

COLONIAL DISCOURSE AND THE POLITICS OF COMIC REPRESENTATION IN ANURAG MATHUR'S *THE INSCRUTABLE AMERICANS***Kumar Sankar Bhattacharya
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This paper deals with colonial discourse with reference to Anurag Mathur's The Inscrutable Americans. Comparing the novel to Christopher Columbus' discovery of the "Indians" and his subsequent hegemonic description, the paper reveals similarities of Columbus' overtures with the protagonist of the novel, Gopal's reduction of the American culture into Manichean binaries. However, Gopal's appropriation of the hegemonic structure turns out to be comic in the end because of his positionality. The potential of an "empire writes back" is thwarted in the process, as Gopal from India, never enjoys the power to "construct" the Occident -- a power that people like Columbus had always taken for granted.

In a letter to the King and Queen of Castile after his first voyage in 1493, Christopher Columbus described the place he had landed and its natives in European frame of reference. Columbus renamed the 'Indians' he saw and the unfamiliar things he encountered into European familiarity. He needed to define them as they were simply not like the Europeans. Columbus' overtures were not uncommon among the colonizers as Abdul R. Jan Mohamed writes in "The Economy of Manichean Allegory." He points out that colonial discourse operates on Manichean polarities of self-other, civilized-native, us-them and a 'native' is defined by "fixing him/her under the sign of the other" (21). But a text produced in a postcolonial society, according to Jan Mohamed, has opportunities to subvert by appropriating these Manichean binaries for oppositional and anti-colonial discourse. In my paper I demonstrate how Anurag Mathur's *The Inscrutable Americans* attempts to use these binaries to question Western hegemony and, at the same time how it fails in the end because of the protagonist, Gopal's positionality. Comparing Columbus' afore-mentioned letter with the letters and observations of Gopal on America, I attempt to explore the novel's presumed appropriation of the frame work of what Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin say in a different context as the "empire writes back."

Gopal, a resident of a small town in India comes to Eversville, in a small university campus for graduate studies. Though his initial knowledge and ideas are inadequate, like a typical colonizer he starts putting the Americans in identifiable brackets as he makes sweeping generalizations about the country and its people. However, the text reduces Gopal to a 'comic' hero through events of his personal 'discovery.' In spite of the novel having the potential to subvert and alter a hegemonic discourse through appropriation, it does not become a reality as Gopal never has the same kind of "power/knowledge" to "construct" America, a Foucauldian concept that Edward Said refers to in *Orientalism*. This power, as Said maintains, is only a prerogative of the 'West' to know the Orient and it helps to "constitute the Oriental other as a particular subject of discourse" (25). Although *The Inscrutable Americans* begins with attempts at reversing the orientalist view of the "inscrutable" East,

Gopal's story quickly degenerates into a "tale of a subcontinental Bumpkin at sea in the American heartland" (*The Washington Post*). He comes from the periphery and not the center of power like Columbus and hence, does not enjoy hegemonic authority to name/interpret things. He might question the normative American 'ritual' of football and mall culture, but, in turn, it points out his "ignorance"; he never gets any agency to reconstruct the occident in the text. The text also denies him the hybrid position beyond the already set up binaries. He remains a fool, a "bumpkin" to be more precise, till he becomes indoctrinated and infiltrated by the dominant American culture in the end.

While describing the natives in the letter to the King and Queen of Castile, Columbus termed the natives as barbaric and emphasized on the necessity of them being properly educated with the civilizational values of the West. Columbus's overtures were not unique as Abdul Jan Mohamed points out in "The Economy of Manichean Allegory." One of the distinct traits of the colonizers' "reading" of the native, Jan Mohamed writes, is to define the colonized by how they are not like the civilized race. Such an act forces the "other" to forego any specific subjectivity and become a "recipient of the negative elements of the self" (20) that the colonizers project onto him. Columbus's description of the natives and their way of living, testify to this colonial tradition. Quite similarly, Gopal, the protagonist of Anurag Mathur's *The Inscrutable Americans*, puts the Americans into compartments even before interacting with them. After landing in New York for the first time, and traveling with his friend Sunil through the streets of New York, Gopal observes how the native/American culture seems to him morally degrading and declares rather pompously how he needs to teach them superior Indian values:

I feel that we are all ambassadors from our country to America and if we are behaving well then they are having us in good books. 'I feel,' says Gopal, clearly warming to his theme, 'that because of our superior culture and all that we must set an example so that the Americans will improve their behavior and I feel that relations and things like that will also improve... (24)

Continuing in his assumption of the culture, Gopal writes to his brother about the American way of living after he reaches Eversville for his college. His act is in the true sense a very colonial endeavor where a colonialist exercising his assumed superiority, "destroys without any significant qualms the effectiveness of indigenous economic, social, political, legal and moral systems and imposes his own versions of these structures on the Other" (Jan Mohamed 20). Columbus' letter assumes such a role as he described the natives to the monarchy. He wrote: "The inhabitants of both sexes in this island, and in all the others which I have seen, or of which I have received information, go always naked as they were born, with the exception of some of the women, who use the covering of a leaf, or small bough, or an apron of cotton which they prepare for that purpose." For Columbus, nakedness showed the Other's complete lack of civilizational and moral values. Nakedness, similarly, evokes the same kind of response from Gopal. After the long brutal winter as the summer sets in, Gopal observes: "...as the trees sprouted new clothes, the people shed theirs. Something or the other is always naked here... [these people] ... casually took their clothes off and unselfconsciously began walking down the streets stark naked, almost" (217). Later when he continues to see "naked women" in the billboards all over, he outrageously muses perhaps America is a "nation of impotents and that is why they are having so many sexy advertisements everywhere" (61).

Moving from the moral degradation of the Americans, Gopal, like a colonizer focuses on the cultural aspects of the American life to show how potentially inferior they can be. Picking on the game of football, a quintessential American pastime and entertainment, he complains how the Americans misname stuff on their own: "The first thing that struck him was the sheer wrongness of it all. How typically American, he thought, to call a game football when it had little to do with the foot and nothing at all to do with a ball" (60). As he witnesses the game, his mind wanders back to the ball concept: "the ball – though nowhere else in the world would it be called that, since a ball is by

definition a sphere, a round object..." (60). As the game begins, he is astounded by what he calls "gladiatorial" endeavors where the players "merely bashed each other enthusiastically" (62) and fall upon each other "to wreak a mayhem" (62). However, explaining the game to his brother later in one of his letters, he expresses his relief in that sense that such potentially destructive power stays within the country itself:

What all to say, brother. This is not new country, it is new world. They are playing game which they are calling football in which they are beating each other without mercies for no reason. But now I am feeling that they should do more beating because if they are beating each other then at least they are not beating rest of world. (77)

Gopal finds out that the complete caricature of the English language in naming the football as the ball is only the tip of an iceberg. He writes to his brother how the Americans never speak English but the American language that is hard to follow. Giving examples, he writes how he is perplexed when his friends keep on telling him "get out of here" (189) after listening to his jokes. In another instance his friend Mike Smith confesses how he is a "son of a gun" (190). As Gopal asks his father's name, he said Mr. Smith. And Gopal is perplexed as Mike, few seconds ago has said that he is the "son of a gun." Gopal is also puzzled by the abundant use of "it" in daily conversations:

Someone says 'darn it' and there is nothing to sew. One fellow says 'beat it' and I am eager to beat him but supposing it is meaning something else? Or they say 'sit on it,' which is very kind of them, but there is nowhere to sit. On streets, stranger will ask 'Are you with it?' I ask, 'Are I with what?' He says 'Cool it'. Now, brother, what is this wonderful 'it' everywhere you will ask? (191)

In formal social interactions also, Gopal is very much apprehensive because of the use of this language. He thinks that "the entire package of greetings" in any American social gathering is "designed to make strong men faint" (214). For Gopal, who was "quite accustomed to being cordially ignored at most parties at home" the wave of greetings like "I have heard so much about you" or "How have you been" or "We have all been just dying to meet you" makes him positively frightened. Such delirium at his arrival suggests that he is "expected to perform amazing feats center stage or at the very least, party tricks" (214). Especially the greeting "I have heard so much about you" makes him nervous as he tries to gauge how much the greeter really knows which "perhaps ... [s/he] ... ought not to have known about him, but now most certainly did" (214).

Gopal's attempt to understand and interpret American culture reminds us of his appropriation of what Edward Said has referred to as "orientalism". While defining orientalism, Said explains how as a discourse and a systematic discipline, orientalism offers the occident opportunities to "manage – even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively..." (25). The most important tool for such maneuvers is perhaps "power moral (as with ideas about what 'we' do and what 'they' cannot do or understand as 'we' do)" (Said 27). Gopal's description of America certainly imitates this very trend of orientalism. But he cannot be successful in achieving the power to interpret things the way he likes to, as orientalism according to Said, is exclusively related to the power structure that the West only enjoys: "In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on the flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (26). Thus Gopal can keep on bragging about his morally superior Indian background, but he will seldom be taken seriously. Hence, his friend Randy at Eversville, in spite of knowing Gopal's family business in India has no qualms to declare how he knows Gopal's famine-stricken background:

To Gopal's regret, no amount of persuasion had been able to convince Randy that there weren't starving millions in India anymore. Gopal had once told him in desperation, "now even beggars are well-fed," but to no avail. Randy remained positive that Gopal was lying on

behalf of his country and that not only did everyone starve there, but Gopal's first square meal must have been eaten after he came to America. (138)

Gopal's attempt to what Ashcroft et al has termed as the "empire writes back" is never actualized even when he uses a typical colonial framework for expressing the other. He might bluntly tell Sally, who shows interest in him that he fails to remember meeting her elsewhere before as all Americans "look alike" (229) or he might think the beginning of sun bathing in sea shores with the advent of spring as signaling "some Dionysian revel, some orgiastic greeting to spring" (218), but at the end he remains an awkward misfit within the American culture. Unlike the colonizers, his background from a so-called developing country denies him the power to name, interpret and change things according to his whims. He ends up changing himself being indoctrinated in the end by the dominant American culture that he critiqued in the beginning.

Gopal's transformation seeps in unnoticed almost in the middle of his stay as he begins to end his letters with the typical American expression of advising his brother to "take care." It becomes extremely prominent when the time comes for Gopal to go back to India after his studies as he reflects how his American stay has converted him altogether:

It was like a dream ending. He felt that in a bare ten months he had gone from child to man. More had happened to him in these few months here than had in his previous two decades in India. Perhaps that was inevitable for any traveler, particularly if he came to a society as open, fast moving and aggressive as this. (237)

He is going back, but he is going to miss America. As he will begin working in his father's hair-oil company amidst the dust and squalor he will definitely look back with a longing:

He would remember the rust and gold trees, the mists in the winter, the sounds of a bar room, the rain on an early evening. Those first snowflakes dancing like him, white trees and a white world, and exuberant faces everywhere. It was such a fresh world. (239)

Initially Gopal's attempt to reconstruct the dominant American culture within a totalizing moral framework has effectively reduces the complexities of the American life into an "approximation of an idealized version" (Ashcroft 113) of Indian life. However, the ending of *The Inscrutable Americans* suggests impossibility on Gopal's part of "evading the destructive and marginalizing power of the dominant culture" (Ashcroft 114). When in many colonial and occidental productions there are horrifying expressions of the protagonists going native, in Gopal's case, his becoming Americanized in the end is celebrated. While people going native under Eastern/Oriental influence are derided, Gopal has been hailed as a person who has been properly educated in the West and in his own opinion has transformed ultimately to the "man" from a child. Thus, Gopal's story fails in the end to produce any alternative discourse. There are possibilities in the text where Gopal exhibits subversive strategies to dismantle the dominant structure, but such subversions never enable him to transcend his limitations of positionality thereby denying him the so-called colonial source of originality and strength that people like Columbus had always taken for granted.

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