

When the East Meets the West: Negotiating Upheavals Physical and Psychological in *The Inscrutable Americans*

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ABSTRACT

“Oh, East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet,” said Rudyard Kipling. Anurag Mathur’s *The Inscrutable Americans* not just chronicles such a meeting but prophesies happy tidings for the future in form of more such meetings of true minds. The saga of Gopal’s visit to the United States of America is a saga of India, for long caught up in the diffidence typical of a former colony, gradually emerging out of the cocoon and after a lot of uncertain baby steps, step into confident strides in its engagement with the global superpower. The language in which the novel is scripted effortlessly captures Gopal’s predicament in the USA, his coming to terms with it and his growth in awareness of myriad kinds. The novel therefore offers a kaleidoscopic view of the early 1990’s India. With the help of a rib-tickling narrative, Mathur captures the Indian psyche of those times by tracing the roller coaster ride that characterised one year in the life of the country bumpkin – Gopal, in America. The paper thus traces the trajectory of Gopal’s growth and how it mirrors the story of his native land.

KEYWORDS

Colony; east-west encounter; post-independence India.

The Inscrutable Americans by Anurag Mathur scrutinises the events that unfold when the pre-economic liberalisation India meets America, igniting sparks of chaos, confusion, energy, excitement, ambition and aspiration. The novel offers a kaleidoscopic view of the early 1990’s India, represented primarily through the character of Gopal. With the help of a rib-tickling narrative, Mathur captures the Indian psyche of those times by tracing the roller coaster ride that characterised one-year in the life of the country bumpkin – Gopal, in America.

What makes the book worth reading is Mathur’s success in capturing

the flavour of both the Indian and American experience in the 200 odd pages of the novel. However, at times, especially when he details the American obsession with sex, he seems to get stuck into a groove from which he barely manages to disentangle himself. In spite of the interment hiccups, the novel seems to flow, all the while tickling the funny bone of the readers.

The hilarious strain begins from the beginning of the novel when in an epistolary fashion Mathur presents Gopal’s first effusions penned to his brother in India from the US of A where he

has gone to pursue a one-year course in Chemical Engineering.

The communique is a pointer as to what lies ahead in the novel for it introduces Gopal as a God-fearing, well-bred boy from the rural heartland of India who begins all meaningful work by greeting "Respectful parents" (Mathur 9). Like a good son of the 'Indian' soil, he respects the learned Dr. Verma's advice and is "Strictly avoiding American women and other unhealthy habits." (Mathur 9) which include eating non-vegetarian food. An obedient and caring boy, he has to compromise going to "bathroom" (Mathur 9) to honour his superstitious grandmother's advice to sit on the coroner seat and then because he did not have the heart to disturb the two old ladies sitting beside him (of course after getting down at the airport he confesses about "going to long bathroom" (Mathur 10). Mathur, by means of the letter, successfully showcases the non-metro Indian psyche, the (mis?)use of English by the majority of Indians and also the innocence which is to characterise Gopal throughout the novel.

Empathizing with this "hopeless, gangling, earnest young man" (Mathur 27) is easy. His gullibility is seen in the way he responds with genuine surprise at the American custom officer's request to watch his ass. Gopal wonders "Now brother, this is wonderful, how is he knowing we are purchasing donkey?" (Mathur 11). He believes that CIA with its incredible powers is responsible for the secret being leaked out. What takes the cake is his very spontaneous expression that the "most surprising thing about America is that it is full of Americans. Everywhere Americans, Americans big and white, it is little frightening." (Mathur 9)

After the letter, Mathur adopts the third person narration and directly comes to the point that is central to the novel-the American obsession with sex. Huge billboards displaying near nude females

flummox Gopal's prudish Indian mentality. His cultural shock is well understood by his cousin Sunil. However, Sunil is also aware that sex is central to the American psyche and that the Americans have no qualms about taking the bedroom to the billboard. It is this country that has the maximum synonyms indicating the sex act as Eskimos have the maximum synonyms for ice and Indians have many words to describe their several relatives.

The author is able to verbalize with sensitivity the feeling that Gopal experiences when he first beholds the New York landscape. His first flirtations with American technology, his bewilderment when the well-dressed American offers to sell him some live pussy which he translates into "Vegetarian Cats" (Mathur 22), his confusion as to whether the red haired ladies have red hair "all over" (Mathur 28), his amazement as to why Randy calls himself by that name or his inability to digest the fact that Americans use common bathrooms that scarcely provide any privacy offer subtle comments on his personality and also hint at the emotional make of the country that he belongs to.

Randy's characterization as a sexually overcharged exuberant young man, to whom laying girls comes as second nature, too is the source of humour. His penchant for dragging sex into all objects of his contemplation seems to make his character a caricature of the American society. A closer reading inspires one to believe that Randy could more be a reality than an exception or even a caricature. His effervescent romantic self could even be spotted in any of the twenty first century Americanized metropolitan campuses even in India.

A cursory reader could blame Mathur for not presenting well developed characters and plot. This criticism may not be so well directed because Mathur seems to have done justice keeping in mind the limited canvas in which the novel is set. He

presents one year in the life of a young Indian in a foreign shore – a year in which the young man, uprooted from his familiar surroundings, does grow in awareness. The novelist successfully narrates the story of the American joy/shock ride that propels Gopal's growth as an individual. This makes Gopal's character richly interesting. However, the natives of the foreign land where he goes, continue their routine life facing no such turbulence. Hence these characters appear comparatively flattish.

What Mathur does is to capture what 'is' (an exaggerated 'is') and does not attempt to push it towards any logical end. This in itself is appreciable and it helps him introduce the American people and paraphernalia to the uninitiated foreign readers and his 'two-edged narration' also reminds them of their own ways-looked upon as strange by the westerners. Though many a time his American characters border on being caricatures, Mathur is successful in providing a 'sting' of the American experience.

Randy, for example, lives but does not grow because the time frame of the novel does not permit his growth nor does the action demand it. Life for him during the year that Gopal leads in America flows as it had been flowing all along. Nothing drastic happens to warrant a change. Therefore, he carries on with his happy go lucky ways and throughout the year he takes up one or the other missions which have sex at their centre. His 'Operation devirginisation' of Gopal being one such 'noble' obsession of his.

The character of Gloria too is not a well developed one but that does not make it any less endearing. The fat lady who hides her melancholy behind her boisterous laughter and clumsy mannerisms is a realistic presentation. Her crush for Gopal who is no match for her in size or age, her penchant for penning pretty love poems addressed to him, mark her as a comic figure that is

lovable because of and besides the comedy she generates.

Ann, Randy's friend, like the naked ladies on the billboards, the semi-nude cheerleaders in the rugby game or the nude dancers in the dance bars further the theme of sex finding a democratic existence in America. She has a proclaimed ambition of sleeping with one thousand different men. Within three hectic years, she was just one short of her target, who she decided should be a virgin male so that her journey could literally end with a bang. Needless to say, locating a needle in a haystack would be easier than zeroing on a virgin man in America. Hence Ann's target becomes Gopal whose virgin status at twenty-one made him an inscrutable character for Randy, but a prize catch for her!

The novel merits appreciation for the narration, which is nimble, which does not drag on and there does not seem to be an attempt to stretch the storyline. Shorn of all thematic and narratorial complexities, the novel is a simple description of an interesting year spent in America by a young Indian untrained in American ways. Hence, all the characters that appear seem immensely 'next door' types and hence welcome. Be it the store keeper who becomes delirious when Gopal in a true Indian style bargains with him and that too successfully, or the old American lady who was curious as to whether Indians drove elephants in the daytime as well as in the nighttime and whether "they have headlights and lights that blink when they drove at night?" (Mathur 122) or the similarity that unites the mothers across the globe stretching from Gopal's mother in Jajay to Randy's mother in a remote American village, all seem to find their natural place in the scheme of things.

Mathur also touches upon sensitive issues like racism. Gopal is a victim of a brutal racist attack in which he very nearly lost his manhood! However, the majority

of the Americans in the novel are seen to suffer from no such sense of racial superiority as far as their dealing with the Asians is concerned. In fact, the way the rest of the American world raises their voice in support of Gopal is comforting to say in the least. American attitude in the novel seems to be one of either a gregarious acceptance or of unconcern but is seldom malevolent. This compares favourably with countless threats that lurk on the streets of Indian metropolitan cities.

Even the act of the head-waiter who disregards Gopal's presence when he visits the restaurant and who later on is seen to distribute pamphlets against non-Americans seems to be more an act inspired by economics rather than racial hatred. His protest seems to echo the current din in America on the outsourcing of American businesses to India. The head-waiter is worried about non-Americans gobbling up the American jobs and he considers himself a victim. He rues the fact that though a trained mechanic, he has to work as a head-waiter in a restaurant.

However, Peacock's presentation of the racial discrimination in America, especially the condition of the Negroes vis-à-vis the whites is chilling. He takes Gopal with him to witness the other side-the dark underbelly of the magnificent US of A. Gopal is stunned to see the squalor and filth of the colony in which the blacks lived- a far cry from the affluence of the other side of the New York City. A junkyard separated the two Americas.

All said and done this novel is the story of Gopal and his travails. It is a story of his starting off with the determination of protecting the so called 'Indian culture' at all costs, to deciding to follow the 'in'

thing in America and get laid, but being a miserable failure in all his attempts to relieve himself of his virginity which clung on to him with a tenacious determination until finally in an unexpected twist to the tale, losing his virginity in an aircraft toilet on his way back to India. His partner in sex was a middle-aged housewife. The novel thus ends with Gopal freeing himself of the baggage of the 'sacred' Indian culture!

However, Gopal in a very 'Indian' way is always very chauvinistic about his country and would always rise to its full-throated defence- once he informs a circumspect American that India has a four-thousand-year-old culture. Not satisfied, the man questions Gopal: "How come no one ever hears of it? I mean no offence, but let's face it, who's heard of India" (Mathur 35). To this Gopal answers in his signature style: "Well, Christopher Columbus is hearing. What do you think he is looking for when he is discovering America?" (Mathur 35). This confidence is a far cry from his first days in the Big Apple when a radio alarm had frightened the wits out of him.

Towards the end of the novel Gopal himself feels he "had gone from child to man" (Mathur 237). All the incidents right from his first encounter with Randy, to his trying to strike a chord with the inscrutable American attitude to sex, his frustrated love for Sue, his involvement with the American education system and his surprise at the way in which America was different from India-right from the way in which they drove their cars on the left side to the way in which they lived their life, his journey to America had changed Gopal forever as Mathur's novel would change forever the way in which novels are written.

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