Gandhi and Indian Critical Tradition in English

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Abstract

Like almost everything that took place in India during the twentieth century, even literary theory in English of the period bears the stamp of Mahatma Gandhi. It may not be easily apparent, but a little research reveals how much Indian literary theory owes in spirit to the Mahatma. Few or none have noticed the fact that without Gandhi even our literary theory and critical understanding would be different. Gandhi taught us a certain attitude which involves self-respect and honour. He made us conscious that we have our own identity and culture which is second to none and that without asserting that identity we would be “enslaved” to the West. This thought has percolated into our literary and theoretical perception. This is what has been variously termed as anti-imperialistic and post-colonial attitude. With the Mahatma nationalistic feelings were aroused and even the critics’ minds were affected by them.

This paper seeks to discuss the connection between Gandhian thought and Indian literary theorist in English. It also aims to outline the concepts of Indian literary theorists in English that are seemingly influenced by Gandhi.

Key words: Gandhi, Bhabha, Spivak, India, Postcolonial.
Mahatma Gandhi was unquestionably one person who has left the greatest impact on the Indian political scene in the twentieth century. He influenced not only the Indian political arena, but also the lives of Indians in all spheres. Gandhi’s influence was not limited only to the politics or lives of the Indian people, but also to the literature of the period. According to Kai Nicholson "A character who has loomed large in Indo-Anglian fiction during and after his life time is Mahatma Gandhi" (p. 239). Gandhi has inspired a whole lineage of writers discussing his philosophy and not only from Indian subcontinent but from across the world. His influence was so pervasive and inescapable that most widely esteemed figures of contemporary times, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and Aung San Suu Kyi, have confessed to be a disciple of Gandhian philosophy. Gandhi’s message of peace and nonviolence, his ethical idealism and the saint-like austerity of his personal life, counter-balanced the foreign influences and awakened among Indian writes a new sense of national pride and purpose. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar is not apologetic in considering Gandhi as a “formative influence on writers of the time” (p. 249).

Surprisingly not much has been done to study Gandhi’s influence on Indian literary theories and theorists. It is a subject that certainly needs greater attention. This paper seeks to explore the impact of Mahatma Gandhi on modern Indian literary theory/theorists. This paper draws parallels between the conceptualisation of anti-imperialistic views of Indian theorists and Gandhian philosophy. The question that this paper seeks to answer is how Gandhi’s image, his personality and his philosophy left an indelible mark on Indian literary critical tradition and also how the Indian theorists are influenced by his take on the West.

It is interesting to explore how Gandhi’s theorisation of freedom is adopted to design an anti-imperialistic stance in the literary theories of Indian writers in English. The philosophy of freedom and Swaraj provides grounds for the resistance of the West by Indian theorists.

Gandhi’s influence on the lives of the people of that period was so massive that Mulk Raj Anand, writes with regard to Gandhi’s mass appeal, “This strange man seemed to have the genius that could, by a single dramatic act, rally multi-coloured, multi-tongued India to himself” (p. 184). Gandhi himself was an accomplished writer. As a prose writer, Gandhi occupies a privileged position in Indo-Anglian literature. The Story of My Experiments with Truth is arguably an unparalleled account for unquestionable sincerity of heart and boldness of conviction. But Gandhi himself had no pretentions to be a writer as he said in 1937, “My writings should be cremated with my body; what I have done will endure, not what I have said or written” (p. 350). His life and his philosophy are greater influence on the make-up of Indian critical minds than his writings. It is often believed that Gandhi was more of ‘doer’ than a ‘thinker’. Perhaps Gandhi was aware of the fact that it was rather difficult to reach every corner of India, which celebrates its diversity of languages and customs, as a philosopher or thinker than as an actor or doer. For him it was only possible through “dramatic act” to reach to every nook and corner of a country that is plagued with communication problems among its own countrymen because of the variety of languages spoken in different parts of the country.

Like almost everything that took place in India during the twentieth century, even literary theory in English of the period bears the stamp of Mahatma Gandhi. It may not be easily apparent, but a little research reveals how much Indian literary and critical tradition owes in spirit to the Mahatma. Few or none have noticed the fact that without Gandhi even Indian literary tradition and critical understanding would be different. Akeel Bilgrami, has claimed that Gandhi
was “the greatest anti-imperialist theorist who ever wrote” (p. 107). Gandhi taught Indians a certain attitude which involves self-respect and honour. He made them conscious that they have their own identity and culture which is second to none and that without asserting that identity they would remain “enslaved” to the West. This thought has percolated into Indian literary and theoretical perception. This is what has been variously termed as anti-imperialistic and post-colonial attitude. With the Mahatma nationalistic feelings were aroused and even the critics’ minds were affected by them.

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, in The Discovery of India, notes, “Gandhi’s influence on India’s mind has been profound in present age; how long and in what form it will endure, only the future can show. That influence is not limited to those who agree with him or accept him as a National leader; it extends to those also who disagree with him and criticize him” (p. 493). Nehru’s remarks about Gandhi’s influence have come true to a great level. The generation that followed Gandhi either agreed or disagreed with him and his philosophy, but they could not afford to ignore him completely. They could not escape his influence. His ideas are somehow present in their make-up.

Gandhi emerged as a leader of the spectacular movement against the British when British rule, i.e., colonialism was in existence. The anti-imperialistic attitude in Gandhi affected English literary criticism written by Indian writers. Gandhi had a great impact on critics like Sri Aurobindo, C. D. Narasimhaiah, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K.Bhabha, etc. If there is something, in spite of their differences, that gives to the four theorists a unity of some kind, it is their Indian identity along with its oppositional attitude towards the West and colonialism. Like Gandhi, all these theorists in question formulate the theoretical foundations of their anti-colonialism in a country that was not their home country.

In my paper ‘The Living Indian Critical Tradition’ I have argued that there is a living Indian literary and critical tradition. In that article I refer to the tradition that arises out of the work of those Indians who write in English. I have tried to establish that this tradition has its anchor in opposition to the West. This tradition has stemmed from a voice of dissent, a refusal to be derivative or merely imitative. It has emerged in opposition to Western, and largely British imperialism and colonialism. The chief architects of this tradition are Sri Aurobindo, C. D. Narasimhaiah, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K.Bhabha. And in the writing of all these four theorists the impact of Gandhi is clearly evident. They have been affected, consciously or unconsciously, by the ideas of Gandhi. This approach is more visible in Sri Aurobindo and C. D. Narasimhaiah than in Spivak and Bhabha.

Like Gandhi, these writers accept and praise what is good in the West. They have an open mind like Gandhi. In spite of his political life, Gandhi’s openness towards Christianity, sensitiveness to the English language (which was largely due to the impact of the Bible and Shakespeare) is a credential to his fondness for what is good in Western civilisation.

The spirit of nationalism is one thing that connects Sri Aurobindo, C. D. Narasimhaiah, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha as a group. Even though each of them are different from one another in their basic approach, they are not only quite conscious of being an Indian nationalist but also have faith in the force of nationalism itself. For these theorists Britain, the country that had colonised India, is not the only Other. Sri Aurobindo while evaluating the poetry and literature of European countries and America, uses the tools of Sanskrit poetics like
Mantra. Through his critique he builds up a case for Indian literary practice and at the same time tries to educate the West on what they have missed. Sri Aurobindo tries to showcase, with great enthusiasm and anxiety, what to him seems to have been the Indian point of view on matters of culture and life.

Sri Aurobindo could be labelled as the pioneer of modern Indian critical tradition. What is striking about Sri Aurobindo’s writing is that he is a nationalist before anything else. When Sri Aurobindo writes *The Future Poetry* he is already writing with a consciousness, which is different from the Western, particularly British, intellectuals. He writes quite distinctly like an Indian. Here is an example, “What you say may be correct (that our oriental luxury in poetry makes it unappealing to Westerners), but on the other hand it is possible that the mind of the future will be more international than it is now (Letters on Poetry p. 165)” [This supposition has come true].

The nationalist fervor in Sri Aurobindo often led him to point out the limitations of the West and the strengths of India:

In Rome, always a little blunt of perception in the aesthetic mind, her two greatest poets fell a victim to this unhappy conception, with results which are a lesson and a warning to all posterity. . . . [I]n both [Lucretius and Virgil] the general substance is lifeless matter which has floated to us on the stream of Time, saved only by the beauty of its setting. *India and perhaps India alone, managed to turn this kind of philosophic attempt into a philosophic success*, in the Gita, in the Upanishads and some minor works modelled upon them. (*The Future Poetry* Aurobindo p. 35) [Emphasis mine]

It appears as if Sri Aurobindo has mainly written to oppose the West. He has written with an attitude that believed, “You are not that great, even though you are our masters, and we are not that low even if we are just men!” The anti-imperialistic attitude developed in him a critical attitude that would turn away from anything that is merely British. Here, Aurobindo’s approach seems to be Hegelian that deliberates the slave must eventually turn away from the master to forge the meaning of his existence in labour. Even though much of his critical understanding was influenced by the Western writers, poets and critics, he makes it a point to oppose the West and sometimes even belittle them. At times, from his writing it seems as if he is opposing because he has to. To achieve this aim, to a larger extent he has employed ancient Indian critical theory superimposed with his own understanding of the nature and function of literature. He thus pioneered a tradition of Indian literary theorists in English – a tradition that commended as well as condemned the West at the same time.

Likewise, in Narasimhaiah’s attitude there is a vigorous reaction to the West. One of his aims as a critic seems to be to tilt the things in India’s favour wherever the West is in the advantageous position. Hence the main thrust of Indian theorists in English has been to write differently from the West in spite of the fact that they have tremendous respect for Western theories.

Narasimhaiah writes with a great missionary zeal encrusted with anti-imperialist approach. The anti-imperialist spirit in which he writes and the striving away from Western criteria and Western points draws parallel with Gandhi’s approach. He has the grace to welcome certain
positive aspects of the Empire; even Gandhi praised certain aspects of the British Empire. But he is quite clear about what he would stand up against, never allowing slavish attitudes and deciding quite clearly what he would accept and what he would not.

It is noteworthy that Narasimhaiah, himself, was against any derivative work and criticised those who kept reproducing and imitating the opinions of the British and other Western nationals. Here is just one example of Narasimhaiah’s disgust with derivative writing:

Did I say national identity? I am not sure, for literature at least for a whole century before Independence, we should have the courage to admit, one only witnessed a series of beginnings, historically very important no doubt, but intrinsically not very great. How else one can account for the Indian Shelley that was Tagore, the Indian Scott that was Bankim, the Indian Milton that was Madhusudan Dutt and, till only the other day, the Indian Chekhov that was R. K. Narayan. I am not sure that those concerned liked these left-handed compliments but this is true that these labels seemed to carry with them a suggestion of derivativeness and indeed they did. (Indian Critical Scene p. 183)

Narasimhaiah finds only those things interesting that are somehow related to India. The Swan and the Eagle: Essays on Indian English Literature, which is one of his early major works, indicates this clearly. He makes an endeavour to build up a case for Indian writing in English:

Indian Writing in English is to me primarily part of the literature of India, in the same way as literatures written in various regional languages are or ought to be. It can present life of the village like Bulashah or Kanthapura, or a small town like Malgudi or Kedaram, or sweep through continents and eternity itself; and so long as the operative sensibility of the writer is essentially Indian it will be Indian literature. Sanskrit was not an ‘Indian’ language, nor were Arabic and Persian, but the one became the very breath of India, that by which all else is known – devabhasha, devajanavidya – and the other two, Persian more than Arabic, have fathered forth a very sophisticated ‘Indian’ language, namely, Urdu. A time may . . . come when we can speak of Indian English as they do of American English, Australian or African English. For the term ‘English’ is no longer restricted to the language spoken in the British Isles, but denotes a wide variety of English, wherever it is spoken and however well or ill-spoken. (The Swan and the Eagle p. 13)

One gets a glimpse of Narasimhaiah’s nationalistic spirit and his politics in the enormous number of articles he wrote on Nehru and Gandhi in his journal, The Literary Criterion, some of which later got converted into his books on the two political leaders. He had a huge respect for Nehru. See for instance the following lines:

Jawaharlal Nehru offers an uncommon instance of a writer whose fame and place in the world of letters have been seriously impaired by his prolonged Prime Ministership and, earlier, by the pre-eminent role he played, along with Gandhiji, in the National Movement. I have often been embarrassed by very intelligent friends of mine in the field of literature who have been either amused or indifferent, if not exasperated, at my enthusiasm for Nehru’s literary sensibility. I am embarrassed that, as highly educated Indians and especially as men
of literature, they haven’t cared during all these years to read with attention any one of Nehru’s half-a-dozen distinguished works. (*The Statesman as a Writer* p. 11)

Even though he had genuine respect for Nehru, his understanding was more noticeably influenced by Gandhi. Narasimhaiah has authored a whole book on Gandhi *The Writer’s Gandhi* (1968) and has edited a book on Gandhi *Gandhi and the West* (1969). Narasimhaiah’s response to Nehru is rather complete and impulsive whereas in his response to Gandhi the case is rather different. Narasimhaiah finds Gandhi a difficult model to follow, particularly for “the erring types” like himself. Nevertheless, Gandhi was undoubtedly a guiding force for Narasimhaiah— in his Indianess, his boldness, his anti-imperialist stance, and his campaign against a blind imitation of the West. Narasimhaiah too, like Gandhi, refuses to be blown off his feet, in spite of the fact that he too welcomes winds from all directions. He quotes approvingly the following words of the Rig Veda, “Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions”.

What Narasimhaiah fails to learn from Gandhi is opposition with poise. Narasimhaiah, takes a different route in setting things right in favour of India wherever it is otherwise. He chooses to be much more belligerent towards the West and works with a missionary zeal in his crusade against imperialistic arrogance. Like Gandhi, Narasimhaiah also espouses what he considers right both in the West and in India. He does not reject an idea or anything merely because something is British, but at the same time he demolishes any construct that fails to see the Indian or the “Other” point of view — the point of view of the colonised countries that are now writing without imperialistic interference.

Narasimhaiah’s attraction towards Gandhi and Nehru is not surprising because before him they had combined the best traditions of the East and the West. They had not been narrowly nationalistic, though nationalism was in their veins. They considered humanity first and the nation later, unless there was a crisis which compelled them to do otherwise.

Gandhi gets the highest tribute when seen as a saviour of the Indian author (writer/philosopher). To Narasimhaiah, Gandhi was a kind of liberator of the literary men. Gandhi made it possible for the “enslaved” Indian writer to free himself. He asserts, “We brought the English and we keep them. Why do we forget that our adoption of their civilization makes their presence in India at all possible? Your hatred against theirs ought to be transferred to their civilization” (Gandhi, Mahatma p. 66).

Narasimhaiah’s thorough study of Nehru led not only to Jawaharlal Nehru and a lengthy article on him in *The Swan and the Eagle* but also probably to his desire to write on Gandhi. Narasimhaiah seems to have come to Gandhi through Nehru’s understanding of him.

In Narasimhaiah the focus of attack is mainly against the British. He does speak against the West at times, as for instance as he does here:

What we need to appreciate is, that while the sages of the Upanishads had found it possible to experience the still-centre in the very midst of the raging storm, the West with its commitment to a life of ‘action’, came to identify action with the happenings of the external world, almost to the neglect, even exclusion, of that from which all action must issue forth
and in which all action must find its supreme fulfilment [meditation]. (The Swan and the Eagle p. 15)

The movement against colonialism that received the impetus from Gandhi was advanced by Indian literary theorists. After Sri Aurobindo, this legacy was continued by C. D. Narasimhaiah, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K Bhabha.

Gandhi emerged as a voice of colonised Indians, similarly Spivak too turned out to be a voice of the suppressed ones, the Subalterns. Gandhi won the war against the British colonists with his impeccable perseverance and firm determination. Similar undying spirit could be seen in Spivak’s campaign against the West.

Gandhi’s Non-Violence Movement is often considered as the main event that encouraged women to participate in the Indian nationalist movement. He encouraged men and women to join the national struggle which led to feminising of the movement which was otherwise largely a masculinist struggle. The feminist in him comes to the fore when he advocates for the female sex who he considers ‘the nobler of the two’ and ‘the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge’. For all intents and purposes, Spivak, too, is a feminist. A substantial portion of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has written has women of Bengal in focus. She has questioned Western feminists, especially Julia Kristeva whom she has cited as a prime example of sanctioned ignorance, for piling up the issues of all women in one single group, without taking into account whether they belong to the First or the Third World. She has often been attacked by the Western theorists for her disproportionate aggressive attitude towards Western models. She has confronted Western theorists to the extent that she has invited the wrath of certain Western critics, like Terry Eagleton. Her fight against the Western modes of interference with the Third World is still on. Her enthusiasm to argue against such ploys has yet not dwindled. Her rant against the West’s concern for Human Rights and cultural representation is very effective and interesting. It is intriguing to note that Spivak sees these modes as a ploy to recolonise the Third World. She sees the Human Rights movement as a contemporary replacement of the erstwhile colonial discourse that had pretensions of civilising the colonised subjects.

Spivak has observed Gandhi so keenly that she could figure out Gandhi’s strategy in denouncing ‘Savile Row’ suit for a loin cloth for its political possibilities and potentials. Spivak in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, sees an association between sati and “Mahatma Gandhi’s reinscription of the notion of satyagraha, or hunger strike, as resistance” (p. 298). So that her readers could get a better understanding of the idea, she invites them to further reading, “I would merely invite the reader to compare the auras of widow sacrifice and Gandhian resistance.” (A Critique of Postcolonial Reason p. 298). She finds Gandhi so important in her study that she could see some similarity even in such two profoundly dissimilar things as satyagraha and sati.

Though Spivak is often considered to be one of those Indian theorists and critics who have adopted the modes of Western theories in her work, there is something about her work that gives to her a clear Indian identity. Though she says that for her Bengal is more important than India is as a whole, since she thinks that Bengal ought not to be put at par with the entire country in social and cultural matters (The Post-Colonial Critic p. 449), for our purposes we would still consider her as having an Indian identity as Bengal is, without reservation, an integral part of
India. Her Indian identity (as opposed to the Western) makes her do things she may never have done if she belonged to the West. She uses Western post-structuralist criteria to deconstruct the West. Many an Indian mind has felt the need to react in some way against the West and bring India or Indian thought under the focus of critical, and general, attention. She can be bracketed with several Indians who have done that directly or otherwise. She shares in this tendency with other Indians such as Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda, C. D. Narasimhaiah, Homi K. Bhabha and others. It could be said that hers, like theirs, is a postcolonial reaction to the West, and a desire to establish an independent identity for her people and also a kind of mission to get attention for the marginalised Indians. Like other oppositional theorists, Spivak too works for justice for those that have been swept aside by Western imperialistic or intellectual domination. Perhaps Spivak has succeeded somewhat more than other Indians have in getting the attention of the West because she has written as a Westerner rather than an Indian, almost from within the “innermost shrine” of the West. Having translated one of Derrida’s chief theoretical statements, *Of Grammatology*, into English, Spivak has acquired a significant position in Western thought and after that she has been able to write from this advantageous position. She has used a Western platform to cry down the West that has been showing blindness to the peculiar situation of the Third World, particularly South Asia, and, even more specifically, India.

In an article, “Learning from de Man: Looking Back” which was published in the highly specialised journal, *Boundary 2*, Spivak’s Indian point of view and an anti-racist attitude are clearly visible where she describes how she suffered at the hands of a racist West when she went to Cornell University, America in 1961 at the age of 19 for a PhD in English:

There was no academic feminism or multiculturalism. It was four years before Lyndon Johnson would lift the quota in 1965, which would lead to an exponential increase in Asian Immigration. There was no other South Asian, male or female, in the English Department, the department of comparative literature, classics, and any of the modern language departments. I was relentlessly exoticized by bad low-grade gender politics and, on occasion, advances from faculty that would qualify today as “sexual harassment”. De Man’s unquestioning and civilized recognition that I was merely intelligent was my food and shelter. It would be difficult to convey to you how very unusual this was. It is a racialized perspective that finds racism more troubling than classism or sexism. (pp. 25-26)

Elleke Boehmer seems conscious of the fact that Spivak concentrates on India-related projects. This scholar says:

Spivak’s 1980s work is closely informed by her interaction with the largely India-based Subaltern Studies group of historiographers, including Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty. From its inception, the group has been concerned to refocus colonial and also nationalist readings of Indian history in order to foreground previously marginalized sectors of society, in particular the peasantry. (p. 353)

Like many other theorists of India even Spivak writes with a spirit of defiance against the West. The crowning glory of Spivak’s achievement has been that she has been able to
manipulate Western standpoints very effectively to show the limitations of Western approaches. She has done this time and again, but the most obvious examples of this pursuit are (a) her standing up against Marxism (in spite of her leaning towards it) for considering all workers to share in their basic characteristics, and (b) her onslaught on Western Feminism for presuming that all women could be brought under one broad category, naming Indian Bengali women and other Third World women as having very different essentials.

Spivak tends not to accept anything merely Western unless she has seen that the concept can be either applied, or not applied, to the Third World. For Spivak the Third World is as important a criterion as any in her scheme of things. In this respect, in her regard for the Eastern or other sections of thought she is in direct link with other Indian theorists like Sri Aurobindo, C. D. Narasimhaiah and Homi K. Bhabha that this paper foregrounds. In the words of Stephen Morton:

Far from adhering rigorously to the terms or concepts of any one theoretical method, Spivak’s work frequently emphasises the limitations and blind spots of academic disciplinary discourse. In an interview with Elizabeth Grosz, Spivak rejects the idea of reconciliation between Marxism, feminism and deconstruction on the grounds that such totalising theoretical models are ‘too deeply marked’ by ‘colonial influence’. Instead Spivak asserts that ‘the irreducible but impossible task is to preserve the discontinuities within the discourses of feminism, Marxism and deconstruction. Spivak has subsequently referred to this task as the ‘critical interruption of Marxism, feminism and deconstruction . . . this intellectual practice of interruption and negotiation is better understood if it is placed in the context and tradition of the ‘Third World’ political thought of (for example) Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) and Frantz Fanon (1925-61). Gandhi and Fanon started the revision and adaptation of western political thought in the context of ‘Third World’ national liberation struggles earlier in the twentieth century. (pp. 20-21)

Spivak has the tendency to offer a corrective on matters that the West has stood by rather firmly. Spivak’s conception of the subaltern groups in India is somewhat like Gramsci’s because in India the caste-system and the class-divisions overlap. Besides there is the presence of an incoherence and unsystematic nature that Morton speaks of in the above account. This incoherence results from India’s historical conditions along with its cultural and social stratifications making the exploited people of India not as easily perceivable as say, the working class of an underdeveloped society. Spivak’s conception of the subaltern in India is so seminal and well conceived that it led to the creation of subaltern studies under the leadership of Ranjit Guha. Spivak describes this in the following lines:

The work of the Subaltern Studies group offers a theory of change. The insertion of India into colonialism is generally defined as a change from semi-feudalism into capitalist subjection. Such a definition theorizes the change within the great narrative of the modes of

2 Apart from other, more well-known essays, an important one that introduces this idea is “French Feminism in an International Frame”, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 134-153.
production, and by uneasy implication, within the narrative of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. (Morton p. 51)

Though Spivak has come down rather heavily on the erroneous attitudes of the West, Bhabha does the same with greater force because he strikes at the grassroots of the West, and its understanding of culture. His basic claims make the West more self conscious of certain lapses, and of its presumptions, than ever before. Edward Said had done this in a significant way in works such as *Orientalism*, but his theory took more than a decade to start seeping in. And then Bhabha showed what was lacking in Said’s theory.

Gandhi showed a bold resistance towards British authority and domination. He did not hesitate to tell them that the colonised country was self–sufficient or could become self-sufficient or could do without them. He spoke of ‘Swaraj’ and thought of alternative economic cottage industries that could provide a substitute for the British-governed industries. This daring attitude can easily be seen in intellectual developments like postcolonialism— a method that shows resistance to the colonisers or the imperial exploitative machinery. Homi K Bhabha’s entire vision of cultural hybridity and hybridisation rests upon an attitude that in its last resort can be traced back to Gandhi.

Gyan Prakash notes that Gandhi’s anti-colonial resistance should be seen as fully comprehensive ‘theoretical events’. Gandhi’s activism may be seen as theory in practice. The influence of Gandhi’s actions is so visible in Bhabha if we pause to notice Leela Gandhi’s observation, “Bhabha’s textual bias is shaped by a quite legitimate and eloquent resistance to the crippling dichotomy between theory and activism” (p. 156).

The work of Bhabha has generally gone against the West. Even though Spivak’s spirit seems more anti-West, Bhabha’s work has been more effective against it. Though Spivak begins a little earlier than Bhabha, his work came after Said and Spivak’s views had already dampened the West on its onward march on the route to unimpeded superiority and dominance. Bhabha’s theory makes the West conscious, more now than ever, that far from being in a very superior position, the West is as much a recipient of knowledge from the East as the East is from the West. As if that was not enough, Bhabha’s work makes the West conscious of an anxiety that it has always lived with, an anxiety of its own wrongdoing in the process of colonizing.

The last five hundred years ought not to be understood as merely, “one straightforward oppression of the colonized by the colonizer”. There has been violence and there has been domination no doubt, but what is necessary is to see the period of the last five hundred years as “a period of complex and varied cultural contact and interaction” (Huddart p. 2). Huddart puts this concept of Bhabha in rather simple terms when he says that “the colonial period is ongoing, and postcolonial perspectives contribute an original understanding of our colonial present. Bhabha’s work is a main driver behind the creation of such post-colonial perspectives” (Huddart p. 2).

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3 David Huddart, “Why Bhabha?”, *Homi K. Bhabha* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 2. Let me acknowledge that the next three or four passages that follow are largely guided by Huddart’s views. In my assessment Huddart is the single most useful critic on Bhabha.
The colonised subject can freely transform the coloniser’s meaning. Like every other text, its authors cannot control the meaning of the colonial text, “When colonizer and colonized come together, there is an element of negotiation of cultural meaning” (Huddart p. 3). Bhabha’s mind is always looking for the liminal spaces, the threshold positions, or the gray areas where there is the constant exchange of cultures. No wonder his *The Location of Culture* begins with a very significant quotation from Martin Heidegger, “A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which *something begins its presencing*” (Bhabha p. 1). It is this recognition of the boundary not being an end but a beginning that provides one of the most central thrusts of Bhabha’s critical premises. It leads to concepts such as hybridity and ambivalence.

What comes out most clearly in Bhabha’s writings is that there is a hybridity of cultures. This could be understood simply by concluding that cultures always have a “mixed-ness” and there is nothing that could be described as “pure culture”. Every culture could be seen as having an original mixedness. Huddart puts the case in the following words:

In the case of cultural identities, hybridity refers to the fact that cultures are not discrete phenomena; instead they are always in contact with one another, and this contact leads to cultural mixed-ness. Many literary writers have taken an interest in expressing hybrid cultural identities and using hybrid cultural forms – for example, novelist Salman Rushdie. Additionally, many non-literary writers like sociologists and anthropologists have explored this emphasis. Their writings undermine any claims to pure or authentic cultural identities or forms. But Bhabha insists less on hybridity than hybridization; in other words he insists on hybridity’s ongoing process. In fact, for Bhabha there are no cultures that come together leading to hybrid forms; instead, cultures are the consequence of attempts to still the flux of cultural hybridities. (p. 7)

One of Bhabha’s seminal concepts is mimicry. Stereotypical representations are deceptive for the coloniser, particularly in his sense of “self-identity” (Huddart p. 57). What follows is that the colonised subjects show a resistance to colonial discourse and the coloniser makes every attempt to create conditions in which this resistance would be minimal. This attempt leads to much anxiety in the coloniser, and in Bhabha’s reading of colonial texts, like Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, there is this search for the coloniser’s anxiety.

The coloniser is ever conscious of the resistance of the colonised to accept his discourse at his terms and this leads to his anxiety. The colonised people indulge in mimicry when they adopt the culture of the coloniser and adapt to it (Huddart p. 57). Far from being a slavish imitation of the colonisers, this mimicry neither is nor does it pertain to a domination of a superior culture that will be assimilated into the culture that is sometimes mistaken to be inferior. Mimicry, we are told is “an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners and ideas” (Huddart p. 57). The colonised people mimic the colonisers but with exaggeration, which shows that it is not in servility towards the coloniser that this mimicry goes on.

Bhabha’s views on culture are often regarded to be the deconstructive aspect of postcolonial criticism, particularly when he analyses literary texts. Keya Ganguly aptly suggests that for Bhabha, “the postcolonial functions as a supplementary element in the text of colonial
modernity— as a sort of “contra-modernity” that is both contemporaneous with the present yet manages to restage the past and introduce “other incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition” (p. 172). She further notes that generally these acts of staging and re-staging the postcolonial are grounded in reader’s approaches of analysis which, according to Bhabha, illuminate the “metaphoricity of the peoples of imagined communities” (p. 172).

Bhabha, on the other hand, has shown how though colonial discourse has tried to mislead the colonised and yet how it has, in fact, failed to do so. Thus whereas Spivak paints a tragic picture of the Third World, or the colonised, Bhabha turns the tables against the coloniser by saying that the colonised are not really in such an unenviable position as they mimic the colonisers comically.

Bhabha moved a step ahead of Gandhi and claimed that it was not only that the colonised did not merely remain a passive recipient of the coloniser’s contribution but actually contributed to the learning process of the colonisers. Behind this theory of hybridisation there is defiance to everything Western. And this defiance stems from the movement that was begun by Gandhi and his team. We cannot call them Gandhian but their thought/ideas are influenced by the spirit that informs Gandhian thought.
References


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