

**THE WANING WEST AND THE MOUNT OF LIGHT: A JUXTAPOSITION OF THE
BRITISH CULTURE AND INDIAN CULTURE IN INDU SUNDARESAN'S NOVEL
THE MOUNTAIN OF LIGHT.**

Author: E. Jothi Kirubha, Ph.D Scholar (Full-time), Register number:
20211174012006, Research Department of English, Rani Anna Government College for
women, Gandhi Nagar Tirunelveli (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli)

Co- author: Dr. Jasmine Andrew, Research Supervisor, Associate Professor and
Head, Research Department of English, Rani Anna Government College for women,
Gandhi Nagar, Tirunelveli (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli)

Abstract:

Indu Sundaresan is one of the emerging Indian woman novelists. Her love for India has forced her to rewrite the erased history of Indian emperors and Queens. *The Mountain of Light* is a brilliant novel that highlights the excellent qualities of Indian rulers. She focuses on the life-oriented culture of India which stands in sharp contrast with that of Occidental culture. The family system, the genuine love of husband and wife, the loyalty of friends and the bravery of Indian king Ranjith Singh and his wife to retain their power over the Indian territory is passionately recounted in the novel.

Key words: erased history, Oriental culture, rewriting.

India is a multi-dimensional country that has inherited a rich vibrant culture and magnificent past. But during the colonization of India by the British people, the glorious past was purposefully twisted and misrepresented by the British historians. They aim at protecting the Western Culture as the superior one above all cultures. In the post-independent era, the Indian writers realized the annihilation of the past glory of India and made conscious efforts to highlight the buried history of the Indian emperors, queens and their extraordinary powers. While portraying these hidden past historical records of India, the European culture and their concept of

materialism falls down miserably compared to Indian culture and its humanistic values. This paper attempts to showcase how the Indian woman writer is passionate about Indian rich diverse culture. She exposes the insipid, lifeless British administrators devoid of humanism and compassion. The British Colonisers and administrators are basically greedy, brutal and dishonest. Assuming a superior pose, they devalued the oriental tradition and their precious cultural heritage.

The novel *The Mountain of Light* is a fascinating vivid account of Ranjith Singh, the king of Punjab and his unflinching bravery and positive values. Ranjith Singh is popularly known as ‘Lion of Punjab’, because of his courageous nature. During the colonization, the British cannot conquer Ranjith’s kingdom though the British succeeds in capturing the other parts of India. Ranjith remains a constant threat to the colonizers. The glorious mythical jewel Kohinoor has been preserved carefully by Ranjith’s wife, even though the Britishers are greedy to grab it from Ranjith Singh.

Indu Sundaresan juxtaposes the large hearted noble, generous Indian Emperor with the greedy, petty-minded, sly British colonizers. The British officials are depicted as criminals, cunning thieves and hypocrites. Their primary intention in visiting India is to loot India and its resources and riches. Indu Sunderasan demonstrates it through the histories of Indian kings Ranjith Singh and his son Dalip Singh. She pictures the misadventures and exploitation of Indian kingdom by the British people. This novel exhibits the glorious traditions and the reputed culture of India in limelight. Sundaresan celebrates the spiritual power of Hindu devotee who incurs the blessings of Lord Krishna in the guise of a diamond Kohinoor. This fact has been recorded in the memoirs of Mughal emperor Babur. Babur has received it from a king whom Babur had defeated

in a battle. This valuable Kohinoor, in course of time, reaches the hands of Shah of Persia, the king of Afghanistan. Later on, he surrendered the diamond to Ranjith Singh, the king of Punjab.

Indu Sundaresan glorifies the conjugal happiness between the Indian king Shuja and his wife Wafa. Wife Wafa is very much devoted to her husband. This loyal wife is entrusted with the Kohinoor diamond by her husband Shuja. His wife offers him all security and comfort in times of crisis. Shuja shares all his anxiety, fear and goals to his wife only. While Shuja is trapped by his enemies, his wife has been a pillar of support for him. He presses secretly the Kohinoor in Wafa's hands with promising words. "This will buy my life someday. Or.... If I die, it will make you rich" (*ML 8*). The family system is a boon in Indian culture and a loyal wife is a treasure to the husband.

Friendship endures for a lifelong period without any break in Indian context. Indians cherish friendship as chastity. Servants never fail to preserve the trust posited on them by their masters. Even they rescue their masters', life at the cost of their own lives. In this novel, Sundaresan describes the deep bonding between the king Shuja and Ibrahim Khan, his intimate friend which is very strong and intense, for "they had both drunk the milk of the same mother." (*ML 13*). In the king's harem, the children of the king play together. Though they belong to different mothers, every child enjoys the privilege of sucking the milk of any mother in the harem. The children develop first bonding with the wet nurse rather than with his or her biological mother. Eventually, Shuja harbours passionate love for Ibrahim, the son of his wet nurse as both have walked together as babies. This abiding love and comradeship continues even when they become adults. These exists mutual love and trust between the friends.

Wafa Begum, Shuja's wife provides equal care and hospitality to both Shuja and Ibrahim, her husband's friend. The bond between Ranjith Singh, the king and his foreign minister Azizuddin is very strong. It is due to Azizuddin's efficient strategies that Ranjith's army is fortified. This military strength keeps the country in good stead. The novelist implies the subtle co-ordination in Indian empire that kept all sects of the state in complete safety and peace.

The wife of Shuja refuses to surrender the Kohinoor to Ranjith Singh, despite the severe threats from Ranjith. For her, her husband's life is more valuable than that of the Kohinoor. She is stubborn in her decision not to give it away to Ranjith Singh, unless he helps her husband to reclaim his lost throne. She brings in radiance and joy in the dark period of her husband's career. In order to secure the release of her husband who is in Kashmir prison, she bargains with the mighty King Ranjith and negotiates the release of her husband from prison. At last she outwits the shrewd king by her intelligence. Sundaresan exhibits the mental prowess of Wafa Begum and contrasts her with the cold, inactive and dysfunctional British Women, who cannot build their own lives independently.

The mythical jewel Kohinoor symbolically represents India, the glorious rich country. Shuja and Wafa cherish a deep, intense love for Kohinoor and their obsession with India is described thus: "so they kept their lives, because their hearts were tethered by a thin line of light of the diamond. A tiny fragment of light" (ML 22). Their lives are closely bound to the country.

Ranjith Singh, though an illiterate, brims with anxiety to learn many things. The novelist explicates his vibrant personality: "There was nothing Ranjith Singh was not curious about. The Sun, the moon, the stars, the country of America, the British in Europe, the philosophies in Sanskrit, in Persian, in Arabic" (ML 25). Another remarkable character that distinguishes Ranjith

is his determination to preserve Indian tradition and cultural heritage. He defends India and thwarts the attempts of the British to disintegrate his motherland. Aziz evaluates the character of Wafa and is amazed by her feminine power, as she can exercise full control over her husband. Moreover, she plays the role of a peace maker. As a shrewd, wise woman, Wafa kills the brutal instincts in men. Even though Wafa is confined within four walls, ‘She (Wafa) had a knife-edge brain.’ (ML 28). It is obvious that woman has all potentials to fortify her country.

Unlike other crafty political figures, Ranjith is eager to establish peace with others. He keeps the British in India well fed, content and friendly. He is all armed up to encounter any enemies or intruder. The novelist points out the dignity and valour of Indian king while Ranjith asserts thus: “Our British friends are very nervous people. They worried about Bonaparte invading India, But to do so, they would have had to defeat me. Now they worry about the Russians? I’m still the Maharajah of the Punjab.” (34). Both the royal women and the ordinary women in Sundaresan’s novel radiate positive energy and happiness even in pressing situations. The women in Ranjith’s harem add much vigour to his kingdom. Her love encompasses all kinds of people, never limiting it to royal circle. Thus Jindan, the young wife of Ranjith Singh is very affectionate towards the white women who visit her harem. She offers them valuable jewels and entertains them with rich food and drinks. She adopts a girl Roshni even though she has given birth to a boy prince Dalip Singh.

Ranjith Singh is carried away by the vibrant spirit of Indian girl Jindan, who hails from a low caste family. Ranjith marries an eighteen years old Jindan at his old age. Even then, their domestic life is filled with happiness and fulfilment. She no longer confines her family with royal harem, as she wanders in the streets and exhibits her son to commoners. Thus she engages the attention of the public. The monarchy system has become a democratic platform wherein

everyone has access to communicate. Jindan is anxious to win the approval and applause of the common people. Her circle includes people from all walks of life. Even in the old age, Ranjith Singh enjoys a blissful marital life with Jindan. Their warmth of love is effectively conveyed by the novelist thus: “He could hear the thud of her heart, smell the faint aroma of roses from her perfume, feel the caress of her fingers upon his neck. They stayed alike until the sun set and darkness came tumbling down upon the tent and the cradle with the child glowed in multi-coloured prints of light.” (ML 62)

The impact of Kohinoor infiltrates their marital life. In their life, there is no rigid division between the rich affluent people and the low caste mass. The tactics and political wisdom of the Indian king is astonishing. While extending warm welcome to the British, he is shrewd enough to defend himself with sword. Thus he is both flexible and dynamic in his outlook. Indu Sundaresan consciously makes a striking contrast between blissful Indian family life and British people's dry, cold and indifferent life. The western people are highly snobbish and prejudiced. They attach more importance for worldly things and materialistic aspects. But Indian culture is more life-oriented. They do not hunger for power, rather they insist upon preserving filial love and family relationship.

English General Auckland represents the sterile English culture. Though he is of marriageable age, he does not get married. He visits India with his two sisters. Jindan cannot grasp this new western culture. She questions: “What man travels with his sisters to India? Where are his wives? What kind of a man does not have a wife?” (65). Indu Sundaresan points out the cultural difference: “In India everyone is married. It was as simple as that.” (65). It is evident in the case of Ranjith who earns his new life through his genuine love for a poor girl. Ranjith showers all his love on her. Hence he rewards Kohinoor for his beloved. The novelist

exalts the power of Ranjith Sing to break the curse on the diamond. Ranjith's family abounds with various relationships, friends, relatives and he adopts other children, whereas the tent of the English man is bare and silent. There is hardly any flowering of natural emotions. General Avitabile proposes his love for English lady Emily by gifting many roses. Yet it cannot blossom into marriage. The Indian family structure allows much space for happiness and genuine love. The Western woman never takes interest in mothering and the consequent responsibilities. The Indian family overflows with luxuries, sweet flavor and children. But the Westerners never exert their energy in nursing their children. Western men and women limit their lives with cold and indifferent attitude. They neither commit themselves into any affair nor keep up any filial relationship. They end up as spinsters or bachelors. The lively atmosphere in India is hated by Emily: "I hate it here". Sundaesan compares the restlessness of the European ladies to sick whining horse. George, an English man, points out the greedy, shallow nature of British officers.

And we came for the money.... It's true, Em. Macaulay was only a member of the Governor-General's council, remember and he came back home with a purse of twenty thousand pounds enough for him and his sister to live on for the rest of their lives. I make that amount every year. When I return, I will be rich. That is why we came to India. (71).

Even the British women are mad after Indian gold jewels and long for gifts from royal personalities. While accepting the precious presents from Queen Jindan, the English women, mock at her for her low caste status. The kind hospitality of Jindan has been misinterpreted and is rejected indirectly by the European women. Being withdrawn spinsters, they devalue the happy marital life of Jindan and Ranjith. Their class consciousness and racial prejudices do not allow the white women appreciate the family life of Indian couple. Their obsession with racial

superiority distances these British women from natural pleasures of life. They hanker for materialistic life and worldly riches. Hence their lives remain unfulfilled and empty. They do not have any sense of achievement as their lives are blocked by false values. The passionate love offered by Avitabile is hushed down by Auckland, the brother of Emily. The enchanting roses gifted by Avitabile means nothing for these women. They alienate themselves from other's pain. Even the painful whining of a horse does not evoke sympathy from the hearts of these white women. Emily's life ends up in darkness as she is reluctant to accept the genuine love of Avitabile. Her life is shaded by greediness and selfishness. There is rivalry even between the two sisters to possess the power and property of their brother Auckland. Their secluded life yields no joy or self fulfilment. Their flowering of senses is completely prevented by their sense of honour and greediness. The unfulfilled desires promote only hollowed self.

Indu Sundaresan has effectively rewritten the exciting Euro-centric history produced by white historians. She subverts the Western assumption that English culture is superior to others. Edward Said observes thus in his seminal text "Orientalism".

Therefore, Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship or institution;.. It is rather a distribution of geo political awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philosophical texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction.... it not only creates but also maintains, it is, rather than expresses, certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different or alternative and novel world. (12).

Thus, Sundaresan unravels the hidden history of Indian kings and emperors through her post- colonial novels. This counter narrative restores the original glory and power of Indian kings.

Works cited:

Sundaresan, Indu. *The Mountain of Light*. Harper Collins publishers, UP, 2013.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1995. Print.