

## **India: A Distorted View in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Atlas Shrugged* published in 1957, highlights the role of the mind in a man's existence and exemplifies a new moral philosophy that was starting to influence mankind in the twentieth century; the morality of rational self-interest. Since its publication, the book has been a topic of intense debate for several reasons. Rating it as one of the top ten books of twentieth-century John Bowdon considers it as the "most fascinating book of the twentieth century" (Butler-Bowdon 247). Some reviews rate it next only to Bible in terms of popularity. The book is a dystopian allegory in which men of action from all spheres of society are found struggling against the stifling regulations imposed by an over-reaching government, which leads to the shutdown of one industry after another, arresting all production, and bringing the world economy to its knees. Rand's philosophy, which she refers to as "Objectivism" in essence, is the philosophy of rational individualism and taps onto the American ideals of freedom, hard work and individualism. The spokespersons in the book advocating for the mystics of muscle and the mystics of spirit, representing the clash of two ideologies, communism and liberal capitalism, provide the thesis and the antitheses of her philosophy. Though the book was debated for many years, Rand's ideas are now taken as conventional wisdom and therein lies the real fear that a distorted image of India, Indian culture and Indian philosophies, evident in Rand's work will be established in the minds of the new readers.

### **KEYWORDS**

Mystics of spirit; mystics of muscle; India.

### **Introduction**

Since its publication in 1957, Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* has been a topic of intense debate for several reasons. The book became significant because it highlighted the role of the mind in a man's existence and exemplified a new moral philosophy that was beginning to influence mankind in the twentieth century; the morality of rational self-interest. Rating it as one of the top ten books of twentieth-century John Bowdon considers it as the "most fascinating book of the twentieth century" (Butler-Bowdon 247). Some

other reviewers rated it next only to Bible in terms of popularity.

The book is a dystopian allegory in which men of action from all spheres of society are seen struggling against the stifling regulations imposed by an over-reaching and inept government, leading to the shutting down of one industry after another, arresting all production, and bringing the world economy to a standstill. Rand's philosophy of "Objectivism" and rational individualism taps into the American ideals of freedom, hard work and individualism. The spokespersons in the

book advocating for the mystics of muscle and the mystics of spirit, representing the clash of two ideologies, communism and liberal capitalism, provide the thesis and the antitheses of her philosophy. Though the book was debated for many years, Rand's ideas are now taken as conventional wisdom and therein lies the real fear that a distorted image of India, Indian culture and Indian philosophy, evident in Rand's work will be established in the minds of the new readers.

### **Mystics of Spirit and Mystics of Muscle**

The real villains in the novel on the textual level are nothing but the embodiment of either the mystics of spirit or the mystics of muscle. John Galt, the protagonist of the novel in his radio speech defends his philosophy of rational self-interest. He equates spiritualists and materialists with the mystics of spirit and muscle respectively. He talks of two kinds of teachers, who promote the morality of death and destruction. They are the products of the split between man's soul and body and advocate the soul-body dichotomy. Both demand the surrender of our minds, one to their revelations and the other to their reflexes. Their aims are common:

No matter how loudly they posture in the roles of irreconcilable antagonists, their moral codes are alike, and so are their aims; in the matter—the enslavement of man's body, in spirit—the destruction of his mind (Rand 940)

### **Mystics of Spirit: A Concept**

The mystics of spirit, according to John Galt, define God as one that is beyond man's power to conceive and man's mind must be subordinated to the will of God. God's standards must be accepted on faith. The purpose of man's life is unknown and he has not to question it. His reward will be given to him beyond the grave. Selfishness is man's evil and self-denial and sacrifice is

the highest virtue. The mystics of spirit declare that they possess a special sixth sense which contradicts the whole of the knowledge acquired through our five senses. They invalidate our own consciousness and ask us to surrender ourselves to their power.

They offer you, as proof of their superior knowledge, the fact that they assert the opposite of everything you know, and as a proof of their superior ability to deal with existence, the fact that they lead you to misery, self-sacrifice, starvation, destruction (Rand 947)

They claim that they perceive a mode of being superior to our existence on this earth. They refer to it as "another dimension," which consists of denying dimensions. The mystics of spirit curse matter; they wish men to profit by renouncing the earth. Their non-material worlds are realms where everything happens automatically. Things get produced instantly by any magical formula. They don't even count human intelligence, energy, skills and expertise to invent modes of any production. For them, a question "how" for these miracles is the concept of vulgar realists; the concept of superior spirits is "Somehow." In short, they deny the contribution of thinking to the development of the human world. For centuries they have put faith over reason. They are the enemies of the mind. They are the creators of the soul-body dichotomy. For them to wish is to create

And that wish is the whole of their shabby secret. The secret of all their esoteric philosophies, of all their dialectics and super-senses, of their evasive eyes and snarling words, the secret for which they destroy civilization, language, industries and lives (Rand, 948)

### **Representation of India in *Atlas Shrugged* and Interpretations**

It seems that Ayn Rand takes India as a symbol of mystics of spirit. For westerners, the early interpretations of Hindu religious scriptures were doctrines of anti-materialism, *Moksha* and anti-capitalism. India has been a point of interest for the world since the beginning of civilization. For a long time, there has been a habit of linking India with spirituality. India has always been a setting for the mystical. The writer Henri Michaux once wrote, "In India there is nothing to see-everything to interpret" (kirkusreviews, n.d.). Henri Michaux designates himself a barbarian in Asia and he felt no qualms in expressing his opinions in his book entitled, *A Barbarian in Asia*. He does not insist on Western superiority but acknowledges that through his Western eyes much seems unusual, odd, and inexplicable and for Asians, it is "far from politically correct .....though natives of these lands might take offense" (kirkusreviews, n.d.).

Knowingly or unknowingly, Ayn Rand takes India as a symbol of the evil created by the so called mystics of spirit. She portrays certain wicked industrialists like Starnes brothers and how the most wicked of them Ivy Starnes tries to follow the Hindu and oriental asceticism after destroying the lives of the workers in her industry. It appears an intentional employment of symbols and deities to prove that India is a site native to the mystics of spirit. She compares the looters to both the mystics of the flesh and spirit through her protagonist John Galt. He says that these mystics fly from one form to the other, but their fight is against thinking. Rand holds that Indian philosophy becomes a perfect mask for these moochers. If readers visualize Indians as mystics of spirit, a catastrophic effect might be cast on the understanding of Indian philosophy.

### **Rand's Distorted Image of India**

The following textual instances can serve to highlight my observations:

1: Dagny, in search of the inventor of the motor reaches to one of the heirs of Starnes. The evil schemes of Starnes heirs destroyed the Twentieth Century Motor Company and the people working in it. The narrator describes the ill smelling bungalow of Ivy Starnes. The smell came from undusted corners and from incense burning in silver jars at the feet of "*contorted Oriental deities*". Ivy Starnes sat on a pillow like "*a baggy Buddha*"(Rand, 300). Ayn Rand chooses oriental deity worship as a solace for this looter, Starnes girl and what she stands for by comparing her with Buddha?

2: The second reference comes in the same chapter during the dialogues exchanged between the heroine, Dagny Taggart and Ivy Starnes. At the end of the dialogue, Ivy states that she has retired from the world of machines, and manufacturers and money for that world is enslaved by matter. She is practising the emancipation of the spirit, as revealed in the *great secrets of India*. According to her, these secrete propagate the release from the bondage of flesh, the victory over physical nature and the triumph of spirit over matter. Dagny becomes angry at the hypocritical behaviour of Ivy Starnes. The Twentieth Century Motor Company in its heyday was the best in the country. Starnesville was the name for the owners of the company, the Starnes family. The hero, John Galt going to work for this company after graduating and informs the readers something about its reputation of it. After Jed Starnes, his three children took over the factory. These children were all horrible people who ran the factory to the ground and inspired Galt to begin his crusade. They preached the slogan, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Basically, they did away with salaries and had people 'vote' on what others should earn based on their 'needs.' This turned out to be a disaster. Ivy Starnes was considered the

worst of them. Ivy sadistically preys on people's emotions and enjoys tormenting them. In this respect, she is what Galt calls a 'looter of the spirit' and has a lot in common with James Taggart and other antagonistic characters in the novel, who also enjoy destroying people for their ambitions, whims and amusement. What's truly horrible about Ivy is that she acts sadistically but speaks in terms of charity and brotherly love. She embodies the very worst what Galt considers looter ideology. She chooses Indian religious practices and philosophy to hide her crimes.

3. India is referred to as a country which "has existed for centuries without any industrial development whatever" (Rand, 868). One of the opportunists Dr. Ferris proclaims that there is an unnecessary overemphasis on industrial development and quotes the example of a nation like India which has survived without any kind of industrialization for centuries disproves this thing. The time of the novel is assumed as some remote time span in the future. It is surprising that the author doesn't believe, India will be industrialized any time soon, even in the remote future.

4. Dagny Taggart observes that the looters are content to return to a pre-industrial age, like a fat, unhygienic *Raja* of India (Kings in India) who will rule his impoverished subjects by force. It will be an unstated promise that their subjects will produce enough for there to be something to loot. According to Dagny, the Rajas will be against electronic factories as they cannot think about anything beyond their luxuries. They are the sources of inspiration for feudal barons in the story world of the novel. It is evident that Rand is ignorant of Indian history where there ruled also very liberal kings and emperors like Chandragupta, Ashoka, Akbar and many more like them. If it is a conscious choice on the part of Rand, perceptions of early American thinkers of Indian history must be re-checked.

5. Later in the novel, in his radio speech that Galt makes, he compares the backward Indians and developed Americans. He tries to prove to the listeners that they make conscious mistakes by regarding the 'fortune makers' inferior to the 'fortune tellers'. The following remark would have been politically and culturally controversial had the author set the novel in a contemporary time frame:

You who claim to rise above the crude concerns of the body, above the drudgery of serving mere physical needs—who is enslaved by physical needs: the Hindu who labors from sunrise to sunset at the shafts of hand-plow for a bowl of rice, or the American who is driving a tractor? Who is the conqueror of physical reality: the man who sleeps on the bed of nails or the man who sleeps on an inner-spring mattress? Which is the monument of the triumph of the human spirit over matter: the germ-eaten hovels on the shorelines of the Ganges or the Atlantic Skyline of New York? (Rand, 963)

6. There are references to other nations like People's State of Chile, Mexico as these states have gone forth to nationalize private property. In the novel, we are told that US was going to grant loan to People's Republic of Argentina and Chile and send relief supplies to People's State of France and Germany. China is mentioned as a state unable to have even enough nails to put wooden roofs over people's heads and Guatemala is mentioned as a State which declines US's request for loan of steel. References to People's State of Norway, Portugal, Turkey and England are made only in relation to the pirate, Ragner Danneksjold.

## **Conclusion**

It thus becomes evident that Ayn Rand paints India as a land of mystics of

spirit and the land which philosophizes the anti-human activities of the enemies of the mind, who are portrayed as the villains in *Atlas Shrugged*. The villains in the novel are the moochers, feigned thinkers, shallow scientists and opportunistic political leaders. Rand might have witnessed the growing attraction of the West, particularly the United States for the Hindu spiritual gurus and their practices. Her views might have been inspired by the religious nuances of the Eastern world view or the Anglo-American conceptions of 'otherness'. However, such textual references targeted against a specific nation can open up a myriad interpretation, understanding or misunderstanding of India. This presentation of India might be an

antithesis of the theory of objectivism and the myopic vision of the then western world that Rand proposed. Henri Michauxh comments on Indians in *A Barbarian in Asia* as the people who are so exasperating to the European, contemplative, idolatrous, slow, sensual, intolerant and immovable and practitioners of many austerities and cruelties. Could it have been a stereotypical representation of Indians, one that the Westerners held in those decades? The fact remains that, this distorted image of India in one of the most popular works of the twentieth century fiction of the world ought to encourage us to undertake a critical study of this work from the 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective of India.

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