

Barriers of Language, Mores and Manners in *the Inscrutable Americans*

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Abstract

The novel, *The Inscrutable Americans* by Anurag Mathur tells the story of the protagonist Gopal, a nascent youngster from an idyllic village in India going to America for his studies. The problems he encounters in the 'other world' makes the novel a hilarious narration. A deep study of the novel reveals how the barriers of language, mores and manners create a cultural divide between the Orient and the Occident.

KEYWORDS: geographical space, ideological space, nuanced cultural positions, nascent, duality, acculturation

Introduction

The protagonist of the novel, *The Inscrutable Americans* by Anurag Mathur gives a very simpleton image of a pious Indian youth which also attracts the western attention. Gopal the Indian boy who goes to America for the first time is shown as an orthodox boy who is vegetarian. He writes back to his brother about his experience in the flight: "Many foods are being served in carts but I am only eating cashewnuts and bread because I am not knowing what is food and what is meat. I am having good time drinking 37 glasses of Coca-Cola" (9).

Gopal has totally a different background. In India he has been advised to keep away from girls and non-vegetarian food. In the beginning of the novel he writes in his letter to his brother, "I am also constantly remembering Dr.Verma's advice and strictly avoiding American women and other unhealthy habits"(9). In Gopal's life priorities are different: "...A life, he concluded, devoted largely to selling hair oil, was a far more sensible one. Let the Americans keep their obsession with sex and romance and let them pay for it. It would be good revenge for Vietnam" (171).

Traditional Indian boys are shown as abstaining from drinking alcohol, smoking and womanizing. Sunil who receives Gopal in America asks Gopal if he has plans to date girls. Gopal's reply is reflective of the unblemished character of the Indian youth: "'Oh, no, brother', erupted Gopal with excessive force. 'Never brother. I am promising everyone that I am not meeting girls or drinking or smoking. I am only going to study, brother,' he swore piously" (23). Gopal is advised to eat the food prepared by Brahmins from his family and that seems to be stretching it too far as Gopal himself is not a brahmin. Gopal writes in his letter: "Then there is vegetarian food problem and I am promising my grandmother I will only eat food cooked by Brahmins and how I am to know if there are any Brahmins in Hank's Delivery Service, though I don't think so" (40). The novel is hilarious due to the problems Gopal faces in America because of the barriers of language, mores and manners.

Problematized Language

The novel is all about Gopal, a nineteen year old tall, lanky and bespectacled simpleton who spends one year in Eversille University. His naïve ways in the USA account for a lot of comical anecdotes and the language used, with its typical Indian English features like the overuse of present progressive form and awkward translations from mother tongue, gives a befitting atmosphere for the story. The novel begins with Gopal's letter to his younger brother:

Beloved Younger Brother,

Greetings to Respectful parents. I am hoping all is well with health and wealth. I am fine at my end. Hoping your end is fine too. With God's grace and Parents' Blessings I am arriving safely in America and finding good apartment near University. Kindly assure Mother that I am strictly consuming vegetarian food only in restaurants though I am not knowing if cooks are Brahmins. I am also constantly remembering Dr.Verma's advice and strictly avoiding American women and other unhealthy habits. I hope Parents' Prayers are residing with me. (9)

The way Americans use English language puzzles Gopal and his lack of understanding of the American English add to the rollicking humour of the novel. Gopal writes in a letter to his brother, "...I am finding "take it easy" is only American for good-bye. I am not knowing why they cannot speak like others in world" (77). Gopal's difficulty in understanding the usages like, "Take it easy", "get off my back", "so long", "stick it", "beat it", "sit on it", "cool it", "Are you with it", "How is it going", "Totally nuts", and "watch your ass" also contribute to comical situations in the novel. Gopal refuses to believe that the Americans speak English and he admits in another letter to his brother: "Biggest thing is language. It is earlier making many problematics for me, because like everyone I am thinking Americans are speaking English. But Brother it is not English, it is American. I am facing so many embarrassing on this reason" (189).

English language shows clear cut difference in its usage in India and in America. The novel begins with the protagonist's letter to his parents as mentioned earlier. It is full of the misuse of stative verbs in the present progressive tense. Otherwise also, excessive use of the present progressive can be seen as a general Indian characteristic (9-10). Further, ridiculous English translations from mother tongue also can be seen. The first paragraph of the novel is the first paragraph of Gopal's letter to his brother. At the same time, the English used in America is also a farfetched variant. Gopal, often, is puzzled at the American informal usages. Further, the Americans use double negatives in their informal conversation like "We aintneedin nothing foreign" (176).

In India people make a habit to argue even just for the sake of argument: "It was common to find people entering a room vehemently rejecting what everyone else was saying, or had said, or indeed might say" (174). But the case in America is different:

... though the American personality contained many positive elements, it lacked the essential one of enjoying arguments. People either said "yes" or "no" or sometimes a "maybe". If they liked something they said so and if they didn't they let you know that too. Sometimes they were even polite about it, but decisively so. If they didn't walk away, it was a dangerous sign, portending physical violence. (173)

Randy gives the first rule of survival in the USA. “Never take no shit from anybody. They give you shit; you give back two buckets of shit” (30).

Divide of Mores and Manners

Many incidents in the novel subtly bring forth the cultural differences between the East and the West. One such difference is in the choice of food. In the flight itself Gopal takes only cashew nuts and bread because “I [Gopal] am not knowing what is food and what is meat” (9). Regarding food habits, many Indians are traditionally vegetarians. Gopal’s grandmother asks him to prefer food prepared by Brahmins (16). Gopal even does not consider meat as food. In his first letter he tells that he took only cashew nuts and bread because he does not know “what is food and what meat is” (9). Americans are better, regarding the conditions of hygiene and Sunil and his friend laugh at Gopal when he asks for boiled water (16). Further a hint to the alarming rate of pollution in India is given. “Gopal’s own home town, on the other hand, wrapped itself in a blanket of dust and grime, much of it, sad to admit, contributed by the National Hair Oil factory. Some inkling of this difference seemed to occur to Gopal” (19). The problem of the “sacred cow” pops up in this novel. A drunken Gopal takes steaks in a hotel and later is shocked to know that steak is nothing but beef. Gopal’s friend Randy explains about the “sacred cows” and the waiter stammers, “I can assure you that that ... that American cows are’nt as sacred as Indian cows, sir” (118).

The novel shows a vast gulf between the West and the East in matters of sex and romance. Gopal gets a narrow escape from a tall negro who tries to sell “real live pussy” (27) for Gopal and Gopal wonders how advanced America is as they sell “vegetable cats” (22). He also wonders at the plentitudes of bill boards with bare female figures. Sunil, who receives Gopal in America, thinks that the main thing America is obsessed with is Sex. “The sex act has more names in America than anything else....The problem though is that not only are they obsessed with sex, they’re making the rest of the world equally crazy” (26). Sunil further ponders:

I don’t think he’s seen pictures of as many naked women in all his life as he has after driving half a day on America’s streets. It’ll be a bloody miracle if he doesn’t turn into a raging sex maniac. And what’s that going to do to his father’s preachings and mother’s warnings and a lifetime of the straight and narrow? Well, he concluded, if it does’t kill him, he’ll go back a new man. God help Jajau then. (27)

The university student, Randy, who receives Gopal at Everssvilleair port curiously proves as leading a bit “randy” life in his real life also. He is shown as a typical American youth in matters of sex and romance. He keeps on changing his girl friends. When he knows that Gopal is still a “virgin”; he starts “operation devirginisation” for Gopal. When he is disappointed even after two weeks of Gopal’s reaching America, he rebukes Gopal: “And what’s been your strike rate? Zero. I mean zilch. I mean if I had to go without it for two weeks, nothing, and I do mean nothing, would be safe in a radius of 50 miles” (57-58). It is a psychological trait of boys to consider sex as a game as Lewis MacLeod says: “...they [boys] treat sex as a kind of athletic achievement and readily compare statistics....”(165) and often they find enjoyment in boasting about their sexual feats.

The hair-dresser girl Ann is shown as a typical American girl who is crazy about sex. Randy plots in such a way that Gopal gets an opportunity with the easy accessible

girl, although he does not break the news to Gopal that Ann is: "...legendary in Eversville for her proclaimed ambition of sleeping with one thousand different men . . . She had only one left to reach the magic figure and she was determined to achieve this through the services of a virgin male so that her odyssey ended, as she put it to Randy, 'with a bang' "(80). The anecdote clearly shows that "Human sexuality clearly involves much more than procreation" (229), as Hans Bertens clearly states. The places and functions where Randy takes Gopal for his "devirginisation" operation shows the sex life of the Americans. The scene of a college foot ball game is described:

In trotted a line of young ladies who seemed to have mislaid their clothing on this cold and windy day and who were therefore attired in their underwear.

To Gopal's total and helpless mystification, they began to perform vigorous exercises alternating with violent orgiastic motions. To this they added cries of ecstasy which faintly reached Gopal. Not really believing his eyes, he carefully looked around, fully prepared to witness a veritable hailstorm of trousers being shed as the males in the audience responded to the unmistakable invitation extended by the undressed lovelies below, as they prepared to descend for what, Gopal feared, would be a gang bang unmatched since Cleopatra. (61)

The difference of the two cultures is very clear as Gopal finds it very difficult to face the almost naked ladies who appear everywhere in the summer season:

Gopal found it extremely difficult to be courteous and respectful to women who wore shorts that displayed half their bottom. And all winter he had been civil to them, he thought in confusion, without once suspecting them of such legs, much less such bottoms.

Bottoms! He thought in amazement. They had blossomed everywhere, like sunflowers. (217)

Gopal is greatly impressed by the ingenuity of the Americans in making and using machines and other gadgets as easy solutions in everyday life. The luxurious American cars, parking lots, malls, machines that gorge food, educational facilities and open air movie theatres often make Gopal to draw a comparison or rather a contrast with those in India. Take for example, the case of Education. Professors are called by their first name and brilliant students are allowed to take tests and to move to next class. Greater amount of freedom and encouragement seem to prevail in the American academia. Gopal writes in a letter: "One is [one of the American professors] saying to me, 'My name is Sam, not Sir Sam. The British are not knighting me yet' " (55).

Gopal feels that in India one gets the best education in the lower classes and gets all the basics very well. But later when it comes to higher studies the students are not allowed or encouraged to deviate from the traditional ways. Students are not allowed to think or experiment freely. The students are not encouraged to question the traditional modes. They are not to put forth questions like:

Why were they constructed as they were? What was the intent and what the result? Could they be improved upon? Such questioning would have been heresy to his Indian teachers, a scandal. But they had done their job and Gopal had left them behind. He often considered

amusedly with what horror they would react to his questions and the viewpoints he held now. But now he thought of them, the giants of his childhood, as dusty, shrunken old men with barred minds.

Here, he exulted, they loved questions. They didn't care if they were insane, in fact the crazier the better, so long as they were also intelligent. (147)

Gopal also feels that "he received more compliments in one month in America on his abilities and his work, than he had received in all his life in India put together" (147). Gopal also thinks that the much discussed brain drain happens in India not because of the better monetary benefits and material comforts, but because of the lack of congenial work atmosphere in India:

... why there's a brain drain, he [Gopal] thought. It wasn't often any longer out of a desire for a more comfortable life in America – in India an affluent person usually lived better than one in America – but it was also for the sheer bliss of a friendly, supportive, well-equipped, encouraging work environment. It could be to get away from the fierce, eternal, all-encompassing hatred with which colleagues in India battled each other and everybody else, usually for no discernible reason other than habit. Transplanted to America, however, they were transformed into paragons of efficiency and tolerance, mused Gopal. (147-148)

Gopal is surprised to see classrooms in which students keep their feet on the table, smoke or sip coffee from paper cups (111):

He [Gopal] contrasted this with India where the students projected a nearly unseemly reverence for their teacher and an apparently hypnotized interest in his pearls of wisdom. In reality they were probably even more bored than the Americans so candidly demonstrated, but at least, Gopal thought indignantly, they had the decency to hide. (112)

There is also a humorous observation about the ways of the American females, especially in their courtesy and hospitality. In America their behaviour changes from one extreme to the other as they move from their teenage to old age. For instance, American girls in their teens always have "gum-chewing insolence" and lack of respect towards visitors (213):

"Yeah?" they grunted nastily. Sometimes they didn't even do that, merely raising their eyebrows in disgust. In the more extreme cases, they didn't even bother to raise their eyebrows. They just stared in expressionless contempt. But as they began to grow older, the volume and intensity of their hellos began to increase, till by college it was nearly civil. By the time they began working, it became positively human. At marriage a quantum leap into excessive delight took place. And you knew someone had entered middle age when she opened the door and on beholding you her effusions made you suspect that this was by far the most significant, memorable and thrilling moment of her life. (213-214)

The novel also provides numerous differences between the Indian ways of life and the American ways of life. Gopal's speaking loudly like a trumpet(13), bargaining in

the shops in the USA, drinking thirty seven glasses of coca-cola in the flight (9), botheration about CIA sabotage even when a lady smacks a kiss on Gopal as a sign of friendship (196), when a Santa Clause, one of his classmates, calls him by name and when a customs official taunts Gopal to “watch your ass” (presuming that it was about an ass recently bought at home), all are shown as typical follies of the Indian youth. When Randy comes to know that Gopal is still “virgin” (44), he replies; “Well. Holy shit, I don’t think I’ve ever met one before. It’s not infectious, is it? Stay away from me” (44). He then swears that he will get Gopal laid (45), before going back to India. He later calls the mission as “Operation Devirginisation” (53).

But during the winter vacation he feels so lonely and miserable that he dares out to go in search of some adventure to a massage parlour of which the pamphlet announced as “fulfilling your every fantasy” (200). But when he goes there spending \$ 75, he merely gets a massage. He is infuriated and gets hold of the girl’s hand. But she threatens to call the police. Thus Gopal is once again terribly frustrated. Later when the spring season comes, all of America is full of almost naked bodies enjoying sunbath. Gopal is amazed at the very thought of bottoms which “had blossomed everywhere like sunflowers” (217): “He beheld acres of female flesh, glistening and undulating like vast water bed. They lay there so naked and purposeless, that it looked like a giant invitation card” (217) and Gopal desperately decides to end up his yearlong celibacy. He then seeks the help of the expert Randy. Randy is surprised that Gopal is still a celibate and takes him to a beach party at night where the sole dancer lady, Samantha, is mating with all the gathered males who want the act. Samantha is lying naked. Men one by one go to her to be consummated in the final act. Randy pushes Gopal when a figure walks out of her. But Gopal is once again delayed as he is skeptical of “those men before and disease” (224.) At last when Gopal is more or less ready for the act, another figure comes forward unbuckling himself and moves towards Samantha. Gopal flees from the scene and when he comes back to Randy he tells that he had the act with Samantha.

When he spots a shop announcing “XXX movies, gadgets, novelties, sex aids” (207), he walks in. But Gopal could not buy or even take possession of the shopkeeper’s free gift of a nude female inflatable doll and he throws it away after returning from the shop. When Gopal comes back to his room, Gloria the owner of the apartment announces that she got a boy Troy and so that “Our thing is over”. He once again gets furious over her uncalled for piece of information. “Gopal didn’t think that in the rest of his life in India he would experience as many emotional upheavals as he had in these last few months” (170).

Later when Gopal at last returns to India, Sunil and Gopal at the New York air port get into a conversation:

‘You mean you’re going back after a year in America without getting laid?’

‘Yes.’

‘Jesus, I hope the Tourist Office doesn’t hear of this. It’ll ruin business. I mean we can’t let that happen, can we?’

‘Gods,’ Gopal said thickly, ‘against it,’

‘Oh nonsense,’ encouraged Sunil. ‘This is America. American gods love it.’ (244)

Gopal's romantic inclinations to Sue, also ends up in a similar heart-break. Sue one day invites him to her home which already shows signs of her poor financial condition. She then explains to Gopal's queries that her husband had left her forever and that she manages to pursue her studies by doing some part-time job. Gopal falls in love with Sue. But when Sue reappears with a man after a lapse of two days he once again plunges deep down into fathomless dismay (158). He understands that, "he probably had the emotional state of an adolescent in a junior high school in America. But the women he met were obviously much better able to manage relationship as well as several others simultaneously" (169).

Passion of the Heart verses Logic of the Head

Gopal worries about his heart which bites him bitterly for the first time. He understands that he is not in a position to bear all the pains and pangs of such romantic affairs. In India he never experienced the kind of mental agony out of romantic love affairs. Indians generally do not go after the passions of the heart:

...At the personal level, Indians didn't even seem to believe in love as an emotion directed at a unique person, as displayed by that monument to pessimism, the arranged marriage. Nearly total strangers were married off to each other on the theory that people from roughly the same background and with a clear idea of the duties and responsibilities of each, would make happy marriages. In a depressing majority of cases, they did. (171)

Thought is taken an antidote for emotional excesses and Gopal tries hard to engage himself in serious studies for a while and he proves himself and to others that he is a great success in the act.

At the airport, when Sunil comes to know that Gopal has still no sexual experience, Sunil tells that they could not let that happen, for then, America would close down. He searches quickly around and finds a blonde and makes a deal. Sunil pays for it and says, that is a farewell present to Gopal. Gopal follows the lady to a basement. But the girl in the room undresses and removes the wig and "she" is quite obviously a man. The realization regarding the "distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality...as social constructs" (Murfin and Supriya 139) makes him frightened. Gopal somehow jumps out of the room and comes back to Sunil.

In the flight he finds a lady in the early forties with fashionable short hair, expensive ear rings and a pleasant face. Gopal as well as the lady is drunk and soon they get into an intimacy of sharing their bosom secrets and anxieties. "Gopal told her of his disasters with women. She told him of how her husband ignored her and tried to seduce every girl he met" (246). Then in totally unexpected circumstances Gopal consciously or unconsciously helps himself to break his celibacy:

At some point they had begun to kiss while talking. And then they stopped talking. Gopal forgot this was a woman so much older. He felt absorbed by her. He felt his cheeks wet with tears, his and theirs, and when he lurched into the bathroom, she went with him. And there, crouched uncomfortably but heedless, 30,000 feet above the ocean, Gopal at last felt he had truly become a man. (246)

Then he goes back to his seat and falls asleep. When he wakes up the woman is gone. Presumably she disembarked at London Airport.

Conclusion

In the novel, *The Inscrutable Americans*, the naïve Indian youth Gopal during his sojourn in America, transcends geographical space and sticks to his own identity which makes the location rather an ideological space. This brings out the nuanced cultural positions of the Orient and the Occident. Gopal is shown as too nascent in matters of romance and sex. He cannot understand the American English usage even in simple cases and he writes his brother: “Many times I am meeting girls of good family during study time and they are saying “so long”. Really, Brother, you are not telling anyone this, but I am blushing. How they can know? And I am assuring you I am only spending times in prayer and Higher Studies. Then who is spreading this rumour about me, I am thinking” (190). In fact Gopal fails to understand the real intention of girls who make amorous advances towards him, and he remains green in the matter throughout his life in America. In the beginning of the novel itself, Randy is totally amazed to know that Gopal is “virgin”: “Well, holy shit, I don’t think I’ve ever met one before. It’s not infectious, is it? Stay away from me. Can I get it just by looking at you? (44). But by giving such innocuous image for the Indian boy does not justify the allegation that Indian English Writer is selling India abroad.

Gopal is a character without any sort of duality as he comes from a cut off town Jajau in Madhya Pradesh and does not have an urban education. He has not adapted himself as a global citizen and the question of acculturation does not arise. At the same time Anand with the American name, Andy, is an example of people who abandon their cultural identity to adopt themselves in global culture-ideology. Wang Fengzhen and ShaoboXie explain such situation: “As consumerist subject individuals are willingly incorporated into transnational capitalist culture-ideology...subjected to the ideas and values of the global capitalist system and losing or abandoning their previous cultural identities” (3).

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