

Double-Exposure of Authoriality in *The Guru*

Sandip Mondal. University of Calcutta, Kolkata, India

Like any other Ivory-Merchant production with a script written as usually by Ruth Praver Jhabvala *The Guru* (1969) is once again set India that becomes a site for the critical convergence of different aspects of diaspora culture; Ismail Merchant's desire of a return to his native land that he has left at the age of twenty two, Mrs Jhabvala's experience of her encounter with a foreign (Indian) culture and so on and so forth. Mrs. Jhabvala came to India after marrying an Indian architect in 1951 and stayed there till 1975 before settling in New York. The representation of India therefore becomes amenable to a symbiotic relationship between an 'outsider's' view and the view of person who once as a native Indian and later as also an outsider discovers a different India. The presence of a third person in the collaborative authorial intention is no less important. The director of the film, James Ivory as a complete outsider, signifying an objective authorial intention brings together the views of two other 'authors' of the film. As all discussions vis-à-vis texts of diaspora address the cultural aspects of at least two countries involved, *The Guru* explores issues of the cultural dialogue between India and the West that started much before English colonialism. The film, based on a real event, once again unravels such a cultural dialogue manifest through music.

The real event started when one of the lead singers of *Beatles*, an English pop band, George Harrison came to India to take lessons of Sitar from Internationally reputed Indian sitar maestro Ravi Shankar in 1966. Amongst many Indian/ Oriental things, considered as exotic, Indian classical music (one among other variants) is one which from the late Eighteenth Century had attracted European learners also for its mystic elements as interpreted by the West.

Despite a long history of interaction between India and Europe primarily through the project of colonialism Indian music took years to attract the attention of the West. In another important sense too, music did not fit comfortably into the general exploration of Indian things. The very nature of Indian music presented difficulties of documentation and analysis. Unlike languages, literature, and architecture, Indian music did not exist in a manner that allowed the same level of detailed examination, especially within the existing paradigms and theoretical framework of Western music, with its emphasis on staff notation and formal compositional procedures. Treatises on Indian music in Indian languages had existed for centuries, but their value for studying contemporary performance practices was minimal. Notation was also used in Indian music, but mainly as a type of shorthand, which could not be compared in use or concept to staff notation. William Jones's 1792 monograph 'On the Musical Modes of the Hindus' and Francis Fowke's paper on the *vina* (1788) which was duly published in *Asiatic Researches*, testify a late interest of the Europeans in Indian classical music.

Similar channels were established to familiarize Indians with the European music during this period. Though musicians and musical instruments came to India to entertain British officials posted in India Indians also found interest in European music through several manifestations of cultural interactions such as Christian Missionaries. Despite the political war between the colonizer and the colonized, once started, the dialogic relationship between the two kinds of music never stopped. The visit of Rabindranath Tagore in England in 1912, who was already using the tune of European ballads, Western classical music and Uday Shankar's visit to England in 1918 to corroborate such a symbiotic relationship.

Such an interactive history of music has enriched the understanding, reception and production of music of both the *Guru* (Teacher) and the disciple; Ravi Shankar and George

Harrison. Harrison's encounter with Indian classical music through the agency of Ravi Shankar changed the course of *Beatles* and by and large the world pop music for next few generations. I would like to mention a few songs here where *Beatles* uses sitar as one major musical accompaniment. "Love you to" and "Within you, without you" are just two examples among many that signify a journey of fusion in music. But Harrison's understanding of sitar functions not simply as an external musical accompaniment in their songs but Indian classical music as a concept contributes to the tune and the presentation of these songs. Though technically speaking there are instances of misunderstanding Indian Classical music that one can trace out in the songs composed by *Beatle* as identified by Farrel:

Nevertheless, there are many aspects of this song which are well within the tradition of Western misunderstanding of Indian music, even if the setting was unprecedented for a popular song. The out-of-tune sound of the sitar unfortunately adds to the impression that if this is not a downright parody of Indian music, it is at least a poor imitation. But perhaps the greatest misunderstanding comes in the vocal delivery, which reflects the notion that to sound Indian, one must sing flat and with a nasal tone, rather than fluently and expressively. In terms of structure, Harrison's song undoubtedly gives a simple sketch of the larger-scale structure of an Indian performance, but introduces various techniques from Indian performances which are rendered meaningless without the detail. Once again, an Asian music has been abridged to a few in this case Indian-sounding formulae, despite Harrison's attempts to push the pop song in a new direction. His interest in Indian music was clearly genuine, but his technique and knowledge at this time did not allow him to explore fully the structural possibilities. This splintered use of Indian musical form is typical of how it would subsequently appear in pop, even into the 1980s. (184)

On the other hand Ravi Shankar's musical collaborations with Western masters like Andre Previn and Yehudi Menuhin in live concerts and record since 1967 when he released the album entitled "West Meets East" that once again point to the other side of the syncretic process.

The event of George Harrison's meeting with Ravi Shankar and its impact on music is in continuation of almost two hundred years of cultural interactions during colonial and postcolonial period. It should also be mentioned here that neither George Harrison's visit to India nor Ravi Shankar's occasional visits to different countries does not come under the larger rubric of diaspora; George Harrison never settled in India. But when taken up by an 'authorial intention' of three people, two of which having diasporic identity, this event is presented with all the threads of anxiety, alienation and cultural ruptures amenable to the discourse of diaspora. Ismail Merchant (1936 - 2005) moved to USA to study MBA in 1958 where met James Ivory at a screening, in New York City, of Ivory's documentary *The Sword and the Flute* in 1959. In May 1961, Merchant and Ivory formed the film production company *Merchant Ivory Productions*. Merchant spent the rest of his life in USA except for coming back to India for shooting a film or other related works. However the memory of his native land perhaps mixed with a sense of desire to 'return' and his personal experiences of Indian partition into two different countries on the basis of religion, India and Pakistan in 1947, as just a boy of eleven, recur as a leitmotif in the entire oeuvre of their films.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala(1927-2013), the scriptwriter of the film, as another element of this collaborative authorial intention was born in Germany of Jewish parents in 1927 who had to move to London during World War II. She came to India in 1951 and married an Indian architect to live there for next 24 years till she moves to New York in 1975.

With the agency of these two personalities, of this collaborative authorship, having diasporic identity the real event of the meeting of two musicians from two different cultures assumed an altogether different dimension when presented on screen. In tandem with real meeting of two musicians the meeting of a British pop singer, Tom Pickle and an Indian Sitarist, Zafar Khan produced almost a different diegesis in *The Guru*. While the real event advances the project of cultural assimilation, embedded in the colonial past and the postcolonial present, the fictional meeting between Tom and Zafar expresses diasporic anxiety, desire and alienation. The diegesis of the film finally produces a ‘meaning’ completely antithetical to that of the real event. The film begins with the possibility of the cultural intercourse of the East and the West, the colonizer and the colonized, India and England, a possibility rendered real in the meeting of Harrison and Ravi Shankar. But even within that possibility is implied the suggestions of widening gap between the two as instead of being inspired by the colonial/postcolonial logic this narrative generated by diasporic identity. The musical score during the credit/title alternates between the same tunes played in blues guitar and that played in sitar. Similar suggestions are also given in the visual level. Tom’s arrival in the Mumbai airport with western attire and a trendy sunglasses and his journey to Zafar’s residence is contrasted by the preparations at Zafar house. Tom’s appearance being manifestations of his culture establishes an antithesis with the Islamic architecture, décor and rituals at Zafar’s house. The unbridgeable gap between the East and the West which the film finally underpins is suggested symbolically when the begum (wife) of Zafar shuts the windows of her room before the arrival of Tom. One of the apparently insignificant changes the film does is the religion of Zafar. He is an Islam in religion as opposed to Ravi Shankar who was a Hindu. Once such a change is made, the narrative of the film is exposed to various possibilities of reading. The change primarily relates to the cultural and also

the political identity of Ismail Merchant whose Islamic identity is recreated in the film as his cultural memory suggesting to his desire to 'return' to the experiences he has once lived as a native Indian. It also relates to the whole political event of Indian partition of 1947 on the basis of religion though Merchant was personally not subjected to it as their family was spared from moving to newly founded Pakistan as his father was a member of the Muslim League. The whole milieu of the Islamic culture recreated in the film is a reflection of Merchant's understanding, memory and desire of his own culture. By placing an Indian sitarist in an Islamic milieu the film also unfurls the ways in which Indian Classical music grew out of the patronage of Muslim emperors and the efforts of exponents from the same religion.

Unlike in the conventional diasporic writings India is not just a site of memory and desire in *The Guru*. Nor is it represented as a land of ideal past. It becomes a site for the coalescing of the one scriptwriter's (Jhavbala) experience of failure to adjust with values of a land she has started inhabiting and the producer's (Merchant) experience of dissatisfaction with his own home land that he left at the age of twenty two. One should refer to the fact, in this context, that Ismail Merchant and James Ivory shared a gay relationship till Merchant dies in 2005 since they met in 1961. Though homosexuality was not legalized in the entire USA but some states legalized it in 1962. Ismail Merchant with his sexual orientation was perhaps more comfortable staying back in USA than ever permanently returning to India. *The Guru*, in various ways explores the issues of an individual's alienation from one culture irrespective of his/her genealogy, culture and religion acquired by birth. Even an Indian can feel alienated from so called Indian culture.

Tom Pickle in the film functions as an alter ego of Ismail Merchant. Tom Pickle, from the very beginning, for instance in the first press meet, is constantly asked whether he would be able to inculcate the 'Indian values' while learning sitar. His failure to understand and

live the 'Indian ways' of life perhaps replicates Merchant's inability to adjust with own native culture. For Tom learning sitar is a segregated experience having nothing to do with the ways of life. Zafar, on the contrary, holds the belief that learning sitar is more a mystical experience rather than being a part of empirical epistemology. Such an experience, which draws inspiration from larger Indian cultural traditions, also depends mostly on the notions of *Guruism*. One should mention in this context that ancient Indian knowledge system is based on *Shrutis* which means acquired knowledge is not recorded in a written script. A *Guru*, which literally means a teacher, transmits the knowledge to his disciples verbally and through practice; practice of a specific knowledge system and a specific lifestyle. Hence in ancient India, down from Vedic ages disciples stayed at their *Guru's* residence and would acquire knowledge and lifestyle which they would later emulate and recreate for their own disciples. Indian classical music is one such system of knowledge. Unlike the western classical music system there is no complete written composition in Indian classical music. Hence the role of a *Guru* becomes very crucial to the learning, understanding and recreation of Indian classical music. Ravi Shankar also along with other disciples, who later became famous musicians, stayed at Ustad Allauddin Khan's place to participate in that kind process of learning music.

The apparent resistance on Ustad Zafar Khan's part to accept Tom with his ways of life, friends and attitude to Indian classical music explains this quasi-religious dimension of Indian music. Zafar's disapproval of Tom's involvement with popular music, dance and friends (ironically enough most of them are Indians) and his stay at a hotel instead of Zafar's place enlightens on those cultural aspects of *Guruism* and Indian classical music. The complex relationship between India and the West with all the more complex cultural dimension, which becomes so pertinent to the discussions of Indian diaspora, can be traced back to the moments of

colonial invasion and postcolonial anxiety. India's interaction with the West (especially The Great Britain) during has not been one of smooth convergence. The uneven graph of this cultural interaction between the colonizer and the colonized, which reflects in condition of Indian diaspora, informs the narrative of *The Guru*.

The narrative of the film moves from the first tempo to the second showing a temporary suspension of the resistance opening up the possibility of a smooth cultural interaction. This movement however is initiated by Jenny, who in search of her 'discovery' of India suddenly comes across the music of the sitarist Zafar Khan and who creates an antithesis to Tom in the film. Tom's initial resistance to the whims of Zafar and to equate learning music with the ways of life is contrasted by Jenny's abrupt submission to Zafar and the ways of life Zafar believes in. Jenny's presence in the film, as a female disciple of Zafar problematizes the representation of the cultural assimilation in terms of music. Ravi Shankar's *Guru*, Ustad Allaudin Khan trained his own daughter Annapurna, who later married Ravi Shankar, to play different musical instruments. This trend of incorporating women as disciples is continued by Ravi Shankar who trained her daughter Anushka Shankar in sitar.

As opposed to these real events Zafar Khan is portrayed as conservative, non-dynamic and extremely male-chauvinist. He justifies his involvement with another wife on the ground that his first has failed to produce a son, a male heir would be another disciple of Zafar and would continue the legacy of music. His relationship with this wife who is put up in another residence in Benares informs the second part of the narrative. Zafar's attitude to (colonial) modernity, he evidently has acquired from the western discourses, is ambivalent. The interaction between Jenny, Tom, who have accompanied Zafar to Benares, and this wife dramatizes the gulf between India and the West. Pitted against the Begum Sahib at his Mumbai residence this wife is a

convent educated girl and more enlightened as to the preference of Zafar. Zafar's ambivalence attitude to modernity manifests when he mandates his wife not to dance with Tom and not to attend the beauty contest as suggested by Tom and Jenny. This gesture of Zafar not to allow women in the trajectory of western modernity becomes instrumental to the experience of alienation realized by Tom and Jenny. Such a resisting stand towards the western modernity, taken by Zafar, though not pretty uncommon in Indian mindset, is ironical. The Indian ways of life, its education system, epistemology, languages and fine arts however have never been formed in isolation; they have always borrowed from and in turn enriched other cultures. This process of assimilation can be traced back to a period much prior to European colonialism, almost to a period of antiquity. Ravi Shankar, the inspiration for this film, himself exemplifies such a trend of cultural assimilation.

Almost an opposite representation of Indian culture is made in the film; a resisting culture that believes in an impossible purity. The resistance that is initially displayed by Zafar, amounts to larger and widening cultural gap between the East and the West, especially when the third and the final tempo of the narrative moves to describe the events at Bajapur.

Bajapur, where Zafar, Tom and Jenny arrive to attend a music festival, becomes a site of Indian culture, that the western colonial and postcolonial epistemology interprets as uncanny and therefore ungraspable, completes the process of alienation between the East and the West. Two sequences in this final tempo located at Bajapur demand critical attention to discuss this process of alienation. Unlike Zafar, who displays an ambivalent attitude towards the cultural assimilation between the East and the West, his Ustad/Guru (teacher), patronized by the king (Maharaja) of Bajapur, unequivocally expresses his disgust with Zafar's endeavour to bring these two poles together. He firmly believes that 'outsiders' cannot learn Indian music as they are never able to

grasp the philosophy and the life style of India. Jenny, who was all along far more receptive about Indian cultures, while imagining about the nautchgirl (female dancer) who was murdered in this royal palace of Bajapur, in a quasi-epiphanic moment, is traumatized to the extent of being physically ill. The rumour of a nautchgirl being murdered and the suppression of the fact alienate Jenny from a culture she was desperately trying to embrace. The event, being pointer to the dominance of patriarchy in Indian society and its link also the trajectories of music and dance, leads her to rethink her position in Indian society, culture and music. This sense of alienation, suddenly realized by Jenny is also symptomatic of Jhabvala's experience in India as a foreigner and also as a woman. In Zafar's house also Jenny is not accepted the way Tom is. Tom is treated as a guest and Jenny as gatecrasher. However, in Bajapur, Tom equally feels alienated and the more they feel alienated the more their bonds, depending on several common grounds, become stronger. Their decision to suddenly stop learning music and to return to their homelands finally suggests the impossibility of the union between India and the West. Like Tom and Jenny, Merchant who repeated fails to adjust with Indian values, Jhabvala who left India after living there for twenty four years and Ivory, who in true sense is a foreigner, meet in India only to recreate the diasporic dilemma and cultural alienation which together in turn make their artistic bonding more firm. The regressive rendering of a real event like the meeting between George Harrison and Ravi Shankar is thus informed by contrasting, yet complementary experiences of Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Ismail Merchant, two important elements of this collaborative authorship.

Reference:

Farrell, G. (1999). *Indian Music and the West*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.