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M.K. Gandhi, a Founding Figure in the Domain of Postcolonial Studies

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Abstract:

M.K. Gandhi has been greatly neglected in the domain of postcolonial studies, in spite of being a towering figure in the arena of Indian freedom movement. It is most probably because of his strict adherence to non-violence; he has not been accorded that much of importance in the belligerent tradition of postcolonialism. But a minute analysis of the history and evolution of postcolonialism ensures the fact that Gandhi fulfills all the criteria to be called the founding father of postcolonial studies. The main apogee of this paper is to justify the stance of Gandhi as an influential figure in the field of postcolonial studies.

Keywords: Non-violence, Postcolonialism, Colonialism, Passive resistance

Introduction:

Some critics like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others often secure a pivotal position in the field of postcolonial studies. Many of the critics construe Said's *Orientalism* as the most seminal text of postcolonial studies that remarkably brought the concept of postcolonial discourse to the fore. Apart from Said, Bhabha and Spivak are also equally influential in terms of their contribution to the growth and development of postcolonial studies.

But besides this trinity, there are some other figures who can be interpreted as the earlier thinkers of postcolonialism with respect to their immense contribution to the development of postcolonialism. Cesaire, Senghor, Ngugi Thiong'o, Frantz Fanon and M.K. Gandhi and others have touched upon the most pertinent issues of postcolonial studies much earlier. But, much work has not been done to justify their stance as the founding figures of postcolonial studies. Especially, M.K. Gandhi who has a great relevance to the study of postcolonialism goes unheard and unnoticed in the major postcolonial texts and treatises. The critics like Said, Bhabha and Spivak have hardly focused upon Gandhi in their most celebrated works.

The contribution of M.K. Gandhi to the arena of postcolonialism is no less striking than that of other thinkers or writers. As a pioneering figure of the Indian national movement for freedom, Gandhi may be considered as one of the founding figures in postcolonial studies. His role in Indian freedom struggle ensures that his achievements stand at the head of the process of global decolonization. He has inspired numerous anti-colonial liberations and pacifist movements of various kinds around the world.

One of the greatest leaders of the 20th century, Gandhi is also a prolific and excellent writer. Being an influential leader with a colonial history, his writings bear a great relevance to the study of postcolonialism. But he is missing from the study of postcolonialism because he is very often studied as a pacifist and humanist. Unlike others, Gandhi has devised his own way to fight against the colonial evils. He has devised and deployed new instruments of resistance and opposition: *non-violence* and *non-cooperation* - through which the Indians have liberated themselves from the British rule. Since, postcolonialism has taken a belligerent stance; Gandhi has not been given much importance in the study even though he has written extensively bearing a great relevance to the postcolonial discourse.

Locating Gandhi in the Domain of Postcolonial Studies:

Numerous writers like Louis Fischer, Roman Rolland, B.R. Nanda and others have worked on Gandhi but they have worked particularly on his biography sparing his connection with the postcolonial discourse. They have mainly interpreted Gandhi as a pacifist and humanist. Of course recently writers and critics have attributed considerable importance to Gandhi. But enough work has not been done on this area to substantiate the role of Gandhi in the domain of postcolonial theory and practice. Recently some of the postcolonial critics have started directing their attention to M.K. Gandhi in their discourse. The critics like J.C. Young, Leela Gandhi, Gyan Prakash, Harish Trivedi and others have endeavoured to locate Gandhi at the centre of postcolonial studies in their writings.

While acknowledging the importance of M.K. Gandhi in the area of postcolonial studies, 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). Stressing the deafening silence of M.K. Gandhi in the postcolonial discourse, P.K. Nayar says, "The most revolutionary participant of anti-colonial struggles, M.K. Gandhi is curiously not often cited or appropriated by postcolonial theorists" (29). Interpreting Gandhi as an earlier thinker of postcolonialism, Ashish Nandy writes, "Gandhi was one of the earliest to realize that colonization was something to be overcome in our own consciousness first" (63). However, J.C.

Young, a renowned postcolonial critic has offered a highly commendable remark on M.K. Gandhi:

Gandhi was the most extraordinary phenomenon of a unique history.....much of the theoretical trajectory of postcolonial India took the form [inter alia]...of a left politics that, while rejecting Gandhian ideology, has continued to absorb some of the political forms and techniques of what were then his counter-intuitive political strategies. With time, they seem to become increasingly modern and relevant to radical political practices of the twenty-first century[Gandhi's] counter-modernity proved to be the most modern of all those of anti-colonial activists. (Young 2001:334)

Revisiting Gandhi with Reference to Postcolonial Studies:

Being a visionary, Gandhi has talked about some of the burning issues of postcolonial studies much earlier. His extensive writings are suggestive of his deep understanding of some issues like racism, colonial hypocrisy so on and so forth. His fight against racism created an epoch-making history all around the world. Gandhi's experience of the evils of colonization is no less horrifying than that of Fanon. Gandhi has stood a lot of humiliating situations in South Africa. But, he has never budged an inch from his own commitment. This indomitable spirit of Gandhi is brilliantly expressed by B.R. Nanda who says with reference to Gandhi's struggle and misery in South Africa, "Gandhi had borne all the beating but had not budged from his seat. It was a classic scene, a fit subject for a great artist; quiet courage and human dignity pitted against racial arrogance and brute strength" (33). With a strong determination to revolt and remove this scourge of racism Gandhi asked for the removal of the badge of inferiority and implied racial taint and he wanted legal or theoretical equality. His fight against the discriminatory enactments against Indians in South Africa fetches him the identity of a pioneering thinker of postcolonial studies.

Apart from racism, Gandhi is quite cynical of the use of English language as a medium of instruction. Like other postcolonial critics, Gandhi vehemently opposes the use and advocacy of English. Realizing the devastating consequences associated with the use of English, he demands the complete replacement of English as a medium of teaching and learning. Gandhi understood the real intention of the colonizing masters in introducing English into India. Lord Macaulay who strongly advocated the use of English language to facilitate the trade and commerce of the English people and underrate the native culture in his famous minute has been badly denigrated by M.K. Gandhi in his *Hind Swaraj*. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi says, "To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them. The foundation that Macaulay laid of education has

enslaved us” (73). No other postcolonial critic has attacked the ideas of Macaulay as bitterly and openly as Gandhi.

Gandhi’s view on education was greatly influenced 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. Instead of advocating the use and appropriation of English language, he prioritized the use of regional languages. While insisting his fellowmen to use the regional languages Gandhi says:

A universal language for Indian should be Hindi, with the option of writing in Persian or Nagari characters. In order that the Hindus and the Mahomedans may have closer relations, it is necessary to know both the characters. And if we can do this, we can drive English out of the field in a short time. (Gandhi 2010:75)

Gandhi has attacked the colonial educational system for its inability to enhance the employability of the Indian students. For him, the colonial ignores the indigenous culture of heart and hand. It alienates the natives from their cultural heritage. Gandhi outlines the difficulty of an Indian student educated in colonial system of education in the following words:

The higher he goes, the further he is removed from his home, so that at the end of his education he becomes estranged from his surroundings. He feels no poetry about the home life. The village scenes are all a sealed book to him. His own civilization is presented to him as imbecile, barbarous, superstitious and useless for all practical purposes. His education is calculated to wean him from his traditional culture. (Gandhi 1966:38)

Through the above lines, Gandhi not only accuses the colonial education of its endeavour to detach the Indians from their glorious tradition but also criticizes the entire colonial enterprise for its hypocrisy and inefficiency. This concern over the native culture undoubtedly adds to Gandhi’s image as a visionary who had envisaged and calculated the hazards of the colonialism much before the publication of *Orientalism* or any other seminal texts of the postcolonial studies.

Gandhi develops a quite critical attitude towards the western civilization. In almost all of his writings, he has denounced the western culture in all its forms or manifestations. Gandhi has made a sincere attempt in both of his words and deeds to retain the originality and essence of

Indian culture. Assuming the superiority of the indigenous culture is always taken as one of the most important tenets of postcolonial studies. He stands in firm opposition to the colonial enterprise for its subversive attitude towards the native culture. His book *Hind Swaraj* which is often studied as the critique of the western civilization clearly exposes the dangers associated with the colonial values. Asserting the cultural supremacy of India in *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi says, “the tendency of Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being, that of the Western civilization is to propagate immorality” (50). *Hind Swaraj* presents an idealized version of Indian culture that is completely absent in the modern West. In his book, Gandhi covers many of the essential postcolonial concerns which got popularized with the emergence of the recent postcolonial theorists.

In an attempt to establish the superiority of his culture over that European culture Gandhi says in *Hind Swaraj*:

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. (Gandhi 2010:30)

These lines of Gandhi reflect his abhorrence or repugnance for the western culture which falls far short of the standard expected of it. Gandhi is of the conviction that the sense of supremacy and dominance claimed by the colonizing masters is baseless and incongruous.

Conclusion:

A minute analysis of some of the writings of M.K. Gandhi clearly indicates that he reserves all the right to be called a founding figure of postcolonial studies. His non-violence is no less revolutionary and effective than any other form of violence. He has projected a distinct image by resorting to the weapon of non-violence and non-cooperation for resisting the colonial dominance. The issues which have constituted the major portion of the postcolonial theory and practice have been articulated by Gandhi much before.

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