

*The Quest for Home in Host Country; documenting experiences of Indian Diaspora's First-generation
Ms. Aparna, Prof. Vikas Sharma*

A Study of the Cultural Shift Portrayed in Professor Vikas Sharma's Novel "Love and Ego".

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Abstract

The research paper entitled "A Study on the Cultural Shift Portrayed in Professor Vikas Sharma's Novel 'Love and Ego'" will explore the shift in cultures of two very different people over time. The novel "Love and Ego" is a desperate try on the part of the author to show the horror of war and its futile results. The use of historical, and magical realism by the author to express the futility of war and the egos that facilitate it through historical personalities like Alexander the Great and Ashoka, and mythical personalities like Ravana and Kansa gives the reader an abundance of perspective to judge the war. In this heartfelt cry to stop the evil of war once and for all, the author also gives a glimpse of the cultural shift through the characters of Savi and Sachi, their husbands Aryendra and Manendra, and Kathleen and her husband Rada Lee. The extramarital affairs in the lives of the Indian couples and the utter faithfulness in the case of the Russian couple Nathleen and Rada Lee are somewhat suggestive of the shift in the cultural ideals of both countries. Professor Vikas Sharma refrains from labeling these acts as right or wrong, a way through which he challenges the rudimentary approach of the society, and neither this paper will delve into the question of the right and wrong, nor will focus solely on the transmutation of cultural ideals between two very different cultures.

Methodology

This paper utilizes the theories of cultural theorists like Raymond Williams and Clifford Geertz to analyze the cultural changes and the resultant shifts in the novel "Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga" by Professor Vikas Sharma. This work of Professor Sharma focuses on how the global forces facilitate changes in distant economies and cultures. War and Globalization are such forces and their effects often shake the foundations of societies. Textual evidence from the Novel and quotes of thinkers are included as proof.

Keywords

War, Extramarital Affair, Faithfulness, Magical Realism, Culture, Globalization, Modernity, Traditionality

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The cultural shift typically comes into the foreground as the transformation of societal values, norms, and traditions, sometimes as a direct rebellion and sometimes as a result of the process started in a distant past. This shift may emerge as a generational conflict, with the younger generation trying to escape the shackles of outdated traditions that the older generation tries to preserve. It can also appear as a transformation in gender roles, where the dominant gender tries to defy the conventional expectations, such as a woman trying to be independent in a patriarchal society, or when the dominating gender gives up following the rules its role requires according to the society as in a man forsaking a manly appearance as defined by societal laws. Acceptance of foreign technology can also be a signifier of the cultural shift a culture may experience. Weighing religion against modern sciences, asking for social justice, shifts in arts, fashion, and cultural trends as an expression of identity, changes in family dynamics, marriage, or relationships, and even changes in language and forms of communication pertaining to the cultural shift a society experiences. The main catalyst for such changes in the present world is what we call globalization. "Globalization" is the process where the different world economies grow interdependence of each other through the sharing of cultures. The intermingling of different cultures gives rise to defiance of traditions and acceptance of "modernity". "The only constant in life is change." This quote by Heraclitus also fits Culture. This aptly explains the change in the cultural and social landscape of various cultures brought up by Globalization. Professor Vikas Sharma, in his latest novel "Love and Ego," has given a glimpse of subjects like "being modern," "ethics in the new world," and "value of traditions in the modern era," which in all its sense echoes Heraclitus' thoughts. The change a culture undergoes over time can never be interpreted inside the boundaries of right or wrong. As the culture accepts changes in its structure, the premises of the argument for it being right or wrong change as well. The acceptance of hybridity in a culture also brings hybridity to the perspectives of its practitioners. The changes are not limited to one dimension. They can be changes in ethics, incorporation of foreign cultural objects, and even complete repression of the dominant culture.

Ethics, traditions, and everything that is connected to a culture are nothing but thoughts that have been practiced for a very long time and transformed into norms. According to Clifford Geertz, "Culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." These inherited conceptions are what have been termed as Ethics, Traditions, Values, etc. They don't occur naturally but are the products of the influence of power structures which rose as a response to various situations faced by mankind at some period. Different cultures

had different circumstances through which they grew, hence the difference in the power structures that shaped them. These different power structures gave rise to different sets of values in their respective cultures. For example, the concept of polygamy. In some cultures, it was termed a heinous evil, while in others, it was an accepted norm. The ethics grew in a similar fashion. In some places, they were lax, while quite inflexible in others.

Among these ethics, come the subjects of the evil of adultery or extra-marital affair, relationships outside the bounds of marriage, and the marriage itself. These subjects have been an integral part of the literature of all cultures for a long time. Some portrayed them as absolute evil, some showed little acceptance, and some just refrained from giving them any consideration. This also marks one of the divides between the East and the West.

The Russian novels of the 19th and early 20th centuries were comparatively more liberal in showcasing the subjects of adultery and infidelity. *Anna Karenina* (1877), a novel by Leo Tolstoy, talks about adultery without rigidity and paints the characters as victims instead of condemning them. Ivan Turgenev's *A Nest of Gentlefolk* (1859), shows romantic idealism and personal freedom through adulterous relationships. In fact, it has a more accepting cultural attitude towards the considered societal evils like adultery than the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. However, the society remained patriarchal. On the other hand, the Indian Novels of that period were not so accepting. Works like *Durgesh Nandini* (1865) by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, *Chandrakanta* (1888) by Devaki Nandan Khatri, and *Godan* (1936) by Munshi Premchand just portrayed these subjects as transgression. On top of that, the female infidelity was showcased as more heinous than the male's.

The constructs of right and wrong can't always be defined by the same definition for a long time. Change always makes its appearance. This facet of Indian literature changed with the arrival of post-modernism. Novelists like Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Anita Desai rose into prominence and the portrayal of infidelity as an unequivocal transgression became a thing of the past. *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy depicts the affair between Ammu and Velutha without casting any judgment and only shows the struggles of the characters. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) is another example of such a portrayal.

Professor Vikas Sharma's novel "Love and Ego" is another addition to that tradition. Titled "Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga", the novel speaks of the war that is still miles away from coming to a close by humanizing its perpetrators to the extent, one might think that there is a possibility they would see a human for human at some point. A man can hope and so the author does. He hopes that the

humanity of the war-thirsty power groups might wake up one day and this evil will cease to exist once and for all. He doesn't delve into the metanarratives to explain the war or challenge it. He just mirrors the effect of this grand destruction on the people who are directly involved in it as well as those who are affected by it indirectly. The characters Savi, Sachi, Manindra, Aryendra, Rada Lee, and Nathleen are such people who are being affected by the war in some way or the other. The author shows the dual nature of these characters. One is social where they attempt to voice their disdain towards the war and the other is personal where they indulge in their daily lives as guided by their primal instincts. In the latter one arises the subject of ethics as the personal life itself has become a product of culture.

The lives of the Indian couples Savi and Manindra, and Sachi and Aryendra do not quite fit the traditional definition of married life in the Indian context. As all four of them had convent education, the hybridity of the Eastern and the Western cultures was already infused in them. As the author points out:

“Savi and Sachi had a convent education since childhood and were modern women in true sense.” (*Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga* 18)

As the construct of modernity has requirements of having a Western education and acceptance of Western culture, the author aptly describes both of them as “modern women”. This construct also gives rise to the concept of individual freedom that thoroughly contrasts with the Indian traditional family structure and values where individuality is found rare. Both women are not afraid to make decisions and are not bound by cultural norms. The same goes for their husbands as well. Even the process of their marriages shows an infusion of Western culture. This particular process has become the norm these days as this shift started with Western education itself. This process is the meeting of a boy and a girl before marriage to know each other's views. It was never a part of Indian culture before the arrival of Western thought. It could be in the very distant past when the tradition of “Swayamvara” was still in practice, though it vanished completely. Not very long back in northern India, two men, a Brahmin and a Nai (a man of barber caste), used to visit the houses of the parents of the girl and the boy to fix their marriages. Still, in some remote areas of India, girls are not allowed to meet their future spouses. And even if they are, they are not allowed to reject them. So the meeting of the future couples before the marriage marks an important shift in culture.

This meeting of Aryendra and Sachi goes like this:

“When Aryendra went to meet Sachi for the first time with the prospect of marriage, he requested Manindra to accompany him. In the very first sight, Aryendra fell for Sachi and gave his consent.” (*Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga* 18)

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Still, the family holds a lot of power even after such changes came into being after a long process. As the novel says:

“But, the final decision was to be made by his parents on Sunday.” (*Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga* 18)

It suggests that the institution of family is in constant war with the ideology of individuality. The two generations are in the midst of generational conflict, where the older generation is trying to curb the longing for freedom of the younger generation. The younger generation, mostly in third-world countries, is trying to escape the boundary set by the culture. Savi, Sachi, Aryendra, and Manindra show the same tendencies. It can also be argued that their consumption of seemingly two opposite cultures made them exit the world of constructs and become “liberal” in the true sense of the word. One thing is for sure the cultural shift is evident throughout their actions. Why a cultural shift and not just an act of treason? This question can easily be answered in the question of Savi when Aryendra attempts to further his leanings towards her.

“Your intentions are questionable today Aryendra. Don’t you feel satisfied with Sachi?” (*Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga* 21)

If it any way mirrored the traditional values of India, it would have incorporated the moral dimension in its structure. But the question solely focuses on the subject of carnal pleasure. This act of straying away from the foundations of marriage as defined by culture was just mirroring the acceptance of another culture where individuality holds importance. The acceptance of this act did not linger on the concepts of right and wrong, hence not treason. It was most definitely a rebellion, but not treason. And as the prerequisite of change is rebellion, the cultural shift is evident.

The changes become evident in their day-to-day lives too. The fact that both of the couples decide to live in apartments, away from their families is also a form of defiance. Defiance against the institution of “joint family”, a very important unit of Indian traditional culture. Even the mention of Cupid in their talks suggests the cultural shift that Westernization brought with it. As Savi said to Manindra, “Let’s leave the rest of the talking for tomorrow; Cupid forces me to love now.” (*Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga* 19) The incorporation of Western ideals so casually is significant to showcase the shift in culture India has gone through after the introduction of the Western education system.

Now coming to Rada Lee and Nathleen, the relationship that showed a traditional color to it throughout its existence. The existence of these two characters signifies the intersection of modernity and traditional values.

This excerpt by Nathleen after she had a dream of getting raped by a black

man and delivering his son gives a pretty good hint into the traditional nature of her consciousness:

“O Lord, my honour is in your hands.

You know well that I was sincere to my two husbands and yet they abandoned me.

Now see Lee joined me by chance.

Perhaps it is your wish to join him to me.

I promise to obey and love him.

Dreams are illusions.

And let this illusion be an illusion

And not a reality.” (*Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga* 115)

Even a single dream of being unfaithful to her husband makes her shiver down to her core. This is a woman of the 21st century who is thinking all these things. It can be argued that her religious beliefs and her father’s influence over her were the catalysts for her adhering to traditional values. Though she had her education at Harvard University but still didn’t change her persona. But there is still a kind of cultural shift in the case of Kathleen. The cultural shift here is not from the “dominant culture” but from the “emerging culture” of “individuality”. Emerging culture is defined by Raymond Williams in his *Marxisms and Literature* as, “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships [that] are continually being created”. The emerging culture today is “absolute freedom”, as accepted by Indian couples in the book, and Nathleen even after living in an environment where such culture stays at the forefront, that is, in the educated circle, remains aloof of it.

Another instance of her traditional values emerges when she asks for her father’s permission to go to the Bangkok massage parlor which he denies.

“But her Papa turned down the proposal, saying, ‘Decent girls don’t visit Bangkok for massage. Much more happens there in the name of massage. Take some medicine as a painkiller and you’ll feel better. We can consult a physician if the pain persists after that.’” (*Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga* 61)

The denial is not a matter of concern but the fact that she asks for his permission is. She prioritizes the concept of family which is the exact opposite of the Characters like Aryendra, Manindra, Savi, and Sachi who are the advocates of the emerging culture of “Individuality”.

Now coming to the modern values of her character. Nathleen’s character, though traditional, is still a free personality as she plays a crucial role in spreading awareness about the war around the world. The character of Nathleen draws from both traditional values and modernity. Her rejection of war, a patriarchal cultural

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object, is also a defiance against the traditions. She accepts Rada Lee, a Ukrainian soldier, on her own terms and rejects the bounds of the state-imposed laws.

“If Lee, you can love me my whole life, I will protect you and take care of you.” She says. (*Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga* 48)

She defies the tradition while sustaining some of its values. The cultural shift her character portrays is dual-natured. She defies the emergent as well as the dominant culture while keeping her freedom intact.

Another of the many instances showcasing the cultural shift in the novel is the speech of Dr. Geetha Yadav. Unrelated to the discussion above, it is about the rejection of the absolutism of religion for the sake of humanity. She unapologetically targets the patriarchal institutions of India. Her attack on religious fanaticism in her paper as the primary propagator of hate is an attack on the biggest institution of patriarchy. She says:

“We talk about the Taliban using religion to stifle the social and cultural lives of the people of Afghanistan. The same thing has been happening in our very homeland and we see it in every aspect of our daily life.” (*Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga* 158)

Her rejection of this dominant cultural institution marks the shift in the very foundation of society. To summarise her thoughts, a construct can never be absolute, rather it is just a way of life.

Professor Vikas Sharma gives a very detailed look at the changing circumstances of the present-day world. His portrayal of the Indian culture as a hybrid of Western and Eastern culture is quite accurate. Whether it's the defiance of Savi and Sachi or the attacks of characters like Dr. Geetha Yadav, Dr. Shashi Kant Tripathi, etc, the author paints the picture very well. According to Professor Sharma, some changes in the culture are quite apparent, while some of them are still in the midst of the process of standoff against the traditional norms. In the case of Nathleen and Dr. Rada Lee, the author portrays the coexistence of modernity and traditionality. Still, the defiance against some norms is visible. The author gives a clear message that change is inevitable and won't wait for the man to keep up with it. Nothing is wrong and nothing is right. The temporal circumstances construct the concepts of right and wrong and they are the ones that destroy those constructs. A life based on the abstract should not be absolutized and the room for change should always be there. Professor Sharma's style is not judgemental. Rather it familiarizes one with the truths of the changes that the world is going through. The cultural shift is one of those truths and Professor Sharma presents it without any prior prejudices.

The novel “Love and Ego: A Russo-Ukrainian War Saga” is not just an appeal of the author to stop the senseless wars, but also a testimony to the war that is being fought ideologically inside the man. There are so many ways to live that living has become quite tiresome. Ideologies, Egos, Gender roles, Ethics, and everything that forms the culture mean nothing to human existence. Professor Sharma says this through the end of the novel when all three couples give birth to children and the life keeps on going. On one side there is faithfulness and on the other its opposition, but still life doesn’t wait to reward or punish them. Nature has only one rule and that is to move forward. It just goes on.

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