

Palpable Polarities in Romance, Love and Sex in the Novel, *the Inscrutable Americans*

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Abstract – *The Inscrutable Americans* shows America as obsessed with sex. Right from bill boards to the lake party, sex plays a prominent role. Typical American youngsters, both urban and rural, are shown as changing their romantic or sexual partners every week. Libidinal pleasures of the physical body are to be satiated in an animalistic level in the Occident. But in the Oriental background, children are advised to abstain from romance, love and sex especially in the period of their education. Most of the Indian youths are advised not only to keep away from sex but even from non-vegetarian food which would instigate undesirable instincts. Being brought up strictly in a way which could be labelled as typically Indian, the psyche of Gopal the Indian youth, is subtle and designing and it needs the help of logic in matters of romance and sex, while Americans are shown as reckless and impulsive in the matters.

Key-Words: Polarities, Romance, Love, Sex, Head, Heart, Orient, Occident.

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INTRODUCTION

The Inscrutable Americans is the first novel written by the Stephanian, Anurag Mathur, who was in the USA before he settled himself in New Delhi. It is an outright hilarious novel in a lighter tone. At the same time many of the casual remarks of the omniscient narrator have deeper implications which very well delineate the nuanced cultural positions of the Orient and the Occident.

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 embarrassings on this reason" (189).

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). 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'n't as sacred as Indian cows, sir" (118).

The better living conditions in the USA, due to the development of science and technology are projected in the novel. At the same time the miserable life of the poor people like Sue (150-151) as well as the inefficient public road transport system which is mainly used by the low income groups also baffles Gopal. But what really shocks Gopal is the vulnerably pathetic condition of the coloured people in America (195). When the Peacock takes Gopal to a black ghetto which looked like a “ghost town”, Gopal is terribly shocked to see the lamentable, distressed living conditions of the Americans of the African race. Gopal is in the US only for his education and naturally the US never becomes his second home. But in the US, Gopal faces the grim facts of racism and Eurocentrism and so as Rushdie says about England in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*, “the dream-England is no more than a dream” (21) and this is not less true in the case of the US as the freedom and equality in the US also are positioned similarly. Gopal actually transcends the geographical space and maintains his identity showing that location is more an ideological space.

But it is in matters of romance, love and sex that novel shows a vast gulf between the West and the East. 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 doesn’t kill him, he’ll go back a new man. God help Jajau then. (27)

The university student, Randy, who receives Gopal at Eversville airport 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 girlfriends. 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 places and functions where Randy takes Gopal for his “devirginisation” operation shows the sex life of the Americans. The scene of a college football 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)

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)

Thus the naïve Indian youth’s encounter with the West in the U.S gives a sharp contrast between the

East and the West, but in a very pleasant language and less offensive tone.

THE WEST'S OBSESSION WITH SEX

The novel, *The Inscrutable Americans* tells that in America the act of sex has the maximum number of synonyms and so Sunil who receives Gopal at New York airport, thinks that sex is the obsession with the people of America (26). The novel gives a description on the orgiastic movements by a team of almost naked nubile girls of a college football game: "... participating in one of the sacred rules of America, if only Gopal knew it, a worship of its truest gods. Sex and violence, colour and pageantry, brutality and beauty, and most of all, action. All presented in the guise of a game, of good humour and sportsmanship" (59-60).

When Gopal comes to America for doing a one year diploma course, he is awestruck by the plentitude of bill boards almost everywhere with an over dose of the display of female flesh. He gapes at them and makes comments. So Sunil thinks "It'll be a bloody miracle if he doesn't turn into a raging sex maniac" (27). Later Gopal is received by the university student Randy who becomes his guide and friend until Gopal leaves America. Randy is a typical American youngster whose major concern is sex. When Gopal starts emotional upsets regarding his love and sex, he seeks the opinion of the experienced Randy: "He [Gopal] held long discussions on this with the learned Randy, whose opinions and views on matters relating to sex and its aftermath were, like those of many young Americans, frighteningly experienced for his years" (170). Randy chooses to have one new girl-friend every week. He would go on praising her charm madly and the very next week he would reject or discard her and take another. When Gopal asks about this characteristic, Randy replies "...you can't stay in love with the same girl for longer than a week. Ain't natural" (237).

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). 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).

The novel also gives ample glimpses of sexual profligacy by American ladies. Ann, the young hair-dresser and Gloria, the middle-aged fat owner of Gopal's apartment are typical examples. Ann tries to seduce Gopal in many ways. Gopal is excited by the novice experience of getting close to the totally different physiognomy and odors of the female sex when Ann tries to entice him. But before really getting into the act of physical love-making, he shies away as he could not mentally come in terms with such adventures (75-76). When Gopal mentions Ann as a cultured lady friend, Randy purposely avoids mentioning that she was:

... legendary in Eversville for her proclaimed ambition of sleeping with one thousand different men. In a span of less than three years, she had, through a wholly admirable perseverance combined with a nearly total lack of quality control, nearly reached her goal. 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)

When Ann fails in her initial attempts with Gopal, she comes to his room on the pretension that she needs some lessons in Mathematics. She then puts off her coat and displays her red mini-dress that ended an inch below her panties. Gopal is really excited but his designing mind decides that he should impress her with his certificates and gradually trap her into the act later one day. As Gopal starts his teaching, he understands that Ann's attention wavers. She slowly settles full length on the sofa keeping her legs on Gopal and he could even see the impressions on her panties. Gopal considers all the possibilities and comes to the inevitable conclusion that she must be sick. He becomes eager to help her when she is in such a need and offers water. She complains that she has sprained her back and leg muscles by playing tennis. Gopal starts massaging:

Sitting astride her feet, he began to chop and pummel her legs and back while severely ignoring those portions of her contained in lamentably ill-fitting underwear. How they would later laugh together, he told himself, when he had finally in the next few months conquered all her defences, through persistence and cunning. He could then remind her of this occasion. How easily someone less strategic minded than he could have misunderstood and made a hasty move that would have crushed the fragile blossom of their friendship. How impressed she would be – but laughing all the same no doubt – at his self-control and guile. (83)

Gopal was mesmerized by the sight of Ann in her panties from such a close quarters and goes on massaging like a robot. Ann is terribly disappointed and suddenly she accuses Gopal in a hard voice, "You through messin around?" (83).

She then gets up and gives him a briefing about how girls should be careful of her reputation and all that. Her eyes are wet with tears. She tells she would visit him later and gives him a kiss on his cheek before she leaves. This anecdote clearly shows the difference in the traditional reckless and impulsive American psyche and the designing, subtle Indian psyche, in matters of love and sex.

Randy takes Gopal to many of the bars where almost naked girls engage themselves in gyrating hip movements. In one of the bars, Gopal feels infatuation to a bar lady and she comes near Gopal and demands drinks at his cost. But after the drinks, she prefers other men and neglects Gopal. Gopal is dejected and goes out. The next time when they go again also, he offers her drinks and she dances specially for him for a while but then totally ignores him.

Another incident which proves the sexual profligacy of American girls happens when Gopal goes to Randy's home. Both of them went to a drive-in theatre with two girls. Randy chooses Jill, his girlfriend from childhood and arranges another spicy girl, Bernice as Gopal's date (137). Randy arranges coke and sandwiches to add their pleasure. Randy and Jill already start enjoying the charged romantic moments. Bernice makes enough romantic advances but Gopal does not get her hints and he obligingly moves away. Bernice slumps away from him and finds one of her boy-friends outside. She invites him inside and they too suddenly get themselves involved in physical love-making while Gopal makes lengthy intellectual lecture on OPEC and all that in an attempt to impress the girl. When the couples proceed to "arcane erotic arts" (143), Gopal pours coke over Randy's head and makes an end of the amorous acts of both the couples. That incident thwarts his impression of the countryside also and Gopal falls into deep abysses of dismal dejection.

LOVE, ROMANCE AND THE FINAL CULMINATION

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).

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.

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 airport 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 god's love it.' (244)

Sunil then 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. 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. Women are traditionally portrayed either as chaste or unsullied or as sex sirens as Sara Suleri points out: "Anglo-Indian narrative schematizes the Indian women into two parallel images: she is either sequestered in the unknowability of the *zenana* or all too visible in the

excessive availability of the professional courtesan..." (92). In this novel also Indian ladies are shown in two categories: the chaste, virtuous majority and the Dionysian characters.

CONCLUSION

Thus the naïve Indian youth's encounter with the West in the U.S brings forth palpable polarities in matters of romance, love and sex. Most of the anecdotes give a sharp contrast between the East and the West, but in a very pleasant language and less offensive tone. 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). Truly Gopal is shown as a typical Indian boy cautious to stick to his vegetarian habits and is too nascent in matters of romance and sex.

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 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 Shaobo Xie 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). Gopal the Indian boy’s case shows that traditionally Indians use the head rather than the heart in matters of romance and sex. Gopal too is interested in sex, but he is not impulsive and daring as it is the case of the Americans. His mental make-up gives him the logic that making love with girl friends is unethical and hence he needs to put up a logic of love and dignity even for sexual advances. But by the time he plots and ploys the American girls are fed up and look for other impulsive guys. Without realizing this American psyche, Gopal falls into abject frustration and deliberately takes up misadventures and meets with the final catastrophe. The Indian mind as depicted in the novel needs to put up a logic of love and dignity at least to satisfy the working of his head rather than heart in such matters.

Being brought up strictly in a way which could be labelled as typically Indian, the psyche of Gopal the Indian youth, is subtle and designing and it needs the help of logic in matters of romance and sex, while Americans are shown as reckless and impulsive in the matters.

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