
Debora Baker's The Last Englishmen: Love, War and the End of Empire: A Gandhian Approach

Tehzeeb Abdur Rasheed, Node Assistant Professor of English (Adhoc),Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad

Dr. Atul Kumar Parmar, Head of Department of English, Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad

Paper Received on 11-04-2024, Accepted on 09-05-2024
Published on 11-05-24; DOI: 10.36993/ RJOE.2024.9.2.137

Abstract:

This research explores Gandhian idea of Decolonisation and “Swaraj” in Deborah Baker’s *The Last Englishmen: Love, War and the End of Empire* written in 2018. Debora Baker showcases Nehru as the “Last Englishman ruling India”, pertaining to his British received education of many first leaders of independent India who colonised India even more to the extent that India did not actually free itself from the clutches of British rule for a very long time. The first part of the 20th century which had witnessed many social, economic, nationalist, education up rise is explored in this paper. This paper looks up the neo-colonial aspects of the British rule in India from the point of view of a first world nation’s author.

Keywords: Love, War, Approach, social, economic, nationalist, education.

Introduction:

The first half of the 20th century marked as the turning point for the freedom movement in India. The 1900s saw an uprise in the development of the freedom struggles led by the freedom fighter across the nation. These years were both turbulent and transformative for India and the people of India who were struggling against the invaders. The 20th century was the era which ended up with the independence of India in 1947.

Many political, economic, social and cultural movements took place in the first half of the 20th century. The rise of nationalism was seen to be growing quite significantly with the establishment of the Indian National Congress demanding self-rule (Swaraj) from the British government. Notable leaders came into action. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose vouched for different strategies leading India towards independence. The year 1905 saw the partition of Bengal which efficiently exposed the British policy of imperialistic Divide and Rule policy which tried to bring about a crack or split in the nationalist movements and religious communities, especially between Hindus and Muslims.

It was the very structure of colonialism in India for the British to gain from the colonial economy through Indian industries and Agriculture. The Raw Materials were taken from India and sent to Britain, while the Indian markets were selling British goods. This deindustrialization resulted into severe economic hardships for the natives of India. all this was on top of frequent famines and existing poor conditions in India. India experience some severe famines during the colonialism which were a result of careless and inconsistent British economic policies and their administrative failures.

Apart from the downsides of colonialism, several uprise were also seen socially, educationally and culturally during the British rule. This period saw large amount of social and religious movements like Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj which were two movements that set foot towards abolishing child marriages and widow burning (Sati) which were present at the time in India. Leaders like B.R. Ambedkar fought for the rights of the marginalized, especially the Dalit community in India. The

Research Journal Of English(RJOE)

ISSN:2456-2696;An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal;Impact Factor:8.16 (SJIF)

Indexed in: Cosmos, Google &International Scientific Indexing (ISI) etc

influence of the British also brought Westernization in Indian education system and the flow of English language in India which created a special and new class of educated Indians. These educational developments brought about many leaders and thinkers in the nationalist movement in Indian freedom struggle. The art, literature and music saw an uprise where Rabindranath Tagore received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913.

The 20th century saw Gandhi's leadership and Gandhi as the central figure in the independence movement in India with his Non-violence philosophies against the British laws and policies. Gandhi gave the movements like Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920-1922, the Salt March in 1930 and Quit India Movement in 1942. Gandhi also taught Satyagraha (passive resistance) to the people of India for their freedom struggle.

Swaraj for Gandhi had many different types and meaning including political Swaraj, Economic Swaraj which included village swaraj (gram swaraj), usage of khadi and Indian-made products (swadeshi), trusteeship, bread and labour, social swaraj and swaraj for control over the self. 19th century India has witnessed the identity of self in the Indian mindsets as well as cultural identity in many Indian nationals. The meaning of Swaraj (independence) has been evaluated and re-evaluated by Gandhi time and again in his different speeches and writings. Gandhi gives the definition of Swaraj in his book Village Swaraj (Gram Swaraj) as:

“The word Swaraj is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint, and not freedom from all restraint which 'independence' often means.” (Gandhi 38)

Swaraj does not insist on complete freedom like that of the word “Independence” but it means self-governance, self-rule and self-restraint.

Deborah Baker, an American writer, has many books to her credit, some of which are *Making a Farm: The Life of Robert Bly*, *In Extremis*; *The Life of Laura Riding*, *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India*, *The Convert: A Tale of Exile and Extremism* and *The Last Englishmen: Love, War and the End of Empire*. *Making a Farm: The Life of Robert Bly* is a biography and the first ever book written by Baker in college in 1982. She wrote *In Extremis; The Life of Laura Riding during her time in Calcutta*, which shows her deep interest and research about India in 1990. is her last published work and her fifth book which was written in August 2018.

Deborah Baker begins in her book *The Last Englishmen: Love, War and the End of Empire*, by saying that she wished to write about India in the times of second world war. It begins with an epigraph by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India saying “I am the last Englishman to rule in India” (Nehru). Nehru was among the anglicized Indians who had been educated in English universities such as Harrow and Cambridge. Now, it is to be understood here that Jawaharlal Nehru did not use the above stated statement explicitly in any of his many speeches rendered before or after the independence of India. But this statement or rather the very usage of this statement in the very epigraph of Baker's book draws light upon Nehru's personality attributed to him for running the nation, his role in architecting the Indian history as it is today as well his own personal life. It also draws the light on Nehru's deep-rooted influence by the westernised thought, culture and education which Gandhi was totally against. The subjects of democracy, secularism and socialism that he advocated came from his English education that he had received throughout his life. It was all this English-received education that stood him apart from the Indian national movement of Independence. All these factors did not make Nehru any less adamant in being one of the strongest advocates of Indian fight for independence. Nehru played one of the most important roles and highly acknowledgeable roles in the Indian fight for Independence. He was one of the key-figures of Indian National Congress. It could be understood and interpreted that Nehru's statement in the epigraph of Baker's book could only mean that it was thus the end of colonial rule in India and that the new state of Independent India was emerging. Baker, by writing this epigraph highlights upon such Indians who then went on to rule over Independent India. This further suggests neo-colonial intentions of the rulers of India who were the forebearers of the English Colonizers over once colonized India. Baker skilfully recognized the then state of a freshly independent India which had not yet freed itself from the shackles of the British Raj which had tied it for such a long

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time. Baker goes on to explore about the lives of two people, John Auden, who was also the brother of W. H Auden and Michael Spender, who were both geologist and Cartographers by profession. Baker, goes on to relate the lives of Auden and Spender in their inclinations towards India. She also goes on to highlight upon how corrupt the organizations were, that they were affiliated with. Both Auden and Spender were affiliated to Geological Survey of India and Royal Geographical Society. Both these organizations had their roots in India while the mission that were carried by Auden and Spender were not in India but in Nepal, towards their climbs on Mount Everest. Both Auden and Spender feel a bit of shame in order of their exploitation towards the regional people of Mount Everest in order to execute their missions that were assigned to them by the Geological Survey of India and Royal Geographical Society. All this was administered by the characters of the book even while they were not in India itself. The continuous conversations between Baker's characters about their climb over Mount Everest, their views on travel across India and the technology that was to be used for the second world war as it was the entire backdrop of the book by baker, reminiscences on Gandhi's views in Hind Swaraj on machinery. Not just did Gandhi condemn the use of machinery in his book but also highlighted his thoughts on civilization of the entire human race, drawing more focus on western civilization.

It had been pointed out that Gandhi condemned machinery so much so that he also forgot about the spinning wheel, spectacles, plough, etc. It is understood from this study that Gandhi used the guide of machinery and technology to quote his ideology about the modern bureaucracy. Gandhi does not say that Machinery and Technology are wrong but says that they have become the means of "Self Interest" (Parel 295) the Machine that was earlier used for the service of the people, became the very source of domination over the same people to whom it was made to render services for. Machinery, according to Gandhi was the chief symbol of modern civilization. Gandhi goes on to the extent of terming machinery to be satanic and sinful. (Gandhi 8)

The very discourses of Auden and Spender on the technology used by the allies of the Second World War show the air of violence in the atmosphere at the onset of the Second World War. The very site the refugee camp shown in the prologue of the book on 3rd September, 1947, shows how despite the failure of the British raj, they receded India in all their pomp and glory. There is narration of Fireworks, parades by the military, marching bands in all its glory (Baker 3). The narration of Louise MacNeice, being confused and not knowing much about India except for his reading of Kipling's' and Tagore's text. The selection of members who were from or related to Auden Group of poets and playwrights is commendable on the part of Baker. The Irish writer's dilemma on finding his purpose in a newly freed nation is another thought given by Baker to ponder upon. All the discourses Louise MacNeice had come across about India were mostly heard from either from English writers like Kipling, who wrote texts like *White Man's Burden* or from the Oxford Union, another English organization where he had heard somethings about India he doesn't even remember anymore because they had been attended by him before more than twenty years ago. MacNeice asks a question to himself "What does India have to do with me?" (Baker 17). The only friend MacNeice had from India was Rabindranath Tagore and it was because of his advocacy that MacNeice had any little interest in India otherwise he only thought of India as a land of Swamis and their theories and philosophies that were advocated by them that circulated around. It was Tagore who told MacNeice that it was the British who spread such stereotypical pictures of India being a land of spirituality and exoticism.

The running thoughts of MacNeice highlight upon the then mindset of the Indians and the British in their defence and resistant selves. According to the Indians, the Britishers destroyed their country and their culture.

The Last Englishmen: Love, War, and the End of Empire throws light upon the journey of British officers, Auden and Spender, who showcase the India of 1930s, the final years of the British colonialism in India. Debora through her non-fiction narrative of the British-ruled India showcases the state of India and the beautiful Himalayan Glaciers of India during the raging Second World War. The Gandhian nationalism is showcased along with the politically and socially upfilled period in history that was being witnessed in India. Auden and Spender witness the living freedom struggle which is only

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seen through the textbooks of History. The legacy of the British colonial Empire in India is thus impressively and intellectually highlighted by Debora Baker in her text.

During the second world war it was seen that Gandhi took the stance of complete non-cooperation and non-violence. He as one of the most important leaders of the Indian freedom struggle and it is important to know his stand on the onset of ongoing second world war that was going on in the world around. He was dedicatedly adhered towards non-violence and was completely against imperialism. Gandhi bent towards a stance of non-cooperation during the second world war as Britishers were themselves involved in the war. He did not show any support towards the war as he only stood with Indian Independence. According to Gandhi, any support or help of the British in the war would mean advocating violence and support to imperialism.

"I must say why I think that the warring nations do not know what they are fighting for. I had used the expression 'Warring nations', not 'peoples of Europe'. This is not a distinction without a difference. I have distinguished between the nations and their leaders. The leaders of course know what they are fighting for. I make no admission that they are right. But neither the English nor the Germans nor the Italians know what they are fighting for except that they trust their leaders and therefore follow them. I submit that this is not enough when the stake is so bloody and staggering as during the present war. It is perhaps common cause that Germans and Italians do not know why English children should be slaughtered in cold blood and beautiful English homes should be destroyed. When I asked the British soldiers in South Africa during the Boer War, they could not tell me what they were fighting for. Theirs 'was surely 'not to reason why'. They did not even know where they were being marched to. The British people would not be able to give me a more satisfying answer, if I happened to be in London and asked them why their soldiers were working havoc in Berlin. If the press accounts are to be relied upon, British skill and valour have wrought more havoc in Berlin than have the Germans in London. What wrong have the German people done to the British people? Their leaders have. Hang them by all means, but why destroy German homes and German civilian life? What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy? I assert in all humility, but with all the strength at my command, that liberty and democracy become unholy when their hands are dyed red with innocent blood. I hear the living Christ saying: "These so-called children of mine know not what they are doing. They take my Father's name in vain, for they disobey the central command of my Father" If my ears do not deceive, I have erred in good company, if I have erred at all.

And why have I uttered the truth? Because I am confident that God has made me the instrument of showing the better way. If Britain seeks justice, she must appear before the imperial court of God with clean hands. She will not defend liberty and democracy by following totalitarian methods so far as war is concerned. She will not be able to retrace her steps after out-Hitlering Hitler in war. The last war is a resounding lesson. Her victory, if attained, will be a snare and a delusion. I know mine is a voice in the wilderness. But it will someday ring true. If liberty and democracy are to be truly saved, they will only be by non-violent resistance no less brave, no less glorious, than violent resistance. And it will be infinitely braver and more glorious because it will give life without taking any." (Gandhi) Gandhi remained staunch on his views on the opposition of the war and remained onto his own peaceful means towards the end. This opposition led to hefty results in the Indian freedom struggle.

Thus, it is seen that Baker's book *The Last Englishmen: Love, War and the End of Empire* is one of the modern-day models of the Indian freedom struggle and how the British viewed it through the eyes of Auden, Spender and MacNeice. The fine selection of characters, two Britishers Auden and Spender and an Irishman, who had nothing to do with England or India's colonial times gives a seamless, intellectual experience and a third person view on Indian freedom struggle. Gandhian peaceful means of "Swaraj", be it political, social or cultural are viewed through his statements passed during the Second World War. It was his staunch stance along with Nehru and many other freedom fighters' stances that India is free from the British shackles once and for all and is working its way towards complete Swaraj.

Research Journal Of English(RJOE)

ISSN:2456-2696;An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal;Impact Factor:8.16 (SJIF)

Indexed in: Cosmos, Google &International Scientific Indexing (ISI) etc

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How to cite this article?

Tehzeeb Abdur Rasheed, Dr. Atul Kumar Parmar,“Debora Baker’s The Last Englishmen: Love, War and the End of Empire: A Gandhian Approach”*Research Journal Of English (RJOE)*9(2),PP:133-137,2024, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2024.9.2.137