

## IMMIGRANTS' EXPERIENCE IN RANA BOSE'S *BABA JACQUES DASS AND TURMOIL AT COTE-DES-NEIGES CEMETERY*

*Dr. Ramesh Chougule, Associate Professor and Head, Department of English,  
Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Sub-Campus, Osmanabad, MS, India*

### **Abstract:**

*Rana Bose is one of the most important South Asian Canadian playwrights, others being Uma Parameswaran, Rahul Varma, etc. He is the founder of the theatre group called Serai. His noteworthy plays include 'Baba Jacques Dass and Turmoil at Cote-Des-Neiges Cemetery', 'Some Dogs', 'On the Double and Komagata'. Rana Bose experiments with non-traditional stagecraft, and evolves a new concept of multiculturalism which cuts across ethnic barriers. South Asian issues and people are at the centre of Serai Theatre. Most of actors and characters in his Serai theatre and plays belong to different ethnic backgrounds who share a common vision of theatre and of multiculturalism, a vision that sees beyond ethnic ghettoization to a richer interrelationship of cultures.*

**Key Words:** *Multiculturalism, immigrant experience, ghettoization, interrelationship of cultures.*

Uma Parameswaran writes about the play *Baba Jacques Dass* "...the most ambitious and significant of his plays in the literary context. Like many first plays, it is packed with just about everything the writer has thought about or felt to be key issues in his vision of life.... The play is imaginative and innovative. It opens whole new worlds of Canadian consciousness as it zips around from grave to grave in the cemetery and closet to closet in society drawing out skeleton of cultural prejudices and political betrayals" (Uma Parameswaran 105). Rana Bose criticizes South-Asians' view of life in Canada and other Canadians' view of South-Asians in Canada.

Baba Jacques and Binoy are at the core of the play. Though Engineer from India, Binoy gives up the job and starts to write a novel in Canada. His sister Neela attempts to bring Binoy out of a spell of writer's block. She introduces him to Baba Jacques, a French-Canadian recluse who lives in Montreal's historic and impressive Cote-des-Neiges Cemetery. Baba Jacques is depicted as an activist who encourages people into rebellion on various fronts. His encounter with Binoy leads reader in and out of Binoy's intellectual experience. Binoy's interaction with his south Asian social circle gives the audience a glimpse of South-Asian prejudices and expectations.

Set in Montreal Rana Bose's *Baba Jacques Dass and Turmoil at Cote-Des-Neiges Cemetery* is about Indian immigrant's (Binoy) attempt to write a novel (*Ramdass*) on India and her people and to get published in Western Countries. Binoy is presented as Indian immigrant living in Canada. When he was a child, he left India for Canada. He has left engineering career and chooses a writing career. He writes a novel on first Indians who settled in Montreal: "I unfold the story of the simple emigration of a middle class family to Canada..." (Rana Bose 1996, 181). The central character Binoy becomes restless because the Canadian publishers refuse to publish his novel. Binoy feels nowhere in Canada: "neither here in Canada nor there in India, but pretending to be everywhere" (Rana Bose 1996, 184). Almost all Indian immigrants have great passion for India. Binoy also loves India and her culture.

Binoy's girlfriend Janet is not happy with the lack of privacy in India. She spends most of the nights with Binoy without marriage. Binoy's mother is not upset to Janet's spending night in Binoy's bedroom. She thinks she is not "average Indian nosy mother" (Rana Bose 1996, 180). Indian immigrants use to read

Indian newspapers like *Thirumangal* to retain their identity and culture. MA reads the newspaper. MA is working for multicultural grants. She works as job councilor at home for South Asian women.

Baba Jacques is one of the most important characters in the play. He has a great passion for India. He lives in a cemetery. Time and again Binoy speaks about the India and her culture. He dreamt of visiting mountains near Rishikesh to have his Kundalini rise up to shatter through his forehead. Binoy longs to experience the Indian culture. Since Binoy cannot experience, he fulfills his dream by writing a novel on Indian people and her culture. Most of Indo-Canadians are overwhelmed with the idea of discovering the spiritual India though they are not born in India. Binoy decides to give up his rotten materialistic past and joins Jacques. For him, Baba Jacques is the source of information on India.

Though Neela is curious about India, she is critical of Binoy's writing. She says, "... You were not there, you grew up here... so you concoct, fabricate, imagine an India of your fantasies" (Rana Bose 1996, 187). Binoy neither forgets his past nor embraces Canada completely: "The body of an Indian, and the mind of a Canadian" (Rana Bose 1996, 187).

There is the sheer exuberance of imagination in Baba Jacques' living in the cemetery and getting a stage full of characters. Journalist Matt, Esther Crawford whose family owns a brewery and publishing house, bigoted Mr. Fraser walking in and out of the vaults. Baba Jacques lives in graveyard. He is introduced by the author as an Indian, a Sadhu having "Long hair, big beard with a bad toothy smile. Muttering a sloka, Om Mani Padme Om" (Rana Bose 1996, 188). He speaks in Hindi and has great knowledge of Indian culture and tradition. The writer has introduced various characters from Canada and India as dead stepping out of grave and speaking with live characters. Jacques and Esther are such characters. Jacques once visited India when there was Emergency in India. He had worst experience and hence wanted to know more about India. That is why he shows his interest in Binoy's writing about India. Jacques is interested in turmoil in India "an India of smoky coffee houses, hanging out of public buses, travelling on train roofs and the sting of a cop's stick on your ass whenever you stood on a line" (Rana Bose 1996, 197). According to him India has the richest turmoil in the world.

Canadians are fascinated towards the orient's writing novels in Canada. For Canadian the entire East seems mystery. The playwright has made the dead from grave to speak with Binoy in order to throw light on immigrants' failure to become one with host culture completely. Indians are not able to cut themselves from their old habits and old culture. For Binoy "It's very difficult to kill old habits... yes" (Rana Bose 1996, 195). Living in Canada, Binoy chants morning prayers using "OM" and does Yoga also. Binoy tries to retain Indian culture and identity through Yogas and such other practices. Binoy speaks about India as if he grows up in India. He has cherished lot memories about Indian culture and way of life.

Canadians are very critical of the Asians living in Canada. As a Sikh, Binoy refuses to wear turban. When Binoy is asked to marry a Canadian woman, he refuses to do so because it is against Indian culture. Mr. Fraser remarks that "that's what they are all saying (*imitating Indian accent*) until they get their status" (Rana Bose 1996, 199). According to Canadians, immigrants promised to follow Canadian culture but once landed in Canada and settled, they refused to follow Canadian culture and way of life. Fraser is also critical of Indian beer. He loves only Canadian beer.

The Canadians are very critical of immigrants for the growing number of immigration has led to acute job shortages. As a reporter, Matt holds immigrants responsible for criminals and scarcity of jobs for the natives. The natives are left with jobless. However, Jacques is not agreed with Matt and accuses him for lagging behind: "... Matt, you are two decades behind" (202). Matt sows only feelings of hatred and bleeds like liberals when the damage is done. The Canadians (Jacques) are practical and ask immigrants like Binoy not to charge the situations but to change the situation with hard work. Indian mothers are not happy with their sons doing "western things, western ways of life" (205). At the same time Indian mothers expect their son to be good Canadian citizens. The author has highlighted the ambiguous attitude of Indians through the character of mothers. Jacques criticizes this nature of Indians and calls them as a crafty Indian

trick. Binoy's parents (First generation of immigrants) want to forget the Past Indian heritage and become one with the host culture. However, this desire to adopt Canadian culture totally does not last for a long time. They cannot forget the origin of their land and inculcates values of life to their children by citing examples of 'our heritage and our culture' (25). They have forgotten the reasons of immigration. In fact they have not totally become Canadians. They insist on retaining their heritage and culture. They are not bothered about their past or the present.

Binoy decides to go to Toronto to publish his novel. However, the publishers are not interested in Binoy's depiction of Indian life in his novel because they consider the novel out of context. The publisher wants to make the novel juicy, romantic with some wispy sexuality. Binoy's girl friend Janet is also fed up with Binoy's fringing fantasies about India. The author has used dramatic strategy of aside to throw light on Janet's dislike for Indian stories and Indian's struggle to retain past heritage and culture and writing on Indians only. The Canadians are critical of immigrants. They call immigrants as fucking oriental bastard. Binoy is not happy with Canadians' interest in Canadian life and criticizes their self-indulgence. He calls Canadian 'just a sick, neo-nazi punk' (210).

Rana Bose has introduced characters from different ethno-cultural backgrounds. Indian women participate in cocktail party but refuse to drink beer. They like Mataji's *lassi* back home. Mr. and Mrs. Tory also participate in the party. Mrs. Tory is Indian. Indian women name their kid in Indian style. They are proud of Indian names but do not forget they are living in Canada. Mala has named her son Rishikesh but calls him Rick. In the party Canadians like Tory MP (Mr. Scott) enjoys Indian made a *lassi* cocktail whereas Indian born woman Mrs. Tory enjoys beer. Mr. Tory is bored with Indian woman's conservative nature. Mrs. Tory is attracted towards Mr. Tory only because he doesn't want to sleep with her before marriage. Mr. Tory likes anything Indian whereas Mrs. Tory is fond of Canadian dishes and drink. Mr. Tory looks at India as consumer of goods made in foreign. The second generation immigrants refuse to send money back home whereas the first generation immigrants used to send money for the marriage of younger sister or to pay debt. Those who are grown in Montreal with Indian parents have nothing to do with their past or present. Sometime they think of retaining their heritage and culture. Thus the author has pointed out the generation gap.

Mr. Binoy is always busy with the problems of other people. Canadians just love ethnics but refuses to recognize the other. The Natives attacked Binoy in Toronto. Though Binoy wants to immerse in new culture, the natives refuse to adopt him and his culture. He writes only obscene sides of India to please the westerners. Canadians takes pleasure in superficiality about India. They are interested in finding fault in Indian system.

The conversation between Neela and Rick throws light on the life of second generation immigrants in Canada. Soni and Puri discuss the life in Canada. Puri refuses to call himself as an immigrant. He feels like "...a Canadian...a natural born Canadian you know it is very sacred feeling..." (223). Both Sony and Puri feel themselves as "a sacred cow a citizen cow in a multicultural Canada...Well fed and respected...And tolerated" (223). In India, cows are not respected but in Canada immigrants are respected and tolerated. Both Sony and Puri are critical of India because as long as cows give milk, they are protected, and when the milk dries up, Indian made cows drag the plough or they are thrown to the lower classes to eat. The Indians consider cows as sacred but when cows become useless, the cows are sold and eaten. Soni says: "The cow gets eaten very early in the cycle. There is no relationship between the mind and the matter" (224). Both Puri and Soni are afraid of 'boat people' (illegal refugees) who snatches the jobs of the natives. They are critical of socialist government in Canada.

The relatives of the immigrants are vegetarian. It is problematic for the immigrants to arrange food for their relatives coming from India. Woman 1 and Woman 2 are not named. The author wants to highlight everybody's problems through these nameless characters. Both are critical of the conservative nature of in-laws. But at the same time, they cannot appreciate the life style of the in-laws in Canada. The in-laws of the

immigrants are happy to see monkeys in Canada because monkeys bless them with something strange.

Binoy is also critical of Indians tendency of defending themselves. They cannot see something good in Canadian things. They have the tendency to point out the weakness in everything: "Indians have built a poisonous cobweb of ideas around themselves. It is a defense mechanism. If you ask them why everybody is so poor in India, they will say 'but culturally we are rich.' A virtue is made out of poverty which the 'outsider' can never comprehend. To hug misery is wisdom. If one wishes to criticize this deprivation one is confronted by hostility. 'He is attacking the country.' No, you silly asshole I am just criticizing the state of affairs. Then he is a socialist, he is washing dirty laundry in public" (227). In India socialists and their ideas are acceptable whereas in Canada it is an uncomfortable revelation. Binoy does not like to present false image of India. He criticizes westerns for appreciating Indian architecture like Taj Mahal because they are unknown about the history of building of Taj Mahal. Shah Jehan blinded the people who built the Taj because he did not want to build the same architecture in future. That is why Binoy refuses to "write about the wispy, dusty romances woven around bullshit themes like the *Far Pavilions*, *Heat and Dust*" (228). Indians do not like to hear about the poverty of India. They are proud of their old culture. They hug western civilization for the quick buck (Easy dollar) and talk about the depth of Indian philosophy. Binoy mocks dual nature of Indian people. He calls India as a world of lies. Binoy is worried about the poverty in India and wants to write on it. Thus, Rana Bose brings out the Indians' dual nature one the one hand Binoy loves to write on India and her people, on the other he calls India as world of liars. Indian immigrants in Canada are caught in cultural crisis.

The westerner like Hostess uses Indian words like *behan* whereas Indians run after the western thoughts and life styles. Westerner like Baba Jacques visited India and overwhelmed by India's romantic philosophy, culture and past. But he ignores India's poverty. In his stay in India, he was involved in students' agitation against government during middle of Emergency. As a result, he was expelled from the country. However, he creates misunderstandings about happenings in India in the mind of Indian immigrants in Canada.

Indian immigrants in Canada want to forget the past and merge with the mainstream culture: "*Arey baba!* Once we've left the country why *fikr* about it... Let bygones be bygones... I keep telling him stay clear of this Baba in the cemetery" (230). However, Baba Jacques instigates children against the parents. The immigrants' wish to adapt mainstream culture is seen in the statement of Binoy's mother: "My point is, you are born here, you are growing up here... you think like here..." (230). The second generation immigrants in Canada are critical of everything Indian because they think Canada as their country. Binoy, Sony, Puri and Nargis's daughter are willing to become one with the host culture. But they also want to retain their identity in host country. That is why Nargis's daughter calls herself as a black because "black is a state of consciousness, not a matter of skin" (230). Indian immigrants wants bride from India who is traditional and conservative. Binoy criticizes Indian immigrants' hypocrisy.

Binoy's attempt to publish his book in America also meets failure because Americans prefer only American life in books and they deny to publish anything outside America. In fact, turmoil and disturbances are common in almost all countries in the world. But everyone refuses to accept the same. Binoy feels "turmoil in his mind and outside. Turmoil in India, turmoil in Montreal. Turmoil in Canada. Turmoil is everywhere..." (235). Binoy wants to publish his novel in England.

Government of Canada has passed the new bill not to allow refugees to land in Canada because the natives are afraid of losing jobs and heritage. The immigrants thought Canada as humane and hence came to Canada. But the natives were hostile towards immigrants. Some of the liberal natives like Jacques are critical of Canadian government: "...stop this xenophobia, immigrants built this land" (237). According to Jacques, immigration is the only way to revive the economy. But the damage is done permanently to the psyche of immigrants, "the laws are in if you want to seek refugee status you must apply in the country of your persecution under the watchful eyes of your friendly police..." (237).

Binoy loses his interest in getting his novel *Ramdass* published in England and wants to write a novel set in Montreal. Maddening thoughts about Janet makes Binoy to go to Montreal. In the end Binoy realizes that he belongs to Canada. He also defends about his curiosity about India: "...I'm coming back to Canada, because that's where I belong. I was not wrong in any way about India, but I'm no martyr either who wishes to suffer the burden of foiled idealism in the rest of his life. My curiosity has been satisfied. I've seen the people who can change things and they are not the ones who left with my parents..." (241).

In short, Rana Bose has represented transnational culture through the characters from various ethnic backgrounds and asks immigrants to embrace the culture of host land instead of native culture.

**References:**

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