



Resisting Colonial Enterprise: A Postcolonial Study of *Hind Swaraj* by M. K. Gandhi

Binayak Prasad Pradhan

Lecturer in English, S.K.C.G (Auto/Jr) College, Paralakhemundi, Odisha

The author is Lecturer in English at S.K.C.G (Auto/Jr) College, Paralakhemundi 2016. Simultaneously, he is pursuing PhD in English at Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, Odisha on the topic 'Postcolonial Studies and the Writings of Gandhi'. In addition to teaching, he has published a few research articles in different journals. The areas of his research interest include contemporary literary theory and criticism.

Abstract

Subverting the colonial hegemony in all its manifestations has been the prime concern of postcolonial literature right from its inception. As a counter narrative, postcolonial literature aims at challenging the so-called hierarchy set by the colonizing masters and exposing the colonial hypocrisy. However, the study of postcolonialism is closely associated with the works of certain critics like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others. But, a retrospective approach to the history of decolonization places some other figures like Frantz Fanon, M. K. Gandhi, Césaire and others at the centre of postcolonialism. M. K. Gandhi who is very often studied as a pacifist, humanist and nonviolent revolutionary bears a great relevance to the study of postcolonialism. Being a voluminous writer, his writings are characterized by a strong resistance to the then colonial enterprise. *Hind Swaraj*, a seminal text of Gandhi with a strong opposition to the colonial evils, can be classified as one of the important writings in the gamut of postcolonial literature. This paper mainly endeavours to reassess Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* in the light of postcolonial theory to establish it as one of the foundational postcolonial texts.

Keywords

postcolonialism, colonialism, civilization, nonviolence, pacifism

Introduction

J.C. Young in one of his influential works, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* describes Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as the ‘Holy Trinity’ of postcolonial theory on account of their immense contribution to the growth and development of postcolonial studies. But, there are some other thinkers and anti-colonial activists who have a valid claim to be called the founding figures in the domain of postcolonialism. Locating Gandhi and Fanon at the centre of postcolonialism, Leela Gandhi asserts, “...the careful retrieval of figures like Gandhi and Fanon is instructional to postcolonial theory” (22). Postcolonialism can be understood in its right perspective in relation to figures like Frantz Fanon, M. K. Gandhi and other earlier thinkers. Frantz Fanon appears to be the most vibrant voice in the domain of the postcolonial study for his revolutionary ideas in general and stress on violence as the only means of achieving liberation in particular. Fanon’s two groundbreaking works *The Black Skin, White Masks*, (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) have revolutionized the field of postcolonial studies and fetched him the reputation of a great anti-colonial theorist. M. K. Gandhi who appears in the scene much earlier than Fanon is no less revolutionary and influential than Fanon or any other postcolonial thinkers. Harish Trivedi in his essay “Revolutionary Non-violence: Gandhi in Postcolonial and Subaltern Discourse” says, “In view particularly of his direct role in India and wider influence abroad as a leader of the movement for anti-colonial nationalist liberation and decolonization, Gandhi would appear to have a valid claim to be called the father of postcolonial world as well” (522). Probably, because of his strict adherence to nonviolence or pacifism he has been greatly ignored in the arena of postcolonial studies. His book *Hind Swaraj* fulfils all the criteria to be called a major postcolonial text. In this connection, Gyan Prakash offers a befitting estimation of Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*:

Written in 1908 as he travelled from London to South Africa by sea, this text is a severe indictment of modern civilization. Attacking, with a certain recklessness, lawyers, doctors, parliaments, machinery, railways and mills for having created illusions of freedom in an unhindered pursuit of material satisfaction, Gandhi projects nonviolent self-control over passion, greed and hatred as the basis for India’s freedom. (06)

Being a seminal text it leaves no stone unturned to challenge the colonial enterprise by exposing its vulnerability and hypocrisy. Though this book advocates nonviolence in one or other way, it is potent enough to subvert the domineering attitude of the so-called colonizing masters. For Gyan Prakash in *Hind Swaraj* “...the philosophy of nonviolence is overwritten

by a language bristling with violent criticism” (06). Assessing the importance of *Hind Swaraj*, Partha Chatterjee in his essay “Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society” states, “It was in fact in many ways the most crucial theoretical foundation of his entire strategy of winning *swaraj* for India” (159). However, *Hind Swaraj* is one of the earlier texts of Gandhi reflecting his strategy to liberate India from the colonial dominance by outlining its drawbacks, shortcomings, immorality and inability.

Reassessing *Hind Swaraj*

Asserting the cultural supremacy of the once colonized nations by rejecting colonial hegemony in all its manifestations has been the prime objective of the postcolonial literature. Basically, the postcolonial criticism aims at analyzing the texts to highlight the way it represents the native culture and challenges the colonial values. Outlining the function of postcolonial criticism John McLeod says that it aims at “Discussing the ways in which colonial subjects ‘wrote back’, that is responded to, resisted and overturned imperial power relations to the empire (23-29). An endeavour to attack the colonialist ideology or values along with all its adverse effects on the natives or the colonized is conspicuous in majority of the postcolonial texts. In this connection Lois Tyson says, “Analogously texts can resist colonialist ideology by depicting the misdeeds of the colonizers, the suffering of the colonized or the detrimental effects of colonialism on the colonized” (428).

A critical analysis of *Hind Swaraj* conforms to the fact that it reflects all the tenets of postcolonialism. The vehement criticism of the Western civilization, culture, mannerism, immorality found in this book levels it with other foundational postcolonial texts. This book has served Gandhi as a weapon to resist the colonial hegemony and inculcate a greater sense of nationalism among his countrymen. As the book was potent enough to expose the colonial hypocrisy and turn the Indians against the Europeans, the British Government sought a ban on its circulation. In response to the ban exerted by the then British Government. Gandhi says in his preface to English translation of *Hind Swaraj*: “I don’t know only *Hind Swaraj* has been seized in India. To me, the seizure constitutes further condemnation of the civilization represented by the British Government” (08). The attempt of the British Government to put restraints upon the circulation of this text could not dampen the spirit of Gandhi rather it made him more stubborn in confronting the colonial dominance. He undertook the challenge of the British Government by publishing the English translation of the book.

During the heyday of colonialism, the colonizers defined themselves as superior by underrating the native culture and civilization. For them, the natives didn’t have any culture

of their own and they assumed that it was the responsibility of the colonizers to educate and civilize the natives. Almost all the postcolonial texts challenge such type of stereotypical representation of the native culture. Revolting against the colonial values is taken as the core agenda of the postcolonial literature. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* repudiates the colonial dominance in all its forms by the dint of a severe criticism. Instead of emulating the cultural values of the colonizers, Gandhi induces all his countrymen to enrich their own culture by renouncing the colonial venture.

Gandhi tries hard in all his attempts to underestimate the so-called colonial supremacy. Especially, he tarnishes the reputation of the colonial culture and civilization by exposing its limitations. For Gandhi, the modern civilization is wedded to the amelioration of the physical conditions of many. It has undoubtedly helped to gain upper hand over time and space. It has cured us from the deadly diseases. But there is hardly any room for the development of the other aspects of human personality. Having realized the disastrous effects of the colonial culture, Gandhi never prompts his countrymen to replicate the Western culture. For him, it was not feasible to drive away the British Government in India by adopting the modern civilization and modern methods of violence. In his view sticking to modern civilization is 'suicidal policy.' Instead of being trapped by the colonial hypocrisy, the natives should project their own identity by establishing an unflinching faith in their own culture and tradition. Enticing the Indians to cling to their own culture, Gandhi said, "...if they would but revert to their own glorious civilization, either the English would adopt the latter and become Indianised or find their occupation in India gone" (08).

Gandhi accuses that the so-called advancement that passes in the name of civilization, will eventually prove to be self-destructive, for it is bereft of moral content. Science is rich with mechanisms but poor in purposes. It fosters a mad craze after the worldly pursuits. This results in a cut-throat competition for the survival which leads man to live at the cost of others. Man treats his fellow beings as a means to promote his vested interests. Selfishness, merciless exploitations and cruelty become the order of the day. The so-called progress in the idle name of civilization though has enabled man to conquer nature, has on the other hand, left him morally crippled and if not checked will go on doing so. As a result, the so-called boons of modern science will turn out to be the eventual banes for the humanity. Man, today is threatened by the imminent nuclear holocaust. He tends to be the victim of his own creation. The hydrogen bombs, the gun powder, the inter-ballistic missiles have gone a long way in enhancing man's capacity for perpetrating a wholesale destruction. In *Hind Swaraj*,

Gandhi gives a serious thought to this issue. He says, “Civilization is like a mouse gnawing while it is soothing us” (34).

Gandhi’s critique is no less acute and vehement than any other postcolonial critics. He denounces the dominating Western civilization openly ignoring all the factors and consequences. Gandhi condemns what he calls the pseudo-civilization of capitalist and communist system of industrialization. What then is his conception of true civilization? Perhaps the answer to this question is implicit in his rejection of Western civilization. Obviously, he emphasizes on the centrality of morality. To Gandhi, civilization must be based on morality and decency but the Western civilization accords no importance to morality. He says, “Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions” (49).

For Gandhi, the splendours of modern civilization only actuates the baser instincts of man; leaving him morally or spiritually bankrupt. Gandhi therefore pleads for the restraint of the lower self. Gandhi’s opposition to the colonial or imperial values is conspicuous in almost all his writings, speeches and other deliberations. Gandhi is the first one to protest the colonial mechanism in a completely different way. Pointing to the inherent inadequacy and evils of the modern civilization, Gandhi reminds us about the inevitable aftermath of the unrestricted growth of science and technology and thereby stresses the crying need for moral regeneration. In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi reaches the root of the modern civilization to unravel its underlying evils. For him, the Europeans teach the natives immorality in the name of morality. The colonizers resort to all the unfair means to assert their cultural superiority but they miserably fail in their attempt to do so. The civilization which has its bearing on gross immorality and injustice cannot endear itself to others. Accusing the Western civilization of its meanness Gandhi says, “This civilization takes note neither of morality nor of religion....Civilization seeks to increase bodily comforts, and it fails miserably even in doing so” (29). This is quite evident that there is no inducement to morality in Western civilization. Gandhi strongly repudiates the emulation of the modern civilization which for him is quite detrimental and averse to Indian culture and tradition. Abstaining his countrymen from developing obsession for the modern civilization in *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi says, “It is my deliberate opinion that India is being round down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilization. It’s groaning under the monster’s terrible weight. There is yet time to escape it, but everyday makes it more and more difficult” (33)

Gandhi is of the view that the Europeans hardly understand the meaning of civilization. Their civilization which claims to be superior to all other civilizations in the world is totally bereft of the virtues and detrimental to their own existence also. Being engrossed in the midst of comforts and luxury, the Europeans remain impervious to the real attributes of an ideal civilization. The European civilization is so chaotic that they are robbed of the capacity to experience the happiness found in solitude. They invite their insanity by adhering to modern civilization. Further, denigrating the Western civilization, Gandhi says:

This civilization is irreligion, and it has taken such a hold on the people in Europe that those who are in it appear to be half mad. They lack real physical strength or courage. They keep up their energy by intoxication. They can hardly be happy in solitude. (30)

Gandhi grows quite cynical while describing the British parliament as a ‘prostitute.’ According to Gandhi, the British parliament is incapable of operating without the outside pressure or interference. It has no originality at all. For Gandhi, “...it is under the control of the ministers who change from time to time. Today it is under Mr. Asquith, tomorrow it may be under Mr. Balfour” (25).

Being a great thinker and visionary he was well aware of the possible dangers of the colonial enterprise. Representing his own cultural values and placing them at a higher place was a major part of Gandhi’s treatise. His way of critiquing the so-called colonial values locates him at the centre of postcolonial studies. In his attempt to retain the originality of his own culture, he urges all his countrymen to repose their faith in village industry and culture which will be an affront to the colonial rulers. Partha Chatterjee, substantially endorses such view of M. K. Gandhi. He states:

In *Hind Swaraj* the critique of modern civilization and the plea for a return to the simple self-sufficiency of ‘traditional’ village life were based on the idea that it was the very changelessness of Indian civilization, its timeless ahistoricity, which was proof of its truth. India was resistant to change because it was not necessary for it to change: its civilization had found the true principles of social organization. (180)

This firm conviction regarding the cultural affluence of Indians scales a different height for Gandhi as a pioneering figure in postcolonial studies. Apart from Western civilization, *Hind Swaraj* also focuses on different other pertinent issues related to the study of postcolonialism. He also ventilates his discontentment for English education in *Hind Swaraj*. M. K. Gandhi’s resentment and apathy for English education is clearly reflected in many of his speeches and

writings. He strongly opposes English education and advocates the use of mother tongue in teaching and learning process. Remonstrating the introduction of English into India by Macaulay Gandhi says, “To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them. The foundation that Macaulay laid of education has enslaved us” (73). For Gandhi English education is a threat to Indian culture and it enslaves all the Indians by making them eligible to support the English people in different affairs. Gandhi says, “It is worth noting that, by receiving English education, we have enslaved the nation. Hypocrisy, tyranny etc. have increased; English-knowing Indians have not hesitated to cheat and strike terror into the people” (73).

Realizing the far-reaching consequences of the use of English, Gandhi advocates the use of Indian language as a befitting alternative. For him, the renunciation of English language is an affront to the European civilization. The obsession with the English Education adds to the slavery of the Indians. Like other post colonial critics, Gandhi asks for the replacement of English by the regional languages. Such type of apathetic attitude of Gandhi towards English language and education challenges the so-called supremacy of English education propounded by Lord Macaulay in his famous Minute on Indian Education of 1835. For, Gandhi the medium of instruction should be the regional languages. This insistence of Gandhi for using the native language brings him closer to Ngugi wa Thiong’o, another distinct voice in the domain of postcolonial studies. While promoting the native or regional languages Gandhi says, “Those who have studied English will have to teach morality to their progeny through their mother tongue and to teach them another Indian language but when they have grown up, they may learn English, the ultimate aim being that we should not need it” (74). There is an undertone of disappointment and resentment towards English as a language in these lines. Gandhi’s view on education was greatly shaped by the self-sufficient village system of ancient India. His exhaustive travels through the villages of the rural India and his insights into the socio-political, economic and cultural realities of the British India made him formulate his conception of education.

Besides English education and language, Gandhi turns to another most important and pertinent aspect of the postcolonial literature. The colonizers succeeded in their venture to perpetuate their own ideological convictions only by the help of different texts. In the texts, produced during the colonial era, the colonial writers basically intended to justify the colonial supremacy by the pejorative representation of the native culture and tradition. Their writings were greatly aligned and compromised. In this connection Elleke Boehmer says, “The text, a vehicle of imperial authority, symbolized and in some cases indeed performed the act of

taking possession” (13). The colonial literature in general made efforts to describe other lands thereby providing some knowledge about exploration or new colonial acquisition. Boehmer further says, “Colonial literature in its exploratory and expansionist phases proclaimed cultural superiority and rightness” (98). With the advent of postcolonialism, the writers and critics of the once-colonized nations revisited these colonial texts and unravelled the underlying pretension. Gandhi was one of the earlier thinkers to comment on such type of agenda of the colonial writers. For Gandhi the English writers and philosophers often write to glorify their culture concealing its defects. So, he urges the Indians not to consider the accounts furnished by the British writers who are the defenders of the modern civilization. In this connection Gandhi says, “What we usually read are the works of the defenders of modern civilization, which undoubtedly claims among its votaries very brilliant and even some very good men. Their writings hypnotize us. And so, one by one, we are drawn into vortex” (28). In addition, he is of the view that all the English books should be translated into our mother tongues and he says, “A universal language for India should be Hindi with the option of writing in Persian or Nagaria characters... And if we can do this, we can drive the English language out of the field in a short time. All this is necessary for us, slaves. Through our slavery the nation has been enslaved, and it will be free with our freedom” (75). So, much before the appearance of some critics like Said, Bhabha, Spivak and others, Gandhi directs our attention to the misrepresentation of the native culture and the efforts of colonial enterprise to justify its dominance through his *Hind Swaraj*.

Conclusion

A meticulous analysis of Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* ensures that this book can be studied as an earlier postcolonial text, challenging and subverting the colonial dominance. Almost all the important issues of postcolonial studies have been extensively dealt with by Gandhi in this text. This book possesses all the criteria to be called a seminal text in the arena of postcolonial studies. As a pacifist, Gandhi has insisted on nonviolence as a means of liberation for all the Indians. Fanon on the other hand dominates the postcolonial study by the virtue of his strong emphasis on violence which situates him at the centre of the belligerent tradition of postcolonialism. But, Gandhi’s nonviolence is no less effective and powerful than that of the violence, propagated by Fanon and other founding figures of postcolonialism. This is the nonviolence, which has carved out a completely distinguishing place for Gandhi in the history of decolonization across the globe in general and Indian Freedom Movement in particular. Being an indictment of Western civilization, *Hind Swaraj* hardly spares anything

to condemn and denigrate all the colonial ideals and policies. Much before the prominent postcolonial critics and thinkers of our time, Gandhi has touched upon all those relevant issues which constitute the pivotal position of postcolonialism through *Hind Swaraj* which is undoubtedly a pioneering postcolonial text. This book has been instrumental in bringing about a lot of reformation and securing Gandhi the place of an earlier thinker of postcolonialism.

Works Cited

- Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. Print.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society". *Subaltern Studies –III: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. 1st ed. Vol. III. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984. Print.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.
- Gandhi, M. K. *Hind Swaraj: Centenary Edition*. New Delhi: Rajpal & Sons, 2010. Print.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. New Delhi: Viva Books Pvt. Ltd, 2010. Print.
- Prakash, Gyan. *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995. Print.
- Trivedi, Harish. 'Revolutionary Non-violence'. *The Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 13:4,522-23, 2011. Print.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Young, J.C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.