



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 3 No.4, December 2018

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.3, No.4, December, 2018

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Censure or Not to Censure: Colonial Nostalgia and Dynamics of Freedom in Joseph Lelyveld's *Great Soul*

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Submitted 12 August 2018
Revised 23 August 2018
Accepted 28 November 2018

Abstract: An admixture of Politics and Sex in contemporary publishing industry is counted to be the surest way to reap rich dividends. It often leads present-day writers to suggest uncommon and shocking in a familiar terrain, often through insinuation, imposition of motives and historical hindsight. Lelyveld's biography of Gandhi 'The Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India' presents the central figure as a "sexual weirdo, a political incompetent and a fanatical faddist" who destroys everything he touches. The book courted controversy through its allusions to Gandhi's homosexuality with Kallenbach, the Jewish architect who was a close friend of Gandhi during his South African days. Gandhi's reference to Kallenbach as 'Lower House' with himself as 'Upper House' is insinuated in the book as containing sexual overtones. Similarly Gandhi's intense emotional attachment to his followers is construed in relation to Kallenbach as a carnal liaison, without the author using the exact expression. Flouting lack of reverence as its conscious goal, the biography attempts to evaluate Gandhi with a cynical vein, as a person struggling with his numerous faults. While the author claims to be restoring human side of Gandhi, the human side he presents is invariably that of a devious man who had some very twisted ideas in human history. My paper would discuss politics of ban and colonial nostalgia in relation to Lelyveld's book and how the writer courts controversy through his failure of sympathy and desire for cheap popularity.

Keywords: Censor, homosexuality, politics.

I

Ironically, and yet not wholly so in its implications on the politics of ban, the publication of



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book *Great Soul* was noticed in India almost with the publication of a damning review by Andrew Roberts, a known admirer of Winston Churchill and a conservative in *The Wall Street Journal*. The reviewer gleefully seized the opportunity given by Lelyveld to condemn Gandhi: "Great Soul" also obligingly gives readers more than enough information to discern that he was a sexual weirdo, a political incompetent and a fanatical faddist—one who was often downright cruel to those around him. Gandhi was therefore the archetypal 20th-century progressive intellectual, professing his love for mankind as a concept while actually despising people as individuals." (Roberts 1). Andrew Roberts refers to how Gandhi frustrated and irritated Jinnah and was called by Ambedkar 'devious and untrustworthy.' Gandhi was a "ceaseless self-promoter" (Roberts 1) and his famous pronouncements were not his as he often indulged in heavy editing of his speeches. He was a racist who called Africans kafirs and his brahmacharya yajna with women of his ashram, particularly with his niece Manu bore marks of fantasies of a repressed homosexual whose relations with Kallenbach confirmed it. His promotion of celibacy was simply laughable in a country with a large population and his opposition to birth control methods was downrightly dangerous and he was noting more than a devious, crafty man who does not deserve the accolades he got. The controversies stroked by the review got reflected in the *Mumbai Mirror* which published a front page story 'Book claims German man was Gandhi's secret lover.' Contributing to the mill of insinuation was another report published by *The Huffington Post* under its news title 'Indian Government Spends \$1.3 Million To Stop Auction Of Gandhi Letters That May Show He Was Gay' with well elaborated excerpts from *The Wall Street Review* suggesting that Indian Government's action amounted to stifling the unpalatable truth about the Father of the Nation. *The Inside Story* in its news caption 'How outrage gripped Gandhi's recalcitrant Nation' focused on Indian Government's attempt to censor the book through quoting India's law Minister Veerapa Moily who condemned the book as "baseless, sensational and hearsay...denigrating a National leader" (Weber 1) and indicated amendment to 1971 National Honour Act making insulting Mahatma Gandhi an offence with a penalty up to three years imprisonment. Christopher Hitchen's review piece 'The Real Mahatma Gandhi: Questioning the moral heroism of India's most revered figure' in *The Atlantic* is a conglomeration of cynical clichéd notions about India and Gandhi with the reviewer nonchalantly claiming at one point that perhaps he



is showing only his “Eurocentric bias” (Hitchens 1). Referring to Lelyveld’s title of the book the reviewer refers to the idea that India was “somehow too refractory and ungrateful” ((Hitchens 1) to Gandhi’s attempts to reform it. According to Hitchens Gandhi was a reactionary and pompous fool to think that Hitler, Nazis or Palestines had humanity enough to care for his pathetic pleadings, while mocking his attempt to apply non-violence to Japanese. Gandhi;s self-effacement represented his arrogance and the reviewer agreed with lelyveld’s “near euphemisms” when he calls Gandhi initiatives “a mixed bag, full of trenchant moral insights, desperate appeals, and self-deluding simplicities.” (Hitchens 1). ‘The New York Times’ noted that “readers in India, more familiar with the idea of Gandhi as a complex figure, will still find the portrait of a troubled, changeable, wily and occasionally egotistical politician challenging.” (Kunzru 1).

As expected the publication of these reviews led to an uproar in Indian political class and the book was banned by B.J.P. Govt. in Gujarat led by Sh. Narendra Modi for depicting perversion by showing Gandhi as a homosexual and thus hurting the sentiments of the masses who revere Gandhi as their icon: “The perversion shown in the writings not only deserves to be condemned in the strongest possible terms but cannot be tolerated. I know that the members of this august house share my feelings.” (Ghosh 1). The ban was also contemplated by the central government, though later it was dropped on the clarification of the author that he had not called Gandhi homosexual and the reviews have misquoted him.

The almost gleeful reviews published by western press in tandem with equally hysterical one by some Indian newspapers, along with a demand for its ban in India by political class makes it imperative to analyse the problematic of censor which seeks to ban a speech, a book or an art form like painting on the premise that it hurts the deep seated and culturally sanctioned values, beliefs or religious system of the receiving culture or religious group whose claim for authenticity is deemed more genuine than the ‘presenter’ ones, often an outsider figure. There are usually two opposite camps, one advocating the inalienable right of expression and appeals to the great tradition of western liberalism, the other as a victim voices its own right to possess the interpretation of the intangible and tangible cultural artifacts. It would be naive to see censor only in terms of external agency with a potential to restrict the communication through coercion. Censorship can be viewed



as quintessential to human speech which involves constant sifting, arranging and shaping process without which human speech remains a jumbled mass of incoherent sounds. Though most often censorship is seen in negative connotations, as an effort to stifle and restrict the freedom of human expression, its use and function as an enabling power is often neglected. The binaries of freedom and censor needs to be looked into more carefully to assign a proper place to censorship within the repertoire of human speech:

If censorship, however, is a way of *producing* speech, constraining in advance what will and will not become acceptable speech, then it cannot be understood exclusively in terms of juridical power. In the conventional view, censorship appears to follow the utterance of offensive speech: speech has already become offensive, and then some recourse to a regulatory agency is made. But in the view that suggests that censorship *produces* speech, that temporal relation is inverted. Censorship precedes the text (by which I include "speech" and other cultural expressions), and is in some sense responsible for its production. (Butler 128).

The innate process of selection and rejection which undergoes within human psyche comprises of two processes. The first factor can be taken as representative of cultural domain which makes any utterance possible through its placing within the intelligible ambience. Secondly the process of speech in itself is a highly selective process beginning from the selection of human sounds to selection and rejection of possible sentence constructions and appropriate verbal behaviour.

If censor is integral to human speech, its function partakes of those very processes which govern its communicability. Any attempt to censor involves the production of the analogous speech behaviours within the linguistic space thus reviving those very linguistic behaviours which it attempts to banish and reject. Through attempts to push an utterance to the margins of unacceptability, the same utterance is given a centrality and thus paradoxically revives them.

One might argue that the communicative sphere of language necessarily posits a realm of obscenity that it seeks, with always partial success, to keep rigorously



excluded from its own operation. This attempt to purify the sphere of public discourse by institutionalizing the norms that establish what ought properly to be included there operates as a pre-emptive censor. Such efforts not only labor under a fear of contamination, but they are also compelled to restage in the spectacles of public denunciations they perform the very utterances they seek to banish from public life. Language that is compelled to repeat what it seeks to constrain invariably reproduces and restages the very speech that it seeks to shut down. In this way, speech exceeds the censor by which it is constrained. (Butler 129).

II

Great Soul courted controversy, as seen by detractors as well as admirers of Gandhi through its allusion to Gandhi's sexuality, particularly his alleged homosexual overtures to Kallenbach. Seen within the totality of suggestions, references and insinuations employed by Lelyveld in the book, the claims of the writer that 'he did not say it' appears to be only literally true. There is much in the book which provided fuel to the baiters of Gandhi despite Lelyveld's ambiguous comment that "In an age when the concept of Platonic love gains little credence, selectively chosen details of the relationship and quotations from letters can easily be arranged to suggest a conclusion" (Lelyveld 88). Lelyveld ascribes the reason of Gandhi's prolonged stay at Transvaal in place of Natal which had far more pressing need of his presence due to his infatuation with Kallenbach: "But the Transvaal was also where he needed or wanted to be for his own purposes" (81). His relationship with Hermann Kallenbach is referred to as "the most intimate, also ambiguous, relationship of his life time" (88). The author refers to Tridip Suhrud, a Gandhi scholar, who says that Gandhi and Kallenbach were "a couple" (88) and alludes to Kallenbach's assertion that they lived "almost in the same bed" (88). Gandhi's separation from Kasturba is construed by "word of mouth" in South African Indian society as an insinuation that "Gandhi, living his wife behind, had gone to live with a man" (88). He refers to letters of Gandhi in which the writer tells Kallenbach: "Your portrait (the only one) stands on my mantelpiece in the bed room. The mantelpiece is opposite to the bed" (89) and that cotton wool and Vaseline are "a constant reminder" (89). Further Gandhi remarks that it is "to show you and me how completely you have



taken possession of my body. This is slavery with a vengeance” (89). The “most plausible guesses” (89) for reference to Vaseline and cotton is that it “may have to do with enemas” (89) or “may in some other way foreshadow the geriatric Gandhi’s enthusiasm for massage” (89). The title of the chapter ‘Upper House’ traces its nomenclature from pet names used by Gandhi while calling Kallenbach ‘Lower House.’ These names are supposedly used in parliamentary sense: “Gandhi is ‘Upper House’ (and therefore gets to vote down excessive spending). Lower house can pronounce on matters of physical fitness and everything that’s literally down to earth on the communal settlement, known as Tolstoy Farm, they’d by then established. Upper house gets to think deep thoughts, strategiz, and direct the moral development of his other half in this touching bibameral relationship” (89). Despite the author’s elaboration of parliamentary meaning of the addressing, the metaphor resonates with other possibilities such as sexual one. For instance Lelyveld refers to exhortation of Gandhi to kallenbach not to “look lustfully upon any woman” (89) and their pledge for “more love, and yet more love...such as they hope the world has not yet seen” (90). Gandhi’s experiments to control senses through his rejection of milk, chocolate etc. began in this period along with Kallenbach renouncing fish, meat and sex.

The prominence given to Gandhi’s sexuality thus becomes the springboard through which his sainthood is deconstructed. While the opposition between saint and sexual being is located upon the misconstrued idea about the Indian concept of the relationship between body and soul, what is more interesting is the fixation of western culture on it. It leads to subversion of projection of recipient culture as conservative and reactionary against the liberality of the writer’s adopted or native one, signalling the operation of censor both ways. While western attitude towards sexuality revealed a movement towards branding it as morally reprehensible in all its manifestations in human behaviour, Gandhian notion, in its attributes of pagan attributes of sexuality, is fundamentally anatomical. For him pleasures of senses may be suspected not because they are foreplay or hidden forms of passion but because they are gateways to sexual feelings and contribute in the arousal of sexuality. Contrasting modern European notion of sexuality with the Greek one, Michel Foucault asserted that European enlightenment created a discourse of sexuality through pastoral services, medicine and psychiatry wherein a whole array of discursive sexual practices were documented, analysed and diversified into various disciplines of



knowledge. For Greeks aphrodisiac was connected with coitus and its physical manifestations. *Akolasia* or self indulgence concerns itself with bodily touch:

For there is pleasure that is liable to *akolasia* only where there is touch and contact: contact with the mouth, the tongue and the throat (for the pleasures of food and drink) or contact with other parts of the body (for the pleasures of sex). Moreover, Aristotle remarks that it would be unjust to suspect self-indulgence in the case of certain pleasures experienced on the surface of the body, such as noble pleasures that are produced by massages and heat in the gymnasium (Foucault, 1992, p. 40)

As against it, modern European notion of sexuality is based upon its conception as a “stealthy, resourceful, and dreadful power” (Foucault, 1992, p.41) which has “the ability to cloak itself in many forms other than sexual acts” (41). Beginning with 18th century in enlightenment Europe, the discourse on sex proliferated in diverse disciplines which contrasted with its earlier view of it as a part of human life and action and was dissected, classified and made of part of human sciences. It was not made a taboo but an interesting mystery which was explicated and studies as an object it itself:

Since the eighteenth century, sex has not ceased to provoke a kind of generalized discursive erethism. [...] Incitements to speak were orchestrated from all quarters, apparatuses everywhere for listening and recording, procedures for observing, questioning and formulating. Sex was driven out of hiding and constrained to lead a discursive existence. From the singular imperialism that compels everyone to transform their sexuality into a perpetual discourse, to the manifold mechanisms which, in the areas of economy, pedagogy, medicine, and justice, incite, extract, distribute, and institutionalise the sexual discourse, an immense verbosity is what our civilization has required and organised. Surely no other type of society has ever accumulated—and in such a relatively short span of time—a similar quantity of discourses concerned with sex. (Foucault, 1990, p.32-33).



Along with its proliferation and classification in diverse branches of study, the discourses on sex now derived their power from its secrecy, its mystery which needs more and more discourses and treatments: “What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as *the* secret.(Foucault, 1990, p. 35).

The development of attitudes towards homosexuality within western culture originated with its break from a more boundary less instance of sodomy which was an event not a reflection on the individual. As studies by Foucault, power operates through intervention and invention of classifications and categories. With the rise of empiricism and modernism along with their offshoot in humanism, human behaviour and action was divided into neat categories and thus delimited life and reality into bounded, fixed behavioural patterns. When applied to human sexuality, it gave rise to new categories which became objects of study by psychologists, medical professionals and sociologists which had further an effect of concretising them into fixed patterns to what was earlier an aberration or stand alone act: “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy to a kind of interior androgeny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual now was a species” (Foucault, 1991, p.1472-73). Ascription of identity to individuals due to certain actions is comparatively modern phenomenon which attained particular intensity in the modern age. Due to it there appeared a whole set of individuals who were labelled in a particular way due to a need to classify and sorting process: “In modern society, actions begin to be taken as evidence of a deep-rooted and persistent identity. In the pre-modern world, in contrast, sodomy and other crimes seen as temporary aberrations, single acts that carried no particular relation to the self who committed them; they certainly were not seen as demonstrating a sexual identity or a criminal nature. The label sodomite says nothing beyond pointing to the commission of particular acts. But the homosexual carries his homosexuality within himself at every moment; the act comes to determine identity” (1473). It is this stigma of homosexuality alongwith almost obsessive interest in its evaluations which makes the ascription of homosexuality to eastern saints an alluring proposition for many artists from western tradition. The moral dictums it intrinsically involves are, despite the claims for



liberality in these matters which junks eastern civilizations as conservatives, ministerial relics of forbidden pleasures wherein sexuality and particularly homosexuality becomes not an alternative practice but a piece of suspicion, interest and moral judgments thus condemning the person.

III

This attitude of incomprehensibility towards the sexual experiments of Gandhi presents a fundamental disconnect which is further revealed in Lelyveld's attitude towards Gandhi as a person who has knee jerk reactions to problems around him, a hesitant, whimsical person who has more faults than virtues. Most of these faults such as recalcitrant, unpredictability, contraries etc, are not only pinned upon Gandhi but also upon India and Indians. The title 'Mahatma Gandhi and his Struggle *with* India offers the two opposite poles—one represented by Gandhi who is seen as an ineffectual idealist caught in his own delusions of self and ego while other is the Indian reality which opposes any kind of sublimation by weak and ineffective efforts of the apostle. India many have come away from the land of exotic snake charmers but is couched in the same oriental terms of obscurity, unpredictability and obdurateness thus making for an effective contrast to the West.

The uproar caused by the writer's suggestion of homosexuality to Gandhi overshadowed a genuine critical assessment of the book. Great Soul is, at its best, a journalistic document with factual information whose interpretation seeks to prefer novelty to reflection. The author's obsession with his argument concerning recalcitrance of India which is born out of a clichéd myopic view of assumed mysteries of India reduces everything to a pattern. Further the danger of journalistic approach used by Lelyveld involves methods of rational enquiry of enlightenment legacy with an attempt to find explanation into everything. Whatever does not prove itself amenable to this methodology is rejected as improbable. Along with it, it is sad to find imperialistic nostalgia peeping out of a writer like Lelyveld, it seems the colonial hangover of Anglo-American gentlemen is still not over. This sigh at loss of kingdoms eventually follows vilification and an inability to empathise with anti-colonial figures with implicit view that 'we were better as compared to these natives.'

One of the most notable tendency with its far reaching consequences in the booming publication market of the contemporary world is a deliberate cultivation of controversy through insinuations



and foregrounding of those details which are sensational and catchy. It eventually leads to the uproar and gives an easy publicity to the book. It particularly works well in a traditional country like India where Gandhi is revered as a Father of the Nation , which added to India's traditional outlook on sexual matters and its fiercely contested political arena, makes it appropriate situation for quick publicity.

The politics of ban involves the highly contested right of freedom of expression. Though defended vehemently by liberals as a sanctimonious prerequisite for democracy, freedom of expression can operate only in a social space: "Liberty is not a personal affair only, but a social contract. It is an accommodation of interest" (Gardiner 34). There can be no freedom of expression within an individual arena without the presence of another subject. Hence freedom of expression, a priori, cannot be individualistic, opportune and self-centered. With all the defence of the right of expression, can we defend the right to say anything on anybody? Do freedoms which are accorded to the critics, reporters are indefinite and devoid of responsibilities? The problem with boundary less freedom is that it encroaches upon the sensibilities of others while failing to accept its own horizon. The situation is more or less like the traffic with the provision that "in order that the liberties of all may be preserved the liberties of everybody must be curtailed" (Gardiner 34). . If one has a freedom to do anything on the road, then of course traffic rules becomes redundant We have to recognise the limitations of the freedom of speech as well as the politics of ban which is behind many such books. To censor or not to censor defies simplistic answers, the situations are amenable not to one unique formula and We can agree with Robert Frost in 'Mending Wall.'

Before I would built a wall, I'd seek to know

What I was walling in or walling out

And to whom I was like to give offence

Sifting out genuine from simply catchy and melodramatic, intentional from original and a consideration of freedom as a shared value not a personal whim can perhaps provide a way out of this contested arena.



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