describe the occident. Allen J. Greenberger also holds the opinion that "the images created by these authors were bound to have their effect . . . It was these images, that people coming out to India held, which influenced the way in which they saw India" (2). Thus colonial discourse was providing every single detail regarding the east that the west required and these images certainly had their impact upon the thinking of the occidentals. They believed these images to be true and were fascinated by them as Miss Moffat was taken away by these images of the orient and was desperate to experience the orient on her own.

After a very long journey via France and Italy and after her encounters with so many people *en route* Miss Moffat ultimately lands in Bombay that was "a deep, keen and bitter disappointment to me. I cannot now say quite what I expected, but it was something different- quite different." (VA 26). The oriental travel literature has presented a typical

colonial image of India to Miss Moffat and actually she encountered nothing of that kind in Bombay. In Bombay she found the coconut palm skyline to be replaced by "a mass of city buildings;" (VA 26) temples were replaced by universities and Yatch clubs and the native Brahmins with white robes were replaced by a "large number of fat, intelligent looking brown gentlemen" (VA 27).

Through all this opposite description of the oriental lands, the author seems to hit at the basic process of stereotypification. Miss Moffat was shocked to see a total reverse of what has been told to her though the books she has read about the orient in England. Lavinia was in a state of ambivalence. She was shocked to see the progress and finds that whatever she has gone through in the books on orientalism was all doubtful. In this novel although there is no fine plot or an engrossing story yet there is this ambivalence in the nature of the narrator that is worth consideration. The images in Lavinia's mind were altogether different from what she actually experiences herself.

She was also surprised to see the Indian gentleman, who never appeared in any of the oriental literature she has read. These natives were very much opposites of the heathen images of the same. Natives are not little black pitiable stuff. They wore "coats and trousers . . . spoke excellent English, and carried gloves and umbrellas" (VA 27). These natives with coats and umbrellas and the English ways of dressing are the 'hybrids' of the process of colonialism. They are mimicking the colonizer to be acceptable and thereby playing a significant role in order to let themselves be heard and seen. Miss Moffat then started her tedious and long journey to Rajabad by rail.

Through a little window of her railway coach, during her two day long journey, Lavinia has the opportunity to look at the rural India. The rural India was exactly like what she has pictured in her mind. She came across many 'heathen and unpronounceable' stations in addition to a few known ones.

The narrative highlights the attitude of the English community with respect to the natives. The 'racial arrogance' of the British comes in the way of establishing strong ties with the colonized

community. This difference / otherness have also gone into the minds of the natives who also do not prefer to share their meals with Lavinia in the compartment of the train. It is not only the colonizers who are embittered but the colonized people are also full of hatred and disgust for the colonizer. Their feelings for one another have been reciprocated.

It cannot be denied that Lavinia was an imaginative and sensible lady who finds the 'Eastern Salaam' very humble and beautiful. She is able to discover some positive qualities of the nation and the natives. Lavinia also observes that, "Nothing is more annoying in India than the persistence with which people lament their fate in living there and shut their eyes to the blessings not to say the luxuries, which they enjoy" (64). Thus she takes a stand and speaks out about the way the British community lives in India, quite enjoying the royal treatment they get but still lamenting about their fate in India. Indian mannerisms also get a positive response from Lavinia. She is quite fascinated to see the country.

Two kinds of images of India, one that has been created in the mind of the orientalist and another, the factual image that Lavinia has encountered were haunting her continuously.

An Indian character, Abdul Karim Bux, enters the novel on the railway platform at Rajabad, when he finds Lavinia highly terrified to see a huge elephant fast approaching the platform. He enquires of Lavinia's whereabouts and informs her that the elephant that has arrived there belongs to Mr. Hawkins and that he has sent this huge thing for her to ride on to his abode at Nuddiwallah, fifteen miles from Rajabad.

The native master of the elephant has lost the letter Vernon had sent for his aunt while feeding sugarcanes to his huge possession. He felt a deep sense of guilt for losing a valuable thing and thus begged pardon from Lavinia by trying to put his head under her feet. This gesture on the part of a native was very much predictable in a colony. They have been treated as filth and non-entities and thereby have lost their dignity and self-esteem in the process of colonization.

Karim Bux happily agrees to accompany the lady to her destination. Lavinia occupied the front seat of the Howdah where as her co-traveler very modestly sat down besides the servant. During the course of their journey Mr. Bux and Lavinia had some time to exchange their views. Lavinia discloses, "I have come to India prepared to take a very deep interest in her people . . . The orient has always had a very great charm for me" (92). Lavinia thus represents a typical orientalist whose main aim of coming to India was to discover it from her own point of view. They wanted everything to conform to what they have read in their books.

On the other hand is Karim Bux, who felt highly elated of the idea of helping an English woman and plans to befriend Lavinia. He wants to impress the English lady and tells her about himself and his life.

There was a deep george between the colonizer and the colonized and the colonizer had so defined the two that they could not ever fill that gap and thereby a natural distance was created between the two groups. Lavinia being a member of the colonizer's group was very much aware of her position in the process and thereby was resolute enough to remain in her boundaries and not to develop any kind of personal likings for the colonized people. Bux's fantasy of befriendng an Englishwoman was thus shattered as Lavinia wanted to maintain the gap that had been made by the orientalist. Allen J. Greenberger also suggests that, "India might provide an enjoyable experience, but the Englishman was expected also to realize that he is an Englishman first and foremost and that he should not let himself get involved with India" (32).

After her long and adventurous journey on an elephant through the tropical regions of India, Lavinia finally arrived at Naddiwallah to meet her nephew Vernon. It was to Lavinia's surprise that "Vernon himself had not orietalized in the slightest degree. He was even more British than when he left home" (VA167). He warm heartedly welcomes his aunt and takes her to his abode, a tent house, in the middle of the forest. She was taken to her tent where she was most uncomfortable.

John Mcleod in *Beginning Postcolonialism* asserts that, "A westerner traveler to oriental lands

was not just moving in space from one location to another, potentially they were travelling back in time to an earlier world" (44). Similar was the case with Vernon's Aunt who seems to be going backwards in the time machine, leaving every luxury of Littlehampton to the jungles of India. The only reason of respite to her was the wardrobe that she found there in her tent at Nuddiwallah. She was unable to find any object belonging to her occident except this mighty wardrobe, which functioned as a moral support to her.

A misadventure is added to Lavinia's diaries when a cat creeps inside her tent while she was trying to sleep in her abode. Highly frightened, she went out of her wits and rushed into a nearby camp of Mr. Jones pleading him to kill the animal that has intruded inside her tent. Being in the middle of an oriental jungle, and hearing so many voices and cries from the nearby forest, Lavinia believes it to be a ferocious carnivore like a leopard or a cheetah but it came out to be a poor cat which became an easy target to Mr. Jones' gun. Elaborating upon Said's *Orientalism*, John Mcleod observes:

Crucial to Orientalism was the stereotype of the orient's peculiarity. The Orient is not just different; it is oddly different – unusual, fantastic, bizarre. Westerners could meet all manner of spectacles there, wonders that would beggar belief and make them doubt their western eyes . . . but ultimately its radical oddness was considered evidence enough of the orient's inferiority. (44)

It was firmly believed by the occident that orient was their opposite and thus the occident acquired every positive attribute so that its opposites could find a place with the orient. After her adventures and misadventures she finally left her nephew's camp on account of not being able to be accustomed to it and narrates the difficulties to Vernon;

I found a brown hairy scorpion as big as a crab, with six little scorpions on its back, in the crown of my bonnet, Vernon. Last night rat ate off the whole middle finger of each of my best black kid glove . . . I fear you are

right. It is difficult at my time of life to become inured to this country. (194)

The stereotypical orient has been projected with all its notorious things. The places are not properly named. At one instance Lavinia says that Mr. Jones "was one his way from something-pore to something-nugger" (119). It was not necessary for the west to name and identify the east, it was all the same. Her experience of the orient was typical that is to say from civility to barbarism.

Vernon's Aunt tells Vernon's friends in the camp that she "had come to throw about my nephew the influence of home" (VA 121) as she felt that eleven year's stay in India might have drastically changed her nephew. The purpose of her visit was no doubt to have a look at the oriental land but she also wanted to see whether her nephew has changed or not as he was living away from his motherland in an alien and savage land. To her surprise she found him to be "even more British than when he left home" (VA 167).

Duncan tries to bring out the aloofness among the two societies but does not devote herself only to this cause in this particular work of her fiction. It gets highlighted, but not discussed thoroughly because of the author's affinities to the centre instead of the margins. India has been presented through a white man's perspective and throughout the novel, the wide gulf between the Indians and the Britishers is brought to the notice of the readers.

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