



DEPICTION OF INDIA IN ATLAS SHRUGGED: SITUATING OR UNSETTLING LITERARY IMAGE?

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Abstract

The theme of *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) is the role of the mind in man's existence as well as the demonstration of a new moral philosophy: the morality of rational self-interest. This book has always been subject to debate for different reasons. It is a dystopian allegory in which the men of action in all the spheres of civilization struggling against stifling regulations, and an over-reaching government who one by one closes down production, bringing the world economy to its knees. Rand's philosophy, which she called objectivism, is essentially the philosophy of rational individualism and drew directly on the American ideals of freedom, hard work, and individualism. The concepts, her spokesperson states, the mystics of muscle and the mystics of spirit, are the known antitheses of her philosophy. Though debatable for many years, Rand's ideas are now taken as conventional wisdom and hence, there is a need to look at the misrepresentation of the image of India, Indian culture and Indian philosophies quite seriously. This paper is an attempt to bring this distorted image to the surface for the interpretation of the readers.

Key words: Mystics Of Spirit, Mystics Of Muscle, India, Mind, Raja.

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1. Introduction

John Bowdon ranks *Atlas Shrugged* among the top ten on the list of "the most fascinating books of the 20th century" (Butler-Bowdon, 247). The real villains of the novel at the textual level are nothing but the incarnations of the mystics of spirit or the mystics of muscle. John Galt, the hero and protagonist of this novel, explains these concepts in his radio discourse. He equates spiritualists and materialists with the mystics of mind and muscle respectively and calls them the two types of teachers of the morality of death and destruction. They are the products of the split between the soul and body of man and advocate the soul-body dichotomy. Both demand the surrender of our minds, one to their revelations and the other to their reflexes. Their aims are common: "... their moral codes are alike, and so are their aims: in matter—the enslavement of man's body, in spirit—the destruction of his mind" (Rand, 940). The mystics of the spirit, according to John Galt, define God as one who is beyond man's power of conception, and man's spirit must be subordinated to the will of God. God's standards must be accepted on faith. The purpose of man's life is unknown, and should not be called into question. His reward will be given to him beyond the grave. Selfishness is the evil of man and selflessness and sacrifice are the highest virtues. The mystics of spirit declare that they possess a special sixth sense which comprises contradicting the whole of the knowledge of our five senses. They invalidate our own consciousness and ask us to surrender ourselves to their power. "They offer you, as a proof of their superior knowledge, the fact that they assert the opposite of everything you know, and as a proof of their superior ability to deal with existence, the fact that they lead you to misery, self-sacrifice, starvation, destruction" (Rand, 947). They claim that they perceive a mode of being superior to our existence on this earth. The mystics of the spirit call it another dimension, which comprises denying dimensions. The mystics of the mind curse matter; they wish that men profit by giving up the earth. Their non-material worlds are realms where everything happens automatically. Things get produced instantly by any magical formula. They don't even count human intelligence, energy, skills and expertise to invent modes of any production. For them, a question "how" for these miracles is the concept of vulgar realists; the concept of superior spirits is "Somehow." Simply put, they deny the contribution of thought to the development of the human world. For centuries, they have put faith over reason. They are enemies of the mind. They are the creators of a soul-body dichotomy. For them to wish is to create "And that wish is the whole of their shabby secret. The secret of all their esoteric philosophies, of all their dialectics and super-senses,

of their evasive eyes and snarling words; the secret for which they destroy civilization, language, industries and lives" (Rand, 948).

India presented in Atlas Shrugged and interpretations

Rand sees India as a symbol of the mystics of spirit. For Westerners, the early interpretations of Hindu religious scriptures were doctrines of anti-materialism, moksha and anti-capitalism. Over the centuries, the world has become accustomed to associating India with spirituality. India has always been a place of mysticism. India has been a point of interest to the world since the early days of civilization. As the writer Henri Michaux once wrote, "In India there is nothing to see-everything to interpret" (kirkusreviews, n.d.). Henri Michaux calls himself a barbarian in Asia and he does not hesitate to express his opinion in the book entitled *A barbarian in Asia* (1949). He does not insist on Western superiority, but acknowledges that through his Western eyes much seems unusual, odd, and inexplicable and for Asians, it is "far from politically correct. though natives of these lands might take offense" (kirkusreviews, n.d.). Unconsciously or unconsciously, Ayn Rand regards India as an apt symbol of the evils created by the so-called mystics of spirit and the social conditions resulting from the practice of the philosophies of the so-called mystics of spirits. When she depicts some cruel industrialists like the Starnes brothers and how the most evil of them all, Ivy Starnes tries to embrace Hinduism and Eastern asceticism after destroying the lives of workers in her industry, it was the deliberate use of symbols and deities to demonstrate that India was an indigenous site of mystics. She compares the looters with the mystics of the flesh and spirit through her protagonist, John Galt. He says that these mystics fly from one form to another occasionally, but their fight is against thinking. Rand argued that Indian philosophy is utilized as the perfect mask by moochers. If readers consider Indians to be mystics of the mind, that could have a catastrophic effect on the understanding of Indian philosophy.

Examples to expose the image distortion of India

I remember the following textual examples and if I reflect from the standpoint of my previous observations, any reader can sense the concern:

1. In her search for the motor's creator, Dagny contacts a Starnes heir. The Twentieth Century Motor Company and everyone who worked there were wiped out by the nefarious plots of Starnes' successors. The narrator recounts Ivy Starnes' musty cottage. Undusted corners and incense burning in silver jars at the foot of "contorted Oriental deities" were the source of the fragrance. Ivy Starnes sat like "a baggy Buddha" on a pillow (Rand, 300).

2. The second reference comes in the same chapter in the dialogues between one of the protagonists, Dagny Taggart and Ivy Starnes. Towards the end of the talk, Ivy says she has retired from the world of manufacturers, machines, and money because that world is enslaved by materialistic entities. She was studying the great mysteries of India, which teach about the emancipation of the spirit. As she interprets, these secrets propagate the release from bondage to flesh, the victory over physical nature and the triumph of the spirit over matter. The hypocritical actions of Ivy Starnes infuriate Dagny. The Twentieth Century Motor Company in its heyday was the best in the country. Starnesville was the name for the owners of the company- the Starnes family. The protagonist, John Galt, who went to work at this company after graduating, tells us something about the reputation of it. After Jed Starnes, his three children took over the factory. These children were all horrible people who ran the factory into the ground and inspired Galt to begin his crusade. They preached the slogan, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." Basically, they did away with salaries and had people vote on what others should earn based on their needs. This turned into a disaster. They considered Ivy Starnes the worst of them. The sadistic Ivy feeds on people's emotions and loves to torment them. In this respect, she is what Galt calls a looter of the spirit and has a lot in common with James Taggart and other antagonistic characters who also enjoy destroying people for their own ambitions, whims, and amusement. What's truly horrible about Ivy is that she acts sadistically, but speaks in terms of charity and brotherly love. She embodies the very worst of what Galt considers looter ideology. She chooses Indian religious practices and philosophy to hide her crimes.

3. India is referred to as a country which "has existed for centuries without any industrial development whatever" (Rand, 868). One of the opportunists, Dr. Ferris, proclaims that there is an unnecessary overemphasis on industrial development and survival of a nation like India with no kind of industrialization for centuries disproves this thing. The time of the novel is assumed as some remote time span in the future. It is surprising that the authoress doesn't think that India will be industrialized even in the remote future. What these views represent is a matter of an independent study.

4. Dagny Taggart sees the looters are content to return to a pre-industrial age, like a fat, unhygienic Raja of India (Kings in India) who ruled his impoverished subjects by force. It would be an unwritten promise that their subject would produce enough to have something to plunder. According to her, the Rajas of India will be against electronics factories because they only think about their luxury.

These Indian kings were the inspiration for the feudal barons present in the novel's narrative world. It is clear that she ignores the history of India, where ruled many liberal kings like Chandragupta, Ashoka, Akbar. If it is a conscious choice by Rand, perceptions of early American thinkers of Indian history are the matters to get re-investigated.

5. In the radio speech later, Galt compares backward Indians and developed Americans. He tries to show the listeners that they make conscious mistakes by regarding the fortune makers inferior to the fortune tellers. The following remark would have been politically and culturally controversial had Ayan Rand set the novel in a typical time frame:

You who claim to rise above the crude concerns of the body, above the drudgery of serving mere physical needs-who is enslaved by physical needs: the Hindu who labors from sunrise to sunset at the shafts of hand -plow for a bowl of rice, or the American who is driving a tractor? Who is the conqueror of physical reality: the man who sleeps on the bed of nails or the man who sleeps on an inner-spring mattress? Which is the monument of the triumph of the human spirit over matter: the germ-eaten hovels on the shorelines of the Ganges or the Atlantic Skyline of New York? (Rand, 963)

6. There are references to other nations like People's State of Chile, Mexico, the states which nationalized private properties. The US is going to grant a loan to People's Republic of Argentina and Chile and send relief supplies to People's state of France and Germany. China has been mentioned as a state unable to have even enough nails to put wooden roofs over people's heads and mention of Guatemala as a state which declines request of the US for a loan of steel. The references to People's State of Norway, Portugal, Turkey and England come only in relation to the pirate Ragner Danneksjold.

2. Conclusion

It is quite clear that Ayan Rand painted unhesitatingly India as a land of mystics of spirit and the land which glorifies the anti-human activities of the enemies of the mind, the villains in Atlas Shrugged. The moochers, feigned thinkers, shallow scientists and opportunistic political leaders have represented them in this novel. She might have been the witness of the growing attraction of the West, especially the United States, for the Hindu spiritual gurus and their practices. Some religious nuances or the Anglo-American conceptions of the otherness might have inspired her views. The textual references targeted against any specific nation like India can open a myriad of interpretations of the understandings and misunderstandings of the then

Americans of India. This presentation of India might be a known antithesis of the theory of objectivism and the myopic vision of the then western world Rand proposed. Henri Michaux comments on Indians in *A Barbarian in Asia* as the people who are so exasperating to the European, contemplative, idolatrous, slow, sensual, intolerant and immovable and a practitioner of many austerities and cruelties. Was it the stereotypical picture of Indians the Westerners have visualized or tagged in those decades?

This discussion was only an attempt to bring to surface this distorted image of India in one of the most popular fictional works in the world. It is a worthy topic for the full-length study to find out the 'Why' of such a depiction of India.

3. References

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