

Inquisition Of The East-West Encounters In Romen Basu's Candles And Roses

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Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate how Romen Basu, in his novel, Candles and Roses, exposes the widespread scepticism over the incongruous components in Eastern and Western values. Basu handles this delicately and draws attention to the treasures of Indian spiritual history even if he has no intention of confronting the West. Through the encounter between Monique and Pramila in the novel, he brings the West and the East together. Samir, Pramila, and Monique are characters created by Basu that combine elements of Indian and Western society. While proud of her French heritage, Monique does not advocate for the supremacy of her culture, contrary to what Samir and Pramila are perceived to be doing. She seeks inner strength and calm, and she believes that the qualities of the East can assist her in achieving both. Instead of mourning the loss of specific ideals in one culture, she wants to gain from these two. Pramila is unable to comprehend Samir's request to extend his contract in France for an additional two years. She is aware of his relationship with Monique, but she is unaware of his infatuation with the West.

Keywords: East, West, Culture, Values, Difference.

Introduction

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India-born internationalist, Romen Basu has travelled across many countries in the globe and he is familiar with many peoples and their culture. His literary works feature a variety of characters who each have unique traits that come

organically from their origins. To clearly illustrate the effects of the collision between East and West and the clash of cultures, he employs fictional works as his tools. Thus, these two must contend with one another in order to retain their superiority on an individual, economic, social, and most crucially, cultural level. Meenakshi Mukherjee avers, in *The Twice Born Fiction*, "Almost every educated Indian today is the product of the conflicts and reconciliations of two cultures, although the consciousness of this tension varies from individual to individual" (64).

Even Basu's *Candles and Roses* makes an attempt to prove that Eastern principles become entangled with Hinduism and eventually find their way into people's social and personal lives. His works also demonstrate both the separation and convergence of Eastern and Western values. He gives each of his characters a distinct cultural identity. Finally, these characters come to terms with the beauty and aroma that diverse cultures bring to the society as a whole. Isaac Jebastine avers: "Basu's treatment of the theme of East-West encounter has generated a good deal of social criticism. He is impartial in his treatment of the inadequacies found in both East and West" (132).

Because Basu is more familiar with the West, he gives the West greater attention. He claims that the UN is both his religion and his way of life in an interview with A.Y. Shinde. The UN is where he communicates the entirety of his life's experiences. He claims that he thinks more deeply about those who are seated close to him. He has the ability to see society as the next unit, varied cultures as the next stage, and ultimately the convergence of various cultures as a result of his interest in the fundamental level. He claims that through fusing various civilizations, we have learned to adapt to the shifting rhythms of the planet. In *Romen Basu, His Vision and His Art*, P. Somnath avers,

As a novelist of the second generation, Romen Basu is naturally interested in the ever-provoking theme of East-West encounter...the fifties and the sixties witnessed a shift of interest from the public to the private sphere. One of the prominent issues was the quest for a satisfactory attitude towards the West, and for a realistic image of the East that would at the same time be emotionally valid. (16)

Samir Sen, the Bengali Brahmin and protagonist, travels to France and falls in love with Monique. But he never develops a

deep affinity for French culture. He believes that the western world is not a happy place. They have made several material advancements and excel in both science and technology. They have upset the natural order of existence, which is why they are unhappy. He claims that despite his zeal to learn everything the West has to offer, he finds solace in his inner faith, which he has been learning since he was a young child. He tells Monique that,

Indian philosophy makes no real difference between the religious and the philosophical search. For both, ultimate wisdom and self-realization are achieved by becoming one with the universe, through one's own inner search.
(16)

In *Candles and Roses*, Basu demonstrates how an Indian's life is intertwined with religious rituals and festivities through the figure of Pramila. Despite its benefits and drawbacks, a person cannot be expelled from the Hindu religion. He highlights the contrast between the East and the West through this occurrence. Monique tells Samir about a personal incident she had when they first met in a restaurant.

In the novel, *Candles and Roses*, Samir extols his wife Pramila. In talking about her virtues, he mentions how she was raised from an early age to respect parents, serve them, and pray to God. Even Monique has referred to Hindu Gods as a result of his repeated discussions on Eastern ideals and the Hindu religion. He claims that Monique's ex-boyfriend Marco is a good lover as they sit in the back of the church one frigid Sunday. She claims to spend a lot of time attempting to lift his spirits. She claims that the East domesticates the West: "Love, like the Indian goddess Durga, has ten arms I suppose" (43).

Samir and Monique can be seen in the French highlands admiring the country's scenic splendour in *Candles and Roses*. He responds in a way when she inquires about whether maintaining a distance improves a relationship. Later, when her mother tells her to stop communicating with a married guy and claims that they raised Monique to be such a girl, Monique rebels. It is at this point that Monique's Western mentality explodes. She is adamant about getting her own flat because she is unique and independent. She believes Samir will divorce his wife without a doubt. They do not talk about getting a divorce, but she trusts her gut. She perceives him as being westernised. In the West, the fundamental concept of marriage is in jeopardy if a couple like he and Pramila do not maintain physical or written touch. Therefore, Monique

believes, "How could he stay married just for form's sake? He was too westernized for that. If she had somewhere they could meet alone, she was sure it would all work out" (64).

In *Candles and Roses*, Monique goes to her flat following a conflict with her mother and an emotional compromise. She finds it offensive when Samir asks if he can help her pay the rent, and she casts him a scornful glance. Basu seems to be saying that regardless of gender or location, ego exists everywhere. Samir enquires about Monique's mother's reaction when he goes to her flat. She claims that some individuals have told her mother that Indians keep as many wives as they can support. And she claims that many people have told her mother that Indians travel to Paris in search of mistresses and that some of the Indians take the French women back home with them as slaves. The fact that Monique is bursting with ideas and cherishes her sense of independence above all else is more significant.

Through the portrayal of Pramila, Basu emphasises the strength of Indian women. She understands that Samir is attempting to arrange her life so that he can live his own life independently. He treats her with a lot of respect. He is even eager to make love to her if she is willing to offer some encouragement. But she is as tall as Sita of legend. She does not dress up to appeal to Rama. In a similar vein, Pramila never tempts him to remain home by making herself appear more alluring or by providing him with his favourite foods or pastimes. Instead, she requests that he give her a space where she can say her daily prayers. She was once heard singing in the kitchen as Samir entered. He enters, dons a different outfit, and waits in the lobby. She keeps singing despite being unaware of his arrival, and as she turns to walk to the refrigerator, she discovers him. She is ashamed, but he lavishly compliments her and remarks on her beautiful voice. She lies still in the pitch-black bedroom, like a mouse. He attempts to make love with her, but as she furiously thrusts his hand away, he silently concedes defeat.

Basu suggests that one must live one's inner life by themselves. Samir's dialogue with Monique serves as a vehicle for expressing it. Each person in the cosmos, according to him, is the centre of life in an unusual occurrence. The absolute truth is that we must live our inner lives alone, regardless of the external reality of people and things (146). Some of Basu's male characters are not living this inner life alone.

In *Candles and Roses*, Basu portrays Monique as a lady who is prepared to adapt to reality and accept change. "Even

though the Devil is clever, he loses at the end" (146). Monique is not adamant despite belonging to the Western society. She explains to Samir that they are not the victims of their circumstances and that there are ways for them to get out of their awful situation. She admits to being powerless and declares, "I lack strength. Your wife is stronger, I have no doubt (147). Monique counsels him to put his fixation with beauty aside, and if he can, he might find her alluring. In the West, divorces are frequently accomplished quickly. But things are very different in India.

Pramila is very distinct from the other female characters in Basu's work. Her religion is vital to her; sometimes even her life comes first. She once informed Samir that there is no mention of God providing if someone prays in the Hindu religion; rather, it instructs everyone to pray. In order to find selfless love, one should pray and give God their love. In *The Concept of Indian Literature*, Vinayak Krishna Gokak avers, "Spiritual values are, in a sense, self-existent. They emerge from the creative springs of the individual's personality when he is able to fathom the depths of his own inner beings" (149). Samir spends his first full night with Monique following Pramila's arrival in Paris. He awakens at six to the sound of St. Sulpice church bells. He is brought to a peaceful and contented world by the sound of the bells. The bells ring "Peace, peace, peace" (161) louder and louder in his head. Monique asserts that Pramila finds her pleasure in God when he departs, nevertheless. Interestingly, this French woman believes that a husband is yet another tool for serving God. Pramila, in Monique's opinion, has strength that she does not. When Monique thinks back to Samir telling her that Pramila had said that love flourishes in any situation, she now understands the true strength of Pramila.

In the novel, Basu portrays the story of Pramila, a woman who adapts to her husband's Western customs and so wins him over. She closely observes Samir's characters when she first arrives in Paris and is astounded to notice the changes the West has done to him: "drinks before dinner, no meat as good as beef" (112). When he insisted that she go out and shop on her own, she picked up the fundamental French terms for things like milk, sugar, and other items. She gains the ability to use a public phone and place calls. When the new bread comes out of the oven at four o'clock, she learns to go to the bakery and get some. She is overjoyed to see the fish stands filled with fresh, cleaned and prepared to eat fish, crab, prawns and

lobster. She familiarises herself with Western culture and French customs to reassure him that she is well.

Samir and Monique are later seen eating a straight forward supper at Café L' Atrium. He begs her not to ruin the moment with her bad attitude because she is not in a good mood. She seems unimpressed when he tells her he has some news for her. He describes the Western women's mentality and says,

What a unique specimen the French woman is. She wants to be independent, but hangs onto her fragility. She is always wanting something, but when she has it, she doesn't know what to do with it. She prefers consideration to her rights. (170)

Monique is now aware of how greatly their perspectives diverge, particularly in regards to love and marriage. She is adamant that a planned marriage is incompatible with true love. Her Western mentality questions whether it is possible to have fallen in love all of a sudden if there is no love prior to marriage. Samir is aware that although Westerners often speak about romantic love, many marriages actually lack it, and many marriages fail as a result. "Love must be experienced slowly, and in proper exposure. Love is the only thing that has a limitless capacity to grow" (17). Samir secretly disagrees with many of the most fundamental Western traditions. Nothing, in his opinion, is as horrible as sin, and no one can make him one. In his heart, he does not believe that he sins and believes that only people who are ignorant can discuss good and evil.

According to Samir, his philosophy is distinct from the Christian belief that breaking even one of the Ten Commandments qualifies a person as a sinner. If Hindus honestly believe there is no such thing as sin, he wonders if they are content with their lives. He seeks the truth and counsels Monique to practice yoga to develop her inner fortitude. Monique is fully aware that the only way to strike a balance between her material and spiritual existence is to become emotionally detached. She is intrigued by Pramila's inner fortitude and calm, which are evident to all.

Basu addresses the issue of how sex is viewed in the East and the West. Pramila is instructed by Indian custom not to even expose any body parts in public. When Samir tells Monique about Pramila's miscarriage during their meeting, she asks him how Pramila is doing it. Samir replies that Pramila is facing this in silence and in her prayer room. Monique admits that she does have a similar experience, much to his surprise.

After his second round of Martinis, he later questions Monique about this. When she was fifteen, she tells him about her time spent in a convent. In the garden, she is in great spirits. "...she felt closer to the trees and birds and squirrels than to the nuns who lived within" (175). There she meets a tall, lanky man who follows her around wherever she goes and never leaves her alone. He is informed that she will bring the issue before the Mother Superior. If she reports it, he warns her, he and his father might lose their jobs. He apologises for offending her and offers to show her a rare hawk's nest as a way to mend fences. They travel a considerable distance while battling a vague sense of being lost. They sprawl out on the grass, and it always comes as a surprise when they take a nap amidst dense foliage. Pramila experiences nightmares whenever she remembers the first night after her marriage to Samir has been finalised. She is overjoyed to see separate beds for her and her husband when she returns to Paris later.

Basu has an equal eye for the East and the West, and his opinions are objective. He does not ignore the curses that exist in both the East and the West while listing the blessings that predominate in the two areas. Basu is aware of the unsanitary conditions present in hospitals in both the East and the West. The condition of the general ward at an Indian general hospital does not appear to be any better than that of the psychiatric unit in an American hospital.

In *Candles and Roses*, Basu also depicts the tension that exists within the same cultural context. Samir admits that he cannot comprehend French ladies when he and Monique meet her cousin Marcel in his studio. According to Monique, one needs be knowledgeable about history if they wish to understand French women. The males also mistreat French ladies, just like they do with Indian women. Women have a rich intellectual history that dates back to ancient times, when their knowledge was more feminine. Men believe that a woman's responsibility is to care for the home and perform domestic tasks efficiently.

Monique's love for Samir causes her to become more aware of who she is and inspires further thought. All of her values, according to her, have changed, and whenever she is by herself, she tries to rationalise a hundred times in various ways. When Monique tells Samir that every time, he comes it breaks her to pieces and all her resolutions to split with him are shattered, Basu brings out the suffering of one of those people born to suffer. He quietly approaches the door, remembering

how much he loves her while he abides by the proverb to not disturb others. Monique is seated in the bright light.

Basu introduces Monique and Pramila as he attempts to balance the underlying virtues of both cultures while writing about the East-West encounter. He does not challenge the West in the same way that Swamy Vivekananda challenged the materialism of the West with Indian spirituality. But when he attempts to prove the spiritual superiority of the East, he continues in a similar vein as Swamy Vivekananda. Pramila supports her cultural values by adhering to Hinduism and participating in its ceremonies.

The majority of Basu's novels maintain the principles that are prevalent in both the East and the West and ultimately force the West to adopt Eastern values. The primary distinction between the East and the West is brought up by Basu. While religion and culture are linked in the East, they can occasionally follow different paths in the West.

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