



## Interrogating Ambivalence, Identity and Supplementarity in Anurag Mathur's *The Inscrutable Americans*

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Received: 07 May 2024; Received in revised form: 10 Jun 2024; Accepted: 17 Jun 2024; Available online: 25 Jun, 2024  
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**Abstract**— *The Inscrutable Americans* chronicles Gopal's misadventures in America. His journey for a better education puts him in the middle of the outrageous and the grotesque realities of America as he desperately tries to cling to the comfort of his Indian identity. He battles racism, feelings of insecurity, familial expectations and judgement all the while interrogating his cultural beliefs of morality and sexuality. Through Gopal, Mathur accomplishes what many postcolonial and diasporic writers fail to do: a sense of humour amidst cultural anxiety. Through the ideas of Ambivalence, Subalterity and Hybridity as proposed by Bhabha and Spivak, the paper attempts to examine the challenges faced by Gopal, his recognition of otherhood, his constant questioning of identity and the gradual acceptance of ambivalence in a foreign land.



**Keywords**— Ambivalence, Diaspora, Homi Bhabha, Hybridity, Identity, Spivak

*Gopal sat in the dark in his pyjamas in the moonlight, finally alone. He was actually and really here. The excitement made him shiver. It was all so alien, so wonderful, yet so scary. Would he adjust, would they like him, would they be friendly, would he do well in class, where would he get vegetarian food cooked by Brahmins?*

Written in the midst of the popularity of diaspora writing in English, Anurag Mathur's *The Inscrutable Americans* takes on the wonderful and bizarre land of America through the perspective of its wide-eyed, sometimes sexist and oftentimes racist protagonist Gopal.

The novel begins with Gopal's experience of the New York airport, where he meets an immigration officer who asks him, out of civility (one supposes), "How is it going?" to which Gopal responds in all earnestness with details of his entire journey: "I am telling him fully and frankly about all problems and hopes, even though you may feel that as American he may be too selfish to bother about decline in price of hair oil in Jajau town" (10). This

sets the tone of the entire novel; one of naive curiosity, surprising discoveries and daunting culture-shocks.

Mathur deftly employs humour to construct the character and experiences of Gopal. His first shock comes in the form of a billboard outside the airport and how silent the car his cousins drive seems to be. Gopal feels that his voice might be too loud as he is used to combating with mechanical sounds to make his voice heard. We see identities being constructed and refined in opposition to that of Gopal. The cousin responds to Gopal's silent amusement at New York by thinking to himself, "Well, he is a small town boy," mused Sushant. 'Bit of a hick actually.' He was himself a Bombay boy and quite used to big city lights" (15). Laughter acts as a tool of validation here, the cousins concretise their Americanness by finding Gopal funny.

Through the Bhabha's idea of the construction of colonial discourse as a "complex articulation of the tropes of fetishism – metaphor and metonymy – and the forms of narcissistic and aggressive identification" (110), the derision of Gopal's cousins is better understood. What we see here, as Bhabha posits is an aggressive desire to set

one's identity in opposition of what is considered as the Other. Though both Gopal and his cousins are racio-ethnically similar (if not same), through their eyes, he's the Other. It is seen that Gopal personifies several stereotypes of the "village hick" to his American-educated cousins, enough to relegate him to a lower position and simultaneously heighten their socio-political position. Expanding on his ideas on stereotype as suture, Bhabha states:

The role of fetishistic identification, in the construction of discriminatory knowledges that depend on the 'presence of difference', is to provide a process of splitting and multiple/contradictory belief at the point of enunciation and subjectification. (115)

It is this "presence of difference" that marks Gopal throughout his experience in America. In his journey to the city of Eversville, Gopal muses to himself of the many differences between India and the land he finds himself in. Many of these contrasts, presented to the reader through the eyes of the naive Gopal seem to be inundated in a fascination for all things American:

People going downstairs in India made a different sound, thought Gopal. It was a sort of scuffling rhythm, maybe because the steps are made of cement, while here each stair seemed a giant piano key that emitted a distinctive, woodenly musical tonking sound muffled in carpeting. (18)

Gopal is engaged in a continuous process of understanding the world around him by comparing it to the one he left behind. In most cases, this analysis is supplemented by a recognition of the superiority of the former:

They drove past trees and shrubs so green and clean that they nearly hurt the eye. Gopal's own hometown, on the other hand, wrapped itself in a blanket of dust and grime (19).

By employing a third-person narrative, Mathur succeeds in providing the reader with a better lens to view the world Gopal occupies and not just through his biases. Where Gopal sees all his dreams of New York city and Times Square being brought to life, the reader is also shown all the people who are confused by his presence:

There was a bounce in his step and he grinned at passersby who eyed him warily. He was walking with the most exciting people in the most exciting city in the world and even if they all rather quickly averted their eyes from him and hurried away, he was anxious to be accepted as nearly one of them. (21)

This anxiety of acceptance has been widely studied within the field of diaspora studies. This anxiety is foregrounded in a recognition of one's otherness. It results in an ambivalent state of identity as Bhabha proposes, constantly switching between the comfortable and the new, hyper aware of the difference between the two. Bhabha contends that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the 'Third Space of enunciation' (37). He states that cultural identity always emerges in this contradictory and ambivalent space. Thus, Gopal's continual amusement and shock can be understood as integral to his process of identity formation from an Indian man belonging to the village of Jajau to an Indian man in Eversville pursuing a degree in Chemical Engineering. Examples of such identity formations are very evident throughout the text:

Lot of advertisements, brother. Everywhere. Yeah - Mostly women in them - Yep. Mostly with no clothes, brother - Makes it more attractive - What do their fathers say? (22)

Bhabha talks of this ambivalence in constructing self-identity in a space of cultural dissimilarity:

Cultural identification is then poised on the brink of what Kristeva calls the 'loss of identity' or Fanon describes as a profound cultural 'undecidability'. The people as a form of address emerge from the abyss of enunciation where the subject splits, the signifier 'fades', the pedagogical and the performative are agonistically articulated. (220)

Gopal's learning curve and assimilation into the American culture occurs quite rapidly. As he meets the Dean of his University and discovers to his dismay the blandness of American coffee, he also is surprised to discover that he has already imbibed some of this country's attitudes towards possessions and their value:

It was amazing how rapidly if not instinctively Gopal had begun to equate an automobile's looks with its owner's virtues or their lack. A bad-looking car, he instantly felt, demonstrated a lawless personality. Oddly, he had never felt a similar sentiment in all his years in India. But in America, without anyone telling him so, he had accepted implicitly that the possession became the man. (47)

Gopal's letters to his younger brother in India give the reader a keen insight into the alienation he feels in America. In a letter wishing his parents well and informing them of having settled down at his university accommodations, he says: "Brother, in food matters I am having big botheration. Everyday I am eating cornflakes and boiled eggs for all meals...But what to do? I think Americans are hating vegetarians" (55).

In an essay titled *Sly Civility*, Bhabha discusses the nature of the doubleness of colonial discourse to state that it is not simply writing of and on violence but also “a mode of contradictory utterance that ambivalently reinscribes, across differential power relations, both colonizer and colonized” (139). While *The Inscrutable Americans* does not deal with the coloniser and the colonised in such objective and definite terms, the discourse is ever-present. Observed clearly through the speech of Randy, Gopal’s friend and guide at the university. On the surface, Randy is hospitable, kind and empathetic but his conversations with Gopal serve as examples of typical colonial behaviour – he refers to Gopal as a “half-nigger”, refers to Maharajahs and slave girls in kingdoms as if they still exist in India.

Oh, yeah,' flared Randy, 'well, let me tell you Mr Big Shot From India - hmm,' he acknowledged, accepting the feint. 'Not bad Kumar, not bad at all. Maybe we'll increase aid to India this year after all.' 'You are not,' blared Gopal, his voice rising, 'giving us much aid. It is mostly trade. (65)

Gopal’s quest to lose his virginity in the land of plenty goes awry in many surprising ways. While he admits to have some exposure to the act of intercourse and a general idea of the mechanics involved, he is taken by surprise while faced with real women who are actively looking for it. This shock turns embarrassing when he brings home Ann, is unable to finish the act and does not have the language to articulate his discomfort. Ann perceives this as something more sinister and resorts to racism as a response. She says, “I know there's a lot of difference between us, I mean we do things different here in America. I mean it might be okay in India with all your harems and stuff, but a girl's got to be really careful here of her reputation, know what I mean?” (84).

Gopal’s sense of alienation becomes pronounced in response to a particularly traumatising experience of being targeted by a group of pick-pockets who mistake him for an Iranian and hurl insults: “I jest don't like no Eye-ranians, boy...Comin in here, takin our jobs, takin our women. I jest don't like it, boy. Why don't you git back to your camel land while you can?” (87).

Gopal had never really thought of himself as being any particular colour while in India. Here it defined nearly every moment of his life. Often when he walked into a room he felt that his skin had burst into flames. He actually sensed the glow of fire. It was as though so many glances locking on to him sparked a kind of spontaneous combustion. (90)

Mathur provides the reader with a clear contrast of the kind of Indians one would find in a university in

America: people like Gopal who are new and wide-eyed, grappling with culture-shock and people like Anand (or Andy as he prefers being called) who have assimilated into the culture enough to adopt the mannerisms and accent to the point of taking pride in their apparent “whiteness”.

Gopal is unnerved by the hatred Anand seems to harbour for India and everything Indian, so much so that he comes close to defending his nation and culture despite knowing nothing about the subjects being spoken of. He admits to himself, “Lying in bed, he was astonished at the severity of his responses to Anand's views on India. In India itself he would have paid no attention to them. Here in America he felt himself personally liable for every one of India's policies and answerable for their failures” (111). This susceptibility of commingling oneself with the nation’s culture is the core characteristic of the hybrid identity. It forms one of the major discourses around nationalism and its perceived historicity where “the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectivity itself” (Jameson 69); Gopal fails to understand that his individual identity need not be constructed with reference to his national identity and that the two need not always be inclusive of each other.

Bhabha borrows the notion of ‘the supplement’ from Derrida in stating that the identity of the subaltern always acts as a sort of supplement:

It is always ambiguous, or more accurately ‘undecidable’, whether the supplement adds itself and is a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence, or whether the supplement supplements... adds only to replace... represents and makes an image... its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness (Derrida 144).

Considering the differing modalities in which Derrida’s supplement can present itself, Bhabha argues that in the case of the subaltern, it is always the latter. Gopal in *The Inscrutable Americans* occupies an ambivalent position throughout the text. His incessant harking back to his perceived greatness of Indian culture contrasted while being simultaneously drawn to the eccentric and apparently immoral lifestyle of America present to the reader the perfect image of a supplemental identity – suspended between the being and the not-being. Bhabha expands the idea further by classifying it under the term “Minority Discourse”:

Minority discourse acknowledges the status of national culture – and the people – as a contentious, performative space of the perplexity of the living in the midst of the pedagogical representations of the

fullness of life...The discourse of the minority reveals the insurmountable ambivalence that structures the equivocal movement of historical time. (212)

Gupta catalogues Mathur's work among the works of Tagore, Kipling, Markandaya and the lighter works of Narayan to plot the changing landscape of writing of the East-West trope in diaspora /Indian English literature. He states, "The playful element of the East-West encounter, is beautifully and hilariously brought out by Anurag Mathur" (305).Gopal's character does not undergo massive shifts through the novel nor does his idea of the West. It is only through such a character, so oblivious to his surroundings, that the reader is allowed more agency in the interpretation of the novel. Further study as to the language employed by Mathur, the racial, sexual and sizeist stereotypes expressed by the characters could yeild insights into the formation of the new kind of commerical novel in post-independent India and in the field of diaspora literature.

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