

## THE ETHICAL IMAGINATION OF GANDHI AS SEEN THROUGH THE CRITICAL EYE OF ORWELL IN “REFLECTIONS ON GANDHI”

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### ABSTRACT

*Concise Oxford English dictionary defines the word ethic ‘as a set of moral principles’. The word ‘ethical’ an adjective derived from ethic is defined as ‘related to moral principles or the branch of knowledge concerned with these’. Ethical imagination is the ability of the mind to form ideas that are morally correct. The argument that will run through this paper centres on Gandhi’s ethics as the moving force behind his aesthetics. Different critics have illumined whole areas of the Gandhian landscape in insightful books and critical essays, but few have devoted themselves exclusively to the moral aspect of Gandhi’s imagination. This paper traces the roots of Gandhian thought to a definite moral point of view. This moral point of view is embedded in his Indianness and his Hindu tradition. He has also imbibed this moral point of view from his education in England. In other words, a consideration of Gandhi’s ethics as an anxiety manifested both in the content and form of his works constitutes the summum bonum of my argument in this paper and to show how Gandhi’s imagination feeds on such an anxiety.*

**Keywords:** bio-ethics, British Empire, Disobedience Movement, Non-Violence.

### INTRODUCTION

Concise Oxford English dictionary defines the word *ethic* ‘as a set of moral principles’. It is derived from Latin *ethice*, from Greek (he<sup>ε</sup>) *éthiké* ‘(the science of) morals’, based on *éthos*. The same dictionary defines *ethos* as ‘the characteristic spirit of a culture, era, or community as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations. The word ‘ethical’, an adjective derived from *ethic* is defined as ‘related to moral principles or the branch of knowledge concerned with these’. Imagination has been defined as ‘the faculty or action of forming ideas or mental images and the ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful. So, it would suffice to say that ethical imagination is the ability of the mind to form ideas that are morally correct.

The argument that will run through this paper centres on Gandhi’s ethics as the moving force behind his aesthetic. Different critics have illumined whole areas of the Gandhian landscape

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in insightful books and critical essays, but few have devoted themselves exclusively to the moral aspect of Gandhi's imagination. This paper endeavoured to trace the roots of Gandhian thought to a definite moral point of view. This moral point of view is embedded in his Indianness and his Hindu tradition. He has also imbibed this moral point of view from his education in England. In other words, a consideration of Gandhi's ethics as an anxiety manifested both in the content and form of his works constitutes the *sumum bonum* of argument and principal concern here is to show how Gandhi's imagination feeds on such an anxiety.

Orwell's essay, "*Reflections on Gandhi*" was published in 1948, the same year in which Gandhi succumbed to the bullets of the assassin, Nathuram Godse. Orwell's comments on the political achievements of the Indian social reformer and nationalist have to be read in the context of Gandhiji's struggle for freedom from the standpoint of despotic rulers. Just as his attitude in "*Shooting an Elephant*" is marked by ambiguousness, similarly, his essay, "*Reflections on Gandhi*" is marked by both ambiguity and ambivalence. In "*Shooting an Elephant*" Orwell realizes his psychological crisis and "*the futility of the white man's dominion in the East... I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. (The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell Vol.1, p.269)*. A perceptive critic like Lionel Trilling comments on the complexity of emotions in Orwell's "*Shooting an Elephant*" thus: "*Orwell has spoken with singular honesty of the ambiguousness of his attitude in the imperialist situation. He disliked authority and he used it, and he was often exasperated by the natives*" (*The Opposing Self* p.161). In his documentary *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell admits that in Burma he "*was part of the actual machinery of despotism*" (*The Road to Wigan Pier* p.147).

Orwell equated Gandhi with mysticism, vegetarianism and home-spun cloth. But at the same time, he was totally awe-struck by Gandhiji's sterling ethics, unquestionable honesty and indomitable courage. In the manner reminiscent of Francis Bacon, he opens his essay on Gandhiji with an aphorism. "*Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent*". This aphoristic statement of Orwell shows his skeptical attitude towards sainthood. It also underscores a subtle mixture of sanctity and shrewd tactics in Gandhiji's protean personality. Orwell does not disown his artistic distaste for Gandhiji because he compromised his principles of sainthood by entering into the arena of politics. Gandhiji was not a politician by profession but he was compelled by the political conditions of the country to enter into the realm of politics which by their very nature are linked with fraud, tyranny and coercion.

Orwell is not blind to certain inhuman tendencies in the character of Gandhiji. Most readers of Gandhiji's bio-ethics know that he was willing to let his wife or child die rather than give them animal food. He was also an advocate of otherworldliness but this did not square with the humanistic ideal on which he laid much significance. His otherworldliness was in no way compatible with his endeavour to escape from the love as well as the pain of living. Orwell does not make snide against the negative aspects of Gandhiji's character. On the contrary, he eulogizes his

impeccable moral courage, his total freedom from suspiciousness, his belief in the sense of equality of all human beings on the planet and his great qualities of head and heart which were highly extolled by both anarchists and pacifists. Then Orwell states that there is not an iota in Gandhi's character which can be labelled bad even by his detractors.

Earlier, Orwell had made an extended review of Gandhiji's autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. If the different chapters of Gandhiji's autobiography entitled, "Childhood", "Child Marriage", "Stealing and Atonement", "My Father's Death and My Double Shame", "The Canker of Untruth", "First Day in Pretoria" and "The Birth of Satyagraha" are clubbed together and read at one sitting, the reader can hear the Mahatma's voice of conscience ringing in his mind's ear loud and bold.

In the essay, "*Reflections on Gandhi*" there is a digressionary twist from Orwell's previous observations on Gandhi. When he was an Officer in the Imperial Police Service he would burst into a guffaw on every occasion in which Gandhiji was mentioned as the most shining example of the policy of non-violence. Orwell had every reason to believe that Gandhiji would have served "*the Japanese if they got there*" in as much as he served the British. When the British admitted privately that Gandhi was "*our man*", it became easier for them to rule India. Behind the policy of their labelling Gandhi "*our man*" was their wicked motive of ruling India easily. The British administrators were always in a state of terror that if Gandhiji was maltreated in jail he might die and his leadership would be replaced by someone who had less faith in "*Soul force*" and more faith in the force of explosives.

In "*Reflections on Gandhi*" Orwell suggests that his impressions of Gandhi and the British administrators might not have been infallible but it was fairly apparent that the British were trying their utmost to make use of him:

*How reliable such calculations are in the long run is doubtful; as Gandhi himself says, 'in the end deceivers deceive only themselves'; but at any rate "the gentleness with which he was nearly always handled was due partly to the feeling that he was useful."*

*(The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell Vol.2, p. 262)*

Then Orwell had a word of praise for the democratic form of government in England. When the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement were gathering steam in India, England was ruled by the Democrats. Orwell opines that Gandhiji's success was to a large extent attributable to the fact that he did not have to deal with a fascist form of government. That democratic government, in the opinion of Orwell, allowed him to enjoy the wide publicity which was primarily responsible for his success. Had a dictatorial government been at power in England, it would have run trains to crush the early protestors (of the Disobedience Movement) and that tyrannical act on the part of the British government would certainly have put paid to all his plans for the Civil Disobedience Movement. Orwell expresses doubts whether the passive methods of resistance of Gandhiji could be applied in a fascist country like Italy or Germany where persons opposing the fascist regime disappear in the middle of the night and their

whereabouts are not known the following morning. All that Orwell wants to suggest is that Gandhiji's policy of non-violence in politics would have been totally inefficacious had it been used in the presence of Hitler, Mussolini or Stalin. Idolizers of Gandhiji could catch Orwell at the wrong foot when he expressed fears that Gandhiji might be wiped away in the hands of totalitarian rulers, Left or Right. What Orwell failed to foresee was that even if Gandhiji was assassinated, his undying spirit would guide the leaders of the Freedom Movement in different corners of the world.

One may wish to agree if we take into account the views of the revolutionary leader, Kihika in the novel of James Ngugi in *A Grain of Wheat*. In stark opposition to Karanja stood Kihika, the most vociferous of the freedom fighters. Though he drew inspiration from leaders like Waiyaki, yet his firm faith in the culture and resilience of people of other lands spoke volumes for his leadership. He sought inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi who gave India the much cherished freedom from the yoke of British tyranny. He told his youthful friends, Gikonyo, Mumbi, Karanja and others, *Why Gandhi succeeded ? Because he made his people give up their fathers and mothers and serve their one Mother———India. With us Kenya is our mother.*

( *A Grain of Wheat* p.83)

In "*Reflections on Gandhi*", Orwell acknowledges the significance of non-violence: "It seems doubtful whether civilization can stand another major war, and it is at least thinkable that the way out lies through non-violence. This is the universal significance of Gandhiji's message and it holds well not only for the twenty first century but for eons to come. This makes one think that Orwell's vision of the world is very close to Gandhiji's moral vision. Perhaps the change in Orwell's attitude and his conviction in the force of non-violence had come about after the nuclear holocaust in Hiroshima in 1945.

Towards the end of the essay, Orwell says that in or about 1945, a large body of public opinion had grown up in England. This huge body of public opinion was certainly sympathetic to the idea of India's attaining of independence. But Orwell was not certain to what extent Gandhiji's personal life and character were instrumental in molding the thought processes of the British politicians. Orwell does not make any bones of the fact that the Labour Party under Clement Attlee took a liberal view of the question of India's independence. Orwell does not mince words in stating that a Conservative Government piloted by Winston Churchill would have forestalled the demand of Gandhiji for independence.

But Orwell is unable to take account of the true revolutionary character of the Indian struggle for independence under the political stewardship of Gandhiji. There is a moral and spiritual side to Gandhi's castigation and denunciation of British imperialism. Gandhi knew that imperialists believe in the egoistic pursuit of power and greed. Hence, Gandhiji did not harbour any illusions about the possibility of purging the political field of such hideous tendencies. In his heart of hearts, Gandhiji knew that the pursuit of power is a basic human urge but when moral values in an individual reach a very high level, they themselves create power and increase the

possibility of individual efficacy and collective survival. Gandhiji certainly gave a new direction to the collective consciousness of the Indian masses by dint of his moral power and this collective consciousness of the Indians was capable of toppling the most potent British Empire in the world.

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