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Paan, Chewing Gum, and Colonial Power: A Study of Satire in Parashar Kulkarni's Cow and Company

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Abstract

Parashar Kulkarni's Cow and Company (2019) is a satirical novel that explores colonialism,Indian culture, religion and commercial interests during British rule in India. The novel tells the story of the British Chewing Gum Company, which attempts to introduce chewing gum into Indian society as an alternative to the traditional practice of chewing paan. What appears to be a simple business venture gradually creates misunderstandings, religious controversies and social conflict. Through humour, irony and unusual characters, Kulkarni criticises the attitudes of British colonial authorities as well as the contradictions within Indian society.This paper examines how the novel uses the conflict between paan and chewing gum to reveal the influence of colonial capitalism, the importance of cultural practices and the misuse of religious sentiments. It also discusses how ordinary people suffer because of the ambitions and decisions of powerful groups. The paper argues that Cow and Company is not merely a humorous account of a failed commercial enterprise but also a criticism of colonial power, cultural misunderstanding and social inequality.

Keywords: Colonialism, satire, Indian culture, consumerism, religion

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Introduction

Indian English fiction has frequently explored the experiences of Indian society during British colonial rule. Many writers have examined the political, economic and cultural effects of colonialism through historical fiction. While some novels focus on the struggle for independence, others explore colonial society through the everyday experiences of ordinary people. Parashar Kulkarni's Cow and Company, published in 2019, belongs to the latter category. The novel presents colonial society through a humorous story involving a British company, its employees, Indian consumers, religious leaders and working class people.The central story revolves around the British Chewing Gum Company, which establishes its business in Bombay with the ambition of introducing chewing gum throughout the British colonies. India is selected as an important market because of its position within theBritish Empire. However, the company faces an unexpected problem: the widespread popularity of paan. Paan is not simply something people chew. It is connected with social gatherings, cultural traditions, religious occasions and everyday relationships. The British company's attempt to replace paan with chewing gum therefore becomes more complicated than its officials initially imagine.

The company director, Thompson, believes that chewing gum can become a successful commercial product in India. He considers the traditional habit of chewing paan an obstacle to the growth of his business. With the assistance of employees such as PesiPestonjee, Dibu Banerjee and the American survey specialist Young, Thompson develops different strategies to attract Indian consumers. However, their plans gradually create confusion and unexpected consequences. One important event occurs when the company decides to use a cow as the

symbol of its chewing gum. The decision is based on the belief that cows are important in Hindu culture and that the image of a cow will attract Indian consumers. Instead of helping the company, this advertising strategy becomes connected with religious controversy and public anger.

Kulkarni presents these developments through satire. Satire is a literary technique that uses humour, irony and exaggeration to expose human weaknesses and social problems. InCow and Company, the author makes readers laugh at the behaviour of the characters, but the humour also encourages them to think about serious issues such as colonial domination, religious intolerance, economic exploitation and social inequality.Literary reviewer VineethaMokkil observes that the novel criticises both British colonial rulers and Indian society through its use of humour and irony. She also highlights the contrast between the novel's comic situations and their serious consequences. The present paper explores how Kulkarni uses an ordinary consumer product to examine the relationship between colonial power and Indian culture. It argues that the company's inability to understand local traditions, together with its careless use of religious symbols, reveals the limitations of colonial commercial thinking.

Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of this paper is to examine the representation of colonial society in*Cow and Company*, with particular attention to the conflict between traditional Indian culture and British commercial interests. It also seeks to understand how Kulkarni employs satire to criticise colonial attitudes, religious controversies and social inequalities.The study follows a qualitative method of textual analysis. It closely examines selected events, characters, dialogues and

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narrative techniques from the novel. The analysis is informed by postcolonial literary criticism, particularly its concern with power, cultural representation and the relationship between colonisers and colonised societies. The paper mainly focuses on the novel's treatment of paan, chewing gum, advertising, religious symbolism and the experiences of ordinary people.

Colonialism and Commercial Ambition

One of the most important themes in *Cow and Company* is the relationship betweenBritish colonialism and commercial ambition. During colonial rule, British companies sought to expand their markets by introducing products and creating new consumer habits. Kulkarni presents this process through the British Chewing Gum Company, whose aim is to make chewing gum popular among Indian consumers. At the beginning of the novel, the company believes that India offers an excellent opportunity for commercial expansion. However, the officials soon discover that paan already occupies an important position in Indian society.Kulkarni emphasizes the breadth of this custom:

> It presided over all events: births, rebirths, weddings, funerals. It was referenced in all texts: written by man, written by God. It left no lip unblemished. It was invincible: in public or private, by day or night, on land or water, by man or beast. (Kulkarni 9–10).

The popularity of paan becomes a major obstacle to their plans. Instead of recognising the cultural importance of the practice, the company approaches it mainly as a business problem.

The company director, Thompson, represents the confidence and ambition of colonial business interests. He assumes that a Western product can eventually replace a traditionalIndian product. "Will anyone eat paan once they discover our chewing gum? No spitting on the streets,

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no stains on the walls; the government should pay us for our services to theCrown" (Kulkarni 11). Here, Thompson's attitude reflects a wider colonial belief thatWestern products and practices are superior to existing local traditions.

Edward Said, in Orientalism, explains how Western institutions developed systems of knowledge and representation that supported their authority over Eastern societies. For Said, the relationship between Western knowledge and colonial power is important in understanding imperial domination (3).This idea helps explain the attitude of the British Chewing Gum Company. The company attempts to understand Indian consumers mainly so that it can influence their behaviour and increase its profits. The company's commercial ambitions are closely connected with its claims about cleanliness and modernisation. Thompson dislikes the red stains caused by paan chewing and believes that chewing gum offers a cleaner alternative.The company therefore presents chewing gum not only as a new product but also as an improvement upon an existing Indian practice (Kulkarni 66).

This attitude reveals an important contradiction. Although the company claims that it can improve public habits, its primary objective remains commercial profit. The language of cleanliness provides a justification for its business interests. Kulkarni uses this situation to question the idea that colonial commercial expansion necessarily brings social improvement.The British officials appear confident about their plans, but they fail to understand the complexity of the society in which they operate. Their ignorance becomes one of the major sources of humour in the novel. Thus, the British Chewing Gum Company represents more than an ordinary

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business enterprise. It symbolises a form of colonial power that attempts to influence Indian society through the introduction of foreign consumer products.

Paan as a Symbol of Indian Culture

Paan plays a central role in the novel. It is not presented merely as something people consume for pleasure. Instead, Kulkarni shows how paan is connected with Indian social customs, cultural diversity and everyday relationships. The opening chapter describes paan as an important part of public and private life. Different communities prefer different ingredients and the practice is associated with occasions such as weddings, religious ceremonies and social gatherings.

The narrator describes this cultural reach:

> The empire ofpaan-the sun never truly set on it- was on all streets and in all homes. It was in alliance with a hundred odd partners: Afghani dates, Malabari cardamom,Kashmiri saffron, Ahmedabadi gold leaves. It presided over all events: births, rebirths, weddings funerals. It was referenced in all texts: written by man, written byGod. It left no lip unblemished. (Kulkarni 10)

This description reveals how deeply paan is connected with Indian culture.

Paan therefore becomes a symbol of cultural identity. People from different religious, regional and social backgrounds may have different preferences, but the habit of chewing paan connects them through a common everyday practice. The British Chewing GumCompany fails to understand this cultural significance. Its officials believe that people will accept chewing gum

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because it is cleaner and more convenient. However, the novel suggests that cultural practices cannot always be changed simply through the introduction of new products.

The character of Dibu Banerjee provides an interesting example. Although he works for the British Chewing Gum Company, he continues to enjoy chewing paan. Thompson eventually introduces a rule prohibiting employees from consuming paan. The rule is itself humorous because the company cannot easily control the habits of its own workers. “Thou shalt not eat paan. No penalties were proposed. No arrests were made” (Kulkarni 14).Through this incident, Kulkarni demonstrates the limitations of colonial authority. Even within the company’s office, traditional practices continue to exist. The conflict between paan and chewing gum can also be understood as conflict between established cultural habits and imported commercial products. However, the novel does not suggest that all Indian traditions are perfect or that every Western product is harmful. Instead, it questions the assumption that existing cultural practices can be replaced without understanding their social meaning.

Paan also provides an opportunity for ordinary people to participate in social and economic life. Paan sellers interact with customers from different backgrounds and become important figures within their neighbourhoods. Their shops function as places of conversation, information and social interaction. The paan seller Lallan is connected with networks of political communication involving workers and students. His shop becomes a meeting point through which information circulates.

The passage describes this informal network:

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When Lallan cracked a betel nut and said, 'the betel leaf is green; it meant that the coast was clear for the strikers to return to the street. When Lallan cracked a betel nut and said, 'the betel leaf is young,' it meant that the university students would join the workers in the strike. When Lallan cracked a betel nut and said, 'the betel leaf is red; it meant that the police had been alerted. The strike would be called off.(Kulkarni 177)

This episode shows that local businesses can perform social and political functions beyond their immediate economic activities. Therefore, paan represents a form of everyday culture that cannot be understood through commercial calculations alone. Through its representation, Kulkarni reveals how colonial business interests often fail to recognise the deeper significance of local traditions.

The Cow as a Commercial and Religious Symbol

One of the most significant developments in the novel occurs when the BritishChewing Gum Company decides to use a cow in its advertising campaign. Pesi Pestonjee believes that the image of a cow will help the company attract Hindu consumers. His reasoning is simple: cows are respected in Hindu culture, and their habit of chewing cud creates an apparent connection with chewing gum. Pestonjee brings a real cow into the company's office to demonstrate its usefulness as an advertising symbol. The situation becomes humorous when the employees attempt to make the cow cooperate with their plans(Kulkarni 71–73).

Their exchange illustrates this assumption:

'What is this nonsense? Is this a joke, Mr Pestonjee? 'No, sir. I got her for you. To show you how she chews the cud, just like chewing gum. And prove to you that she deserves to

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be on our posters. I will open her mouth and show you. Natarwal! Open her mouth,' Pestonjee ordered.... All Hindus love cows. If we use her on our posters, they will love our chewing gum.' (Kulkarni 71–73)

This incident reveals the company's limited understanding of Indian religious traditions. The cow is selected not because the company is interested in its religious importance but because it believes that the animal can help increase sales. The company's advertising slogan, Go MataKoBhata, attempts to connect chewing gum with the sacred image of the mother cow (Kulkarni 70).

However, the relationship between commercial advertising and religious symbolism is not as simple as the company imagines. The cow is understood in different ways by different sections of Indian society. Its image carries religious, cultural and political meanings that cannot be controlled entirely by a commercial organisation. By transforming the cow into an advertising symbol, the company enters into a sensitive area of Indian public life. The novel also demonstrates that the cow has an economic value beyond its religious significance. The demand for cows changes according to religious festivals, protection movements and market conditions. Traders and other interested groups respond to these changes by adjusting prices and making financial calculations (Kulkarni 54–56).

Kulkarni portrays these shifting economic and religious interests:Despite his devotion to minutes, schedules, calendars, plans, Pestonjee could not predict the vagaries of the cow market. Cow love followed its seasons. It peaked during Eid... In the past decade however; the cow became an exponentially popular substitute. Cow riots played their

part. Legal institutions played theirs. In court, theHindus said that the Muslims hurt their sentiments by killing cows in the open. TheMuslims argued that the Hindus were being intolerant of their religious practices. The judge ruled that cow sacrifice would be allowed in places where cows were killed as a custom. Where cow sacrifice did not prevail, no new ritual would be introduced.

Custom is a figment of collective imagination. Within a year, the number of cow sacrifices rose by a multiple of fifteen. A week ago, a rich Hindu landlord paid three times the price to save a hundred cows... Elsewhere; ninety cows were led away to the abattoir... in the past two weeks, cow raiders had procured three thousand cows fromMuslim traders and delivered them to several newly constructed cow shelters. The middle-men incorporated the rich of raids the prices soared. The next week, the police superintendent issued a stern warning to all the cow protectors: 'The police are the only protectors in town.' Immediately, the cow transformed from mothers to meat and the price fell again. (Kulkarni 54–56)

This episode suggests that religious sentiments and economic interests can become closely connected. Kulkarni further explores these contradictions through the cow shelter.Although the shelter is intended to protect cows, the discussions among its organisers reveal how religious beliefs, social practices and practical concerns do not always agree. The novel therefore presents the cow as a symbol around which different interests compete. Through this representation, Kulkarni criticises the commercial use of religious sentiments while also questioning the contradictions within practices of religious protection.

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Religious Sentiments and Social Conflict

Religion is another important theme in Cow and Company. Kulkarni examines how religious beliefs can become involved in public controversies and public mobilisation. The company's decision to use a cow as its advertising symbol creates misunderstandings that eventually contribute to public anger. A religious speaker, Panditji, criticises the BritishChewing Gum Company's advertisements. His speech encourages people to view the company as a threat to religious values. Conversations among members of the crowd reveal confusion about the ingredients of chewing gum and the intentions of the company (Kulkarni236–239).

The following exchange illustrates that confusion:

'What did the Mohammedans do when they found their cartridges greased with cow fat? The 1857 Rebellion! 'Panditji, that was pig fat. The Mohammedans would have eaten the cartridges if it was cow fat.' 'Was it cow fat or pig fat?' a man asked 'It was both' 'Have you ever seen a rifle? The cartridge has to be forced open with one's teeth. If the cartridges are greased with cow and pig fat, they're considered polluted; it has nothing to do with gunpowder.' (Kulkarni 236–239)

The people do not always possess reliable information about the product and therefore rumours and accusations begin to influence their reactions. This incident demonstrates how public sentiment can be shaped by incomplete information. The religious controversy becomes more serious when public anger develops into violence. A crowd approaches the company's headquarters after attacking its advertising materials. The employees become frightened and

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abandon the building. The situation illustrates the dangerous consequences of misunderstanding and collective anger.

However, Kulkarni does not place responsibility entirely on one community or institution. Instead, he presents a society in which commercial interests, religious leaders, colonial authorities, and sections of the public contribute to the growing conflict. The author also criticises the ways in which people interpret the same event differently. Later in the novel, several explanations are offered for the destruction of the company's property. Some people blame labour-related issues, while others suggest commercial conspiracy or deliberate political manipulation. These competing explanations demonstrate how public events can be interpreted according to different interests.

Satire and Humour as Literary Techniques

Satire is the most important literary technique that is used in Cow and Company.Through comic incidents, unusual characters, and exaggerated situations, Kulkarni examines serious problems within colonial society. Much of the humour arises from the behaviour of the company's officials. Thompson believes strongly in the commercial possibilities of chewing gum but repeatedly demonstrates his inability to understand Indian society.Pestonjee attempts to impress his superiors through unusual ideas, while Young places excessive confidence in his surveys and calculations. These characters appear serious about their responsibilities, but their actions often lead to absurd situations. For example, the decision to bring a real cow into the company's office creates an unusual contrast between the formal atmosphere of a British

business organisation and the unpredictable presence of a living animal. The humour becomes sharper because Pestonjee regards the cow as an important part of his professional ambitions.

Kulkarni also uses irony to expose contradictions. Irony occurs when there is a difference between what people expect and what actually happens. In the novel, a company that wishes to improve public habits through a new commercial product becomes involved in disorder and violence. Similarly, the survey that is intended to provide accurate information produces confusion and questionable conclusions.

Another important source of humour is the characters' use of language. Banerjee presents his knowledge of English by claiming that he can “talk English, walk English and laugh English” (Kulkarni 13). This statement is humorous because it exaggerates the importance of speaking English in colonial society. It also shows how English can become associated with social status and professional opportunity. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry offers one way of understanding such situations. Bhabha explains that colonial subjects may imitate the language and behaviour of the colonisers while remaining different from them (126). In the case of Banerjee, the exaggerated performance of English provides a comic example of how colonial language and cultural prestige can be imitated and transformed.

However, the novel's satire is not directed only at British officials. Indian religious leaders, businessmen, employees, and members of the public are also presented through humorous and sometimes contradictory behaviour. For instance, the novel uses exaggerated arguments about cow protection to expose how religious ideas can become disconnected from practical realities. The humour sometimes becomes uncomfortable because the consequences of

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these misunderstandings are serious. As a result, Kulkarni uses satire not merely to entertain readers but also to encourage critical reflection. The novel demonstrates that laughter can be a powerful way of exposing the weaknesses of social and political institutions.

Social Inequality and the Suffering of Ordinary People

Although much of Cow and Company is humorous, the novel also presents the difficult lives of ordinary people under colonial rule.

The narrator identifies the main targets of workers' grievances:

> The strikers had learned three lessons. Public enemy number one was the mill owners who kept the wages low, the hours long and the tenements ghastly. Public number two was the Bombay Improvement Trust who demolished these tenements, raised the rents for the new ones and reclaimed land that was in turn usurped by the real – estate companies. Public enemy number three was the Bombay Municipal Corporation, who decided the rules and allowed the system to run like a whistle. (Kulkarni 216)

The experiences of working-class characters reveal a different side of colonial society from the ambitions of the British Chewing Gum Company. One of the most important figures is the mill worker who appears in the later part of the novel.

The worker suffers from poverty, illness, and unemployment. His experiences reveal the difficult conditions faced by industrial labourers. He explains that workers protested against poor working conditions and excessive working hours. The response of those in authority contributes to his personal suffering.Thus, the worker's experiences draw attention to larger problems of

economic inequality and exploitation. While the company's officials are concerned with selling chewing gum, ordinary people struggle to obtain food, shelter, and secure employment.

The contrast becomes especially meaningful when the mill worker seeks shelter in a place established for cows but is refused accommodation. This incident reveals a troubling contradiction in the social world represented by the novel. Considerable attention is given to the protection of sacred animals, while a suffering human being is denied basic assistance.Kulkarnidoes not present the worker's suffering as an isolated event. Instead, he connects it with wider problems involving industrial employers, municipal authorities, housing conditions, and urban development.

Later in the novel, the worker becomes caught up in the crowd attacking the BritishChewing Gum Company's building. He attempts to direct his attention towards the authorities that he believes to be responsible for workers' suffering, but the crowd moves towards the company instead. During the destruction, a globe thrown from the building strikes him(Kulkarni 253). This scene is significant because it reveals the tragic consequences of collective violence. The worker's grievances are connected with wages, housing, and social injustice. However, those concerns are overshadowed by the religious controversy surrounding the company.

The mill worker thus becomes a victim of events that he does not fully control. The closing chapter returns to his suffering through images of motherhood, animals, family, and loss. These images provide an emotional contrast to the absurd commercial ambitions with which the novel begins (Kulkarni 282). Through the mill worker's experiences, Kulkarni reminds readers

that political and religious conflicts have serious consequences for vulnerable people. The novel therefore moves beyond the failure of a commercial enterprise to examine the human cost of social inequality and public conflict.

Conclusion

Parashar Kulkarni's Cow and Company presents a humorous yet critical examination of colonial Indian society. Through the story of the British Chewing Gum Company, the novel explores the relationship between commercial ambition, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and social inequality. The conflict between paan and chewing gum reveals the difficulties involved in introducing foreign products into a society where traditional practices carry important cultural meanings. The British company believes that its product can replace paan, but its strategies repeatedly expose a limited understanding of Indian society.

The novel also criticises the misuse of scientific knowledge and commercial advertising. Young's surveys demonstrate how attempts to classify people through numerical information may overlook the complexity of social life. Similarly, the company's decision to use a cow in its advertising campaign reveals the dangers of treating religious symbols primarily as tools for commercial profit. Religious controversy forms another major part of the narrative. Kulkarni shows how rumours, public speeches, and competing interpretations can contribute to misunderstanding and violence. Through these events, the author draws attention to the ways in which religious sentiments may be influenced by political and economic interests.

Satire plays a central role in communicating these ideas. The novel's humorous incidents and exaggerated characters expose contradictions within both colonial institutions and Indian

society. Yet the humour is accompanied by serious reflections on poverty, exploitation, and human suffering. The experiences of the mill worker are particularly important because they reveal how the struggles of ordinary people can be overlooked during larger public controversies.

Thus, *Cow and Company* is more than a story about the unsuccessful introduction of chewing gum into colonial India. It offers a criticism of colonial authority, commercial greed, religious manipulation, and social inequality. The central finding of this paper is thatKulkarni uses the apparently simple conflict between paan and chewing gum to reveal deeper contradictions within colonial society. By combining humour with social criticism, the novel encourages readers to question the relationship between power, culture, religion, and everyday life.

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